

Europe Between Strategic Autonomy and Systemic Vulnerability: Geopolitical Drift in the Age of Transactional Power

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary international system is increasingly characterized by geopolitical fragmentation, transactional diplomacy, strategic competition, and the gradual erosion of the liberal rules-based order that shaped post-Cold War global governance. Within this unstable context, the European Union faces mounting pressure to redefine its geopolitical role while simultaneously confronting structural vulnerabilities related to security dependence, economic competitiveness, energy instability, technological dependency, democratic polarization, and social fragmentation. This paper examines the emerging tension between Europe's ambition for strategic autonomy and its persistent systemic vulnerabilities in an era increasingly dominated by transactional power politics, shifting alliances, and multipolar geopolitical uncertainty. The study explores how the transformation of American foreign policy, the rise of China as a global systemic competitor, Russia's geopolitical revisionism, and the growing influence of flexible "coalitions of the willing" challenge Europe's traditional security architecture and economic model. Particular attention is given to the contradictions embedded within the European project itself: the simultaneous pursuit of military rearmament, green economic transition, social cohesion, democratic stability, and fiscal sustainability. The analysis argues that Europe is entering a period of strategic overstretch in which competing political, economic, and security priorities become increasingly difficult to reconcile. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from geopolitics, international relations, political economy, European studies, and strategic governance, the paper investigates how transactional leadership models, protectionist economic tendencies, technological rivalry, and democratic fatigue contribute to a broader process of geopolitical drift. The study further examines the rise of populist and far-right movements across Europe as both a symptom and consequence of prolonged insecurity, economic anxiety, and declining trust in institutional governance. In this context, strategic autonomy emerges not as a fully achievable geopolitical condition, but as a contested and evolving process shaped by external dependencies and internal fragmentation. The paper argues that the future of Europe will likely depend less on restoring previous models of global stability and more on its capacity to adapt to a fluid geopolitical environment characterized by temporary alliances, hybrid economic-security arrangements, technological competition, and permanent crisis management. Ultimately, the study contributes to current debates regarding the future of European integration, global governance, democratic resilience, and the transformation of international order in the age of transactional power.

KEYWORDS: Strategic autonomy; geopolitical drift; European Union; geopolitical fragmentation; democratic resilience; systemic vulnerability; transatlantic relations; geopolitical uncertainty; transactional diplomacy; strategic dependency;

1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical architecture that emerged after the Cold War increasingly appears less transformed than exhausted. For several decades, the liberal international order projected an image of relative institutional stability grounded in multilateral governance, economic interdependence, American strategic primacy, and the assumption—often more ideological than

empirical—that globalization would gradually reduce systemic geopolitical antagonisms. That assumption now seems considerably less convincing. The international environment has become marked by strategic fragmentation, fluctuating alliances, technological rivalry, economic securitization, and an expanding distrust toward universalist political frameworks. What is often described as a “return of geopolitics” may in fact represent something more unstable: the coexistence of multiple partially competing orders without a clearly dominant organizing logic.

Within this increasingly fluid landscape, the European Union occupies a particularly ambiguous position. On the one hand, European institutions continue to articulate ambitions associated with strategic autonomy, democratic resilience, normative leadership, and geopolitical relevance. On the other hand, the Union remains structurally dependent across several critical domains that condition its capacity for autonomous action. Military protection continues to rely heavily upon the United States and NATO infrastructures; technological competitiveness remains uneven in relation to American and Chinese innovation ecosystems; energy security has proven deeply vulnerable to external shocks; while internal political fragmentation increasingly complicates coherent long-term strategic positioning. Europe thus finds itself attempting to behave geopolitically while lacking many of the classical conditions historically associated with consolidated geopolitical power.

This tension has intensified under conditions of growing international volatility. The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not merely provoke a regional security crisis; it exposed deeper uncertainties concerning the durability of transatlantic solidarity, the limits of European defense coordination, and the fragility of economic globalization under geopolitical stress. Simultaneously, the rise of China as a systemic competitor has accelerated debates surrounding technological sovereignty, industrial dependence, supply chain resilience, and strategic decoupling. Yet Europe’s predicament cannot be reduced to external pressures alone. Internal contradictions increasingly shape the European project itself. The Union seeks simultaneously to expand defense expenditures, preserve social protections, maintain fiscal discipline, lead global climate transition efforts, sustain democratic legitimacy, and avoid severe economic stagnation. These objectives are not necessarily incompatible in principle, though under current economic and geopolitical conditions they often appear difficult to reconcile without generating new political tensions.

The gradual normalization of transactional politics further complicates this environment. Traditional assumptions concerning stable alliances and predictable strategic commitments have weakened considerably, particularly following shifts in American foreign policy discourse over the last decade. Analysts remain divided regarding whether the emerging order resembles a renewed bipolar confrontation, a fragmented multipolar system, or a looser constellation of competing spheres of influence. Yet such categorizations occasionally overstate coherence where fragmentation may be the more defining characteristic. Transactional power does not necessarily produce stable geopolitical blocs; rather, it privileges flexible arrangements, selective cooperation, and situational alignments shaped increasingly by immediate strategic calculation rather than enduring normative commitments. Europe, whose postwar identity was

built substantially around institutional multilateralism and rule-based integration, appears particularly exposed within such an environment.

At the same time, the geopolitical crisis intersects with a subtler but equally significant crisis of democratic confidence across European societies. Economic insecurity, inflationary pressures, migration anxieties, industrial restructuring, and perceptions of institutional distance have contributed to the expansion of populist and nationalist movements throughout the continent. While the relationship between economic vulnerability and political radicalization should not be treated mechanically, the persistence of prolonged uncertainty has altered public perceptions regarding globalization, liberal governance, and European integration itself. In some contexts, strategic autonomy is interpreted as necessary geopolitical emancipation; in others, it becomes associated with elite rhetoric disconnected from everyday social pressures. The meaning of sovereignty consequently becomes increasingly contested both externally and internally.

The concept of “geopolitical drift” emerges from this broader instability. Drift does not imply passivity alone, nor does it suggest the complete absence of strategy. Rather, it describes a condition in which political actors operate within rapidly shifting systemic environments where strategic adaptation frequently becomes reactive, fragmented, and constrained by overlapping dependencies. Europe’s geopolitical positioning increasingly reflects such conditions. The Union responds simultaneously to military crises, economic competition, technological disruption, ecological transition, democratic polarization, and transatlantic uncertainty, yet often without a singular strategic horizon capable of integrating these pressures coherently. This does not necessarily indicate institutional failure. It may instead reflect the structural difficulty of maintaining political cohesion under conditions where the external environment itself lacks stable organizing principles.

Existing scholarship has addressed many dimensions of this transformation separately. Studies of strategic autonomy frequently focus on defense integration and security governance (Biscop, 2020; Cottey, 2023), while analyses of multipolarity and geopolitical fragmentation tend to emphasize systemic transition at the level of international order (Acharya, 2017; Scholte, 2020). Other contributions examine democratic erosion, populism, and the retreat of liberal consensus within European societies (Mounk, 2018; Zielonka, 2018). Yet these debates often remain insufficiently connected. Less attention has been directed toward how strategic dependency, democratic fragility, economic restructuring, and transactional geopolitics interact simultaneously to produce forms of systemic vulnerability that are not reducible to any single domain.

This study therefore examines the evolving relationship between Europe’s aspirations for strategic autonomy and the structural vulnerabilities that continue to constrain its geopolitical agency. Rather than approaching autonomy as either an achievable endpoint or an ideological illusion, the paper treats it as a contested process unfolding within unstable international conditions shaped increasingly by transactional power relations, fragmented governance structures, and strategic uncertainty. Particular attention is given to the tension between Europe’s normative ambitions and the material dependencies that complicate their realization.

The analysis further explores how geopolitical fragmentation intersects with democratic pressures inside the Union itself, generating forms of political strain that may prove as consequential as external threats.

The broader question underlying the paper is not simply whether Europe can become strategically autonomous in conventional geopolitical terms. More fundamentally, it concerns whether political entities constructed around interdependence, multilateralism, and normative governance can sustain coherence within an international environment progressively organized around competition, flexibility, and selective power projection. Europe's current predicament may therefore reveal less about temporary geopolitical imbalance than about the uncertain future of liberal political order itself.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The debate surrounding Europe's strategic autonomy has expanded considerably over the last decade, although the concept itself remains theoretically unstable and politically elastic. In some formulations, strategic autonomy refers primarily to military capacity and defense coordination; in others, it encompasses technological sovereignty, industrial resilience, energy independence, democratic security, or even cultural self-positioning within an increasingly fragmented international order. This conceptual ambiguity is not accidental. It reflects the fact that Europe's geopolitical identity has historically been constructed through interdependence rather than classical sovereignty, making the aspiration toward autonomy simultaneously necessary and structurally paradoxical.

A significant portion of the literature interprets strategic autonomy as an adaptive response to declining certainty within transatlantic relations. Biscop (2020) argues that Europe can no longer assume indefinite American strategic protection under conditions of shifting geopolitical priorities and domestic polarization within the United States. Similar concerns appear in Heisbourg's (2020) analysis of transatlantic security transformation, where the problem is framed less as immediate alliance rupture than as gradual strategic unpredictability. The issue, therefore, is not whether NATO disappears, but whether European security can continue relying upon assumptions of automatic American engagement. This distinction matters because much European discourse still oscillates between rhetorical autonomy and practical dependency without fully confronting the political implications of that tension.

Yet the literature diverges substantially regarding whether strategic autonomy represents a feasible geopolitical project or primarily a defensive narrative masking structural weakness. Cottey (2023) identifies multiple dimensions of autonomy—military, economic, technological, diplomatic—while simultaneously acknowledging that the European Union lacks the institutional cohesion traditionally associated with geopolitical power projection. The argument is persuasive to a point, although it occasionally presumes a level of strategic convergence among European states that empirical developments do not always support. The notion of "Europe" as a coherent

strategic actor frequently conceals significant internal asymmetries regarding defense priorities, economic exposure, energy policy, and relations with both China and the United States.

This fragmentation becomes increasingly visible in analyses of the evolving international order itself. Acharya's (2017) concept of a "multiplex world" challenges older assumptions concerning stable hegemonic transition by proposing a more decentralized and plural geopolitical structure in which no single power fully organizes global governance. While influential, this interpretation perhaps underestimates the degree to which contemporary fragmentation is accompanied not only by pluralism but also by intensifying strategic competition and institutional erosion. Scholte (2020), by contrast, emphasizes geopolitical fragmentation more explicitly, arguing that global governance structures increasingly struggle to mediate conflicts emerging from divergent national interests, technological rivalries, and weakened multilateral legitimacy. Europe's difficulties must therefore be understood not simply as regional challenges but as symptoms of broader systemic instability affecting the architecture of global governance itself.

The decline of liberal internationalism forms another central theme within the literature. Mearsheimer (2019) presents one of the more forceful critiques, arguing that the liberal order was structurally unsustainable because it attempted to universalize political models incompatible with enduring geopolitical competition. Although Mearsheimer's realist framework occasionally risks reducing complex political transformations to power-balancing dynamics alone, his broader argument regarding the fragility of liberal hegemony has gained renewed relevance under conditions of war, economic securitization, and rising nationalism. Kagan (2018) similarly warns against assumptions that liberal order possesses self-sustaining momentum, suggesting instead that geopolitical stability depended heavily upon continuous American strategic commitment. Once that commitment becomes conditional or transactional, institutional confidence weakens correspondingly.

The emergence of transactional geopolitics has consequently attracted growing scholarly attention. Rachman (2022) links the rise of strongman politics and personalized leadership styles to broader transformations in global governance, where political legitimacy increasingly derives from immediacy, nationalism, and strategic flexibility rather than institutional continuity. Walt (2018) reaches a related conclusion from a foreign policy perspective, criticizing interventionist liberalism while acknowledging the destabilizing consequences of inconsistent American strategic behavior. Europe occupies an uneasy position within this environment because its institutional logic remains deeply tied to predictability, multilateral negotiation, and rule-based coordination. Transactional power politics undermine these assumptions by privileging selective cooperation and short-term strategic advantage over long-term institutional commitment.

At the same time, several scholars caution against interpreting Europe solely through the lens of external vulnerability. Gnesotto (2021) argues that Europe's dependence is partially self-produced through prolonged underinvestment in defense capabilities and strategic industries during periods when globalization appeared politically stabilizing. This interpretation

complicates narratives portraying Europe exclusively as a victim of geopolitical transformation. Structural dependency, in this reading, reflects historical political choices shaped by assumptions that economic interdependence would gradually reduce geopolitical confrontation. The return of war to Europe destabilized those assumptions dramatically, though perhaps not entirely unexpectedly.

Questions of economic sovereignty further deepen these tensions. Rodrik's (2011) globalization paradox remains particularly relevant in explaining the difficulty of reconciling democratic legitimacy, deep economic integration, and national sovereignty simultaneously. Europe's current predicament reflects precisely this contradiction. The Union seeks to preserve open markets and global competitiveness while simultaneously pursuing industrial protection, energy security, strategic decoupling, and green transition policies. These objectives increasingly overlap with geopolitical concerns rather than remaining purely economic. Leonard (2021) develops this point by arguing that hyperconnectivity itself generates new forms of conflict and dependency. Interdependence no longer functions exclusively as a stabilizing force; under conditions of geopolitical rivalry it becomes a source of vulnerability.

The relationship between geopolitical instability and democratic fragility occupies a parallel strand within the literature. Zielonka (2018) interprets the rise of populism and nationalist movements across Europe as evidence of liberal retreat, though his analysis occasionally treats populism too uniformly across divergent political contexts. Mounk (2018) similarly identifies growing tensions between liberal institutions and democratic dissatisfaction, particularly among populations experiencing economic insecurity and cultural dislocation. Yet explanations focused solely on populist irrationality risk overlooking the structural pressures reshaping European societies. Economic stagnation, inflation, migration tensions, and industrial transformation interact with perceptions of political distance and institutional fatigue in ways that cannot be reduced simply to anti-democratic sentiment.

Krastev (2020) and Krastev and Leonard (2021) offer a more nuanced perspective by emphasizing the psychological and political effects of prolonged uncertainty within European societies. Their analyses suggest that contemporary European anxieties derive not only from economic hardship but also from erosion of predictability itself. Citizens increasingly experience overlapping crises - pandemic disruption, war, inflation, energy insecurity, technological transformation - without stable narratives capable of organizing collective expectations about the future. Under such conditions, demands for sovereignty, protection, and strategic control become politically intelligible even when practical implementation remains ambiguous.

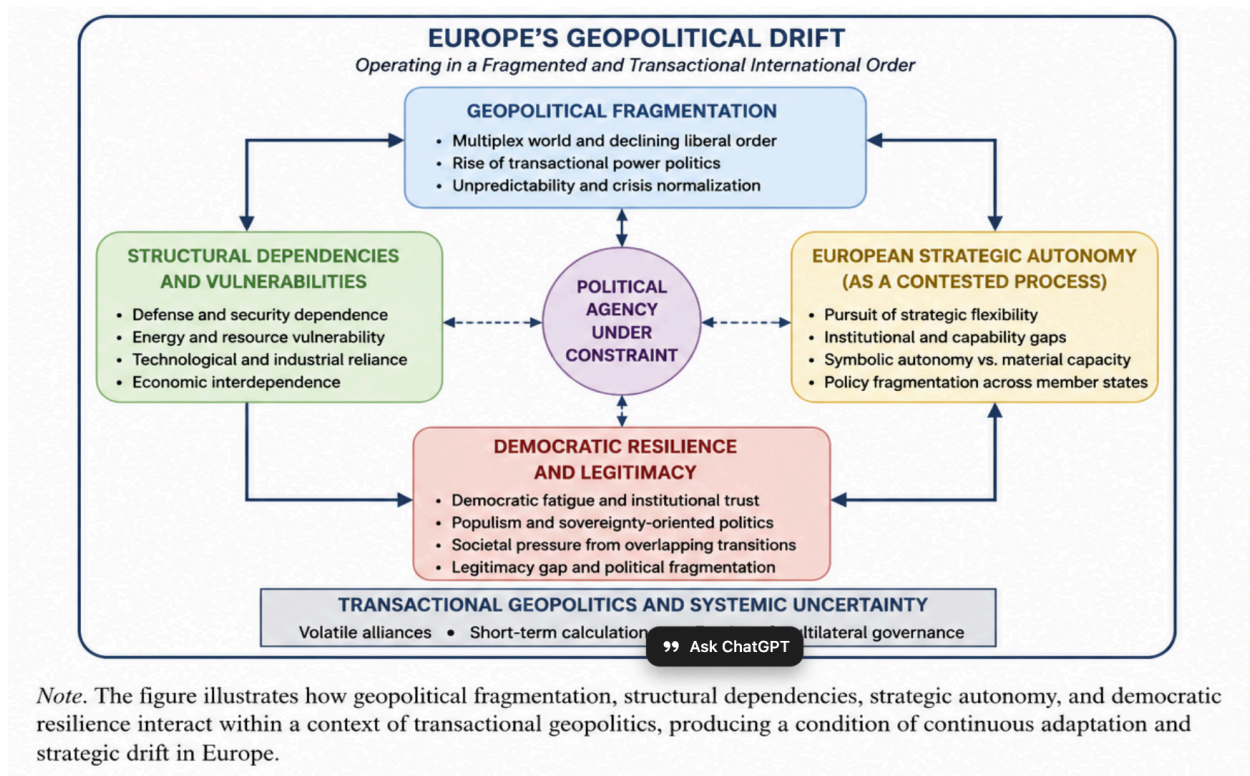
The literature on crisis governance further reinforces this interpretation. Tooze (2021) demonstrates how contemporary crises exceed traditional institutional categories because financial instability, geopolitical competition, technological dependency, and public health emergencies increasingly interact systemically. Europe's strategic dilemmas cannot therefore be isolated within defense policy alone. The Union simultaneously confronts military insecurity, economic restructuring, ecological transition, technological competition, and democratic polarization, often through fragmented governance mechanisms developed under different historical assumptions.

Despite the richness of these debates, several limitations remain visible within the existing

scholarship. Studies of strategic autonomy often privilege defense and foreign policy dimensions while underestimating the interaction between geopolitical dependency and internal democratic strain. Conversely, analyses of populism and democratic fatigue frequently treat geopolitical instability as external background rather than as an active force reshaping domestic political legitimacy. There is also a tendency to conceptualize Europe either as a coherent geopolitical actor or as a structurally weak institutional arrangement, with insufficient attention given to the unstable coexistence of both conditions simultaneously.

This study responds to these tensions by approaching strategic autonomy not as a fixed geopolitical objective but as a contested and uneven process unfolding within a fragmented international environment increasingly shaped by transactional power relations. Rather than isolating security, economic, technological, and democratic dimensions analytically, the paper examines how these domains intersect to produce forms of systemic vulnerability that complicate Europe's capacity for coherent strategic adaptation. The concept of geopolitical drift introduced here attempts to capture precisely this condition: a form of strategic movement shaped less by coherent long-term orientation than by continuous negotiation between competing pressures, dependencies, and crises.

To synthesize the analytical framework guiding this study, Figure 1 presents the interconnected relationship between geopolitical fragmentation, strategic autonomy, and democratic resilience in Europe.



Note. The figure illustrates how geopolitical fragmentation, structural dependencies, strategic autonomy, and democratic resilience interact within a context of transactional geopolitics, producing a condition of continuous adaptation and strategic drift in Europe.

Source: Authors' own conceptual contribution

Figure 1: *Analytical Framework of Europe's Geopolitical Drift in an Era of Transactional Power*

3 METHODOLOGY

The study emerged from a broader concern regarding the growing mismatch between Europe's geopolitical ambitions and the institutional, economic, and democratic constraints that increasingly shape its strategic behavior. Existing literature has examined strategic autonomy primarily through defense policy, foreign affairs, or international security frameworks, while analyses of democratic fragility and populist expansion have often remained disconnected from geopolitical restructuring itself. The present research therefore sought to investigate not merely whether Europe is becoming more autonomous, but how perceptions of vulnerability, dependency, and geopolitical instability interact across political, economic, and societal dimensions. The methodological design was developed accordingly around the assumption that Europe's strategic condition cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative geopolitical indicators or through abstract normative analysis alone.

Three interrelated research questions guided the study. First, how do political, institutional, and academic actors perceive the relationship between European strategic autonomy and systemic dependency under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation? Second, to what extent do contemporary geopolitical crises reshape understandings of democratic resilience, economic sovereignty, and transatlantic relations within Europe? Third, does the growing prevalence of transactional power politics alter the coherence of the European integration project itself? These questions intentionally avoided approaching strategic autonomy as either a measurable endpoint or an exclusively normative aspiration. Instead, the research treated it as a contested political process shaped simultaneously by external pressures and internal contradictions.

Given the interpretative and multidimensional nature of the research problem, the study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design combining discourse analysis, expert interviews, and comparative policy interpretation. This approach reflected a certain methodological caution toward overly deterministic geopolitical modelling frequently encountered in strategic studies literature. Quantitative indicators concerning defense expenditure, trade dependency, or energy vulnerability undoubtedly remain important, yet they often obscure the interpretative uncertainty through which political actors themselves understand geopolitical transformation. The research therefore prioritized the relationship between structural conditions and political meaning-making rather than attempting to construct predictive geopolitical scenarios.

Data collection was conducted between November 2025 and May 2026 across three interconnected stages. The first stage involved document-based discourse analysis examining approximately 120 institutional and strategic texts produced between 2018 and 2026 by European Union institutions, NATO policy structures, think tanks, foreign policy councils, and international governance organizations. Particular attention was given to recurring concepts such as "strategic autonomy," "resilience," "economic sovereignty," "security dependence,"

“democratic stability,” and “rules-based order.” The analysis sought not simply to identify conceptual frequency, but to examine shifts in tone, framing, and strategic emphasis across different geopolitical moments, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with 34 participants selected through purposive sampling. The sample included European policy advisors, academics specializing in international relations and political economy, officials working in governance and diplomatic institutions, security analysts, and researchers affiliated with European think tanks. Participants were drawn primarily from Romania, Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, reflecting both central and peripheral perspectives within the European political space. Interviews lasted between 50 and 95 minutes and were conducted either online or face-to-face depending on participant availability and institutional constraints.

The interview structure combined thematic consistency with interpretative flexibility. Rather than relying upon rigid questionnaires, discussions focused on broader thematic clusters including transatlantic uncertainty, geopolitical fragmentation, defense integration, democratic fatigue, economic vulnerability, energy transition, populism, and perceptions of European strategic coherence. Interestingly, several interviews diverged substantially from the initial research assumptions. Participants frequently shifted discussion away from military autonomy toward broader anxieties concerning technological dependence, institutional legitimacy, and political exhaustion within European societies. This thematic displacement became analytically significant because it suggested that strategic vulnerability is increasingly perceived not exclusively through military capability but through cumulative systemic fragilities.

The third stage involved comparative analysis of geopolitical narratives emerging across policy environments and public discourse ecosystems. Selected speeches, policy debates, media interventions, and strategic reports from European and American actors were analyzed comparatively in order to examine how concepts such as “leadership,” “sovereignty,” “partnership,” and “security” were being reframed under transactional geopolitical conditions. This stage proved methodologically less stable than initially anticipated because geopolitical narratives evolved rapidly throughout the research period itself, particularly in relation to American electoral developments, defense negotiations, and shifting European fiscal debates. Rather than treating this instability as methodological weakness, the study incorporated it reflexively as part of the broader argument concerning geopolitical drift and strategic uncertainty.

The analytical process combined thematic coding with interpretative geopolitical analysis. Interview transcripts and policy texts were coded using NVivo software through iterative thematic clustering. Initial categories derived from the research questions included strategic dependency, democratic resilience, institutional fragmentation, geopolitical uncertainty, and economic sovereignty. However, additional themes emerged progressively during analysis, including “managed insecurity,” “permanent crisis normalization,” “transactional fatigue,” and “symbolic autonomy.” The appearance of these themes suggested that many actors perceived

Europe's geopolitical condition less through binary categories of strength versus weakness and more through ongoing adaptation to instability itself.

Methodological reflexivity became particularly important throughout the research process because the object of analysis remained politically and temporally unstable. Strategic autonomy is not a fixed institutional category but a contested narrative shaped by ideological positioning, national interest, and geopolitical contingency. Participants frequently employed identical concepts while attributing markedly different meanings to them. For some, autonomy implied military emancipation from American dependency; for others, it referred primarily to economic resilience or technological sovereignty. This conceptual fluidity complicated attempts at categorical precision but also revealed the extent to which geopolitical discourse itself reflects uncertainty about Europe's future strategic identity.

Several limitations inevitably affected the study. The qualitative orientation restricted broader statistical generalizability, while the rapidly evolving geopolitical environment complicated stable interpretation of institutional developments. Furthermore, access to high-level policy actors remained uneven across different national contexts, resulting in greater representation from academic and advisory communities than from senior governmental decision-makers. There was also the persistent methodological difficulty of distinguishing between strategic rhetoric and actual policy transformation. European discourse surrounding autonomy often exceeds the pace of institutional implementation, creating interpretative gaps between narrative ambition and material capability.

Yet these limitations are themselves symptomatic of the phenomenon under investigation. Europe's geopolitical condition is characterized precisely by ambiguity, uneven adaptation, and competing interpretations of strategic reality. The methodological objective was therefore not to impose artificial coherence upon an unstable geopolitical landscape, but to examine how actors interpret, negotiate, and respond to conditions of fragmentation, dependency, and transactional power within an international order whose future structure remains increasingly uncertain.

4 RESULTS

The empirical material revealed a persistent disjunction between Europe's geopolitical ambitions and the perceived feasibility of strategic autonomy under contemporary international conditions. Yet this disjunction was not interpreted uniformly by participants. Rather than producing a singular narrative of decline or emancipation, the findings pointed toward a fragmented geopolitical consciousness in which strategic autonomy functions simultaneously as aspiration, necessity, rhetorical instrument, and, in some cases, political fiction. What emerged most clearly across interviews and discourse analysis was not consensus regarding Europe's future direction, but a growing normalization of strategic uncertainty itself.

A recurrent theme throughout the data concerned the perception that Europe increasingly operates within what several participants described as a "permanent crisis environment." This

did not refer solely to military insecurity following the war in Ukraine, although the conflict remained central to most discussions. More striking was the cumulative layering of crises—pandemic disruption, inflationary pressure, energy instability, technological competition, migration tensions, and democratic polarization—which together appeared to reshape how institutional actors conceptualize governance capacity. Strategic planning, according to many interviewees, has become increasingly reactive rather than programmatic. One policy advisor based in Brussels remarked that “Europe no longer governs through long-term direction but through sequential emergency adaptation.” While somewhat exaggerated, the statement captured a broader perception visible across the data.

The analysis of institutional discourse revealed a noticeable shift in strategic language between pre-2020 and post-2022 documents. Earlier formulations surrounding European integration emphasized competitiveness, sustainability, and cooperative multilateralism. More recent documents increasingly foreground concepts such as resilience, sovereignty, protection, defense readiness, economic security, and strategic decoupling. This linguistic transformation suggests not merely rhetorical adaptation but a deeper reconfiguration of political priorities under geopolitical pressure. However, the transition remains incomplete and occasionally contradictory. Institutional narratives continue to defend globalization and liberal cooperation while simultaneously advocating industrial protection mechanisms, strategic resource control, and reduced dependency on external actors.

Interestingly, participants rarely interpreted strategic autonomy as implying complete independence from the United States. Even respondents strongly supportive of European defense integration frequently acknowledged that transatlantic military asymmetries remain too substantial for rapid geopolitical rebalancing. Instead, autonomy was more commonly framed as strategic flexibility or reduced vulnerability rather than full sovereignty in classical geopolitical terms. This distinction became particularly visible in discussions surrounding defense spending. While most participants agreed that Europe must increase military capabilities, many expressed skepticism regarding whether financial expansion alone could generate coherent strategic capacity. Several respondents pointed toward persistent fragmentation within European defense procurement systems, divergent national security priorities, and institutional competition between EU and NATO structures.

Economic dependency emerged as an equally significant source of anxiety. The data suggested that Europe’s vulnerabilities are increasingly perceived through technological and industrial dimensions rather than exclusively military ones. Participants repeatedly referenced semiconductor dependency, digital infrastructure control, artificial intelligence competition, and supply-chain fragility as areas where Europe risks long-term strategic marginalization. Yet perceptions diverged sharply regarding appropriate responses. Some interviewees supported stronger industrial protectionism and strategic interventionism, while others warned that excessive economic securitization could undermine the very openness historically associated with European prosperity. This tension appeared unresolved throughout the material. Europe

seeks simultaneously to remain economically open and strategically insulated, objectives that increasingly collide under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation.

The findings also revealed substantial concern regarding democratic resilience inside the Union itself. Populist expansion was rarely interpreted by participants as purely ideological radicalization. More frequently, it was associated with accumulated public fatigue toward prolonged instability, economic pressure, and perceptions of institutional distance. Several respondents emphasized that European societies are being asked to absorb multiple simultaneous transitions—green transformation, defense expansion, digital restructuring, fiscal discipline, and demographic pressure—without coherent political narratives capable of maintaining broad social consensus. One academic participant described this condition as “strategic overload without emotional legitimacy.” Although phrased somewhat rhetorically, the formulation reflected a recurring anxiety that institutional ambition may increasingly exceed social tolerance.

At the same time, the relationship between geopolitical insecurity and democratic fragmentation proved more ambiguous than some theoretical accounts suggest. Not all participants viewed populist or nationalist movements exclusively as threats to European integration. In certain contexts, demands for sovereignty and strategic control were interpreted as reactions to genuine vulnerabilities exposed by recent crises. This does not necessarily legitimize illiberal political trajectories, though it complicates simplistic distinctions between pro-European rationality and anti-European populism. Several respondents argued that strategic autonomy itself risks becoming politically unsustainable if associated primarily with elite discourse disconnected from everyday economic realities.

The notion of transactional geopolitics generated particularly divergent interpretations. Participants broadly agreed that international relations are becoming less institutionally predictable and more dependent upon situational bargaining, leadership volatility, and selective alignments. However, there was less agreement regarding whether Europe possesses the political culture necessary to operate effectively within such an environment. Some respondents viewed Europe’s continued attachment to multilateral frameworks as a strategic weakness under conditions increasingly shaped by hard power competition. Others argued almost the opposite: that Europe’s institutionalism may become more valuable precisely because geopolitical fragmentation produces demand for mediating structures and cooperative governance mechanisms. The findings therefore did not support deterministic conclusions regarding the decline of the European model, although they did reveal widespread uncertainty concerning its adaptability.

One unexpected finding involved the symbolic dimension of strategic autonomy. Across interviews, references to “European sovereignty” frequently appeared disconnected from precise institutional mechanisms or operational definitions. In several cases, autonomy functioned more as a psychological or political narrative aimed at restoring collective confidence after successive crises. This symbolic function should not be dismissed as merely rhetorical.

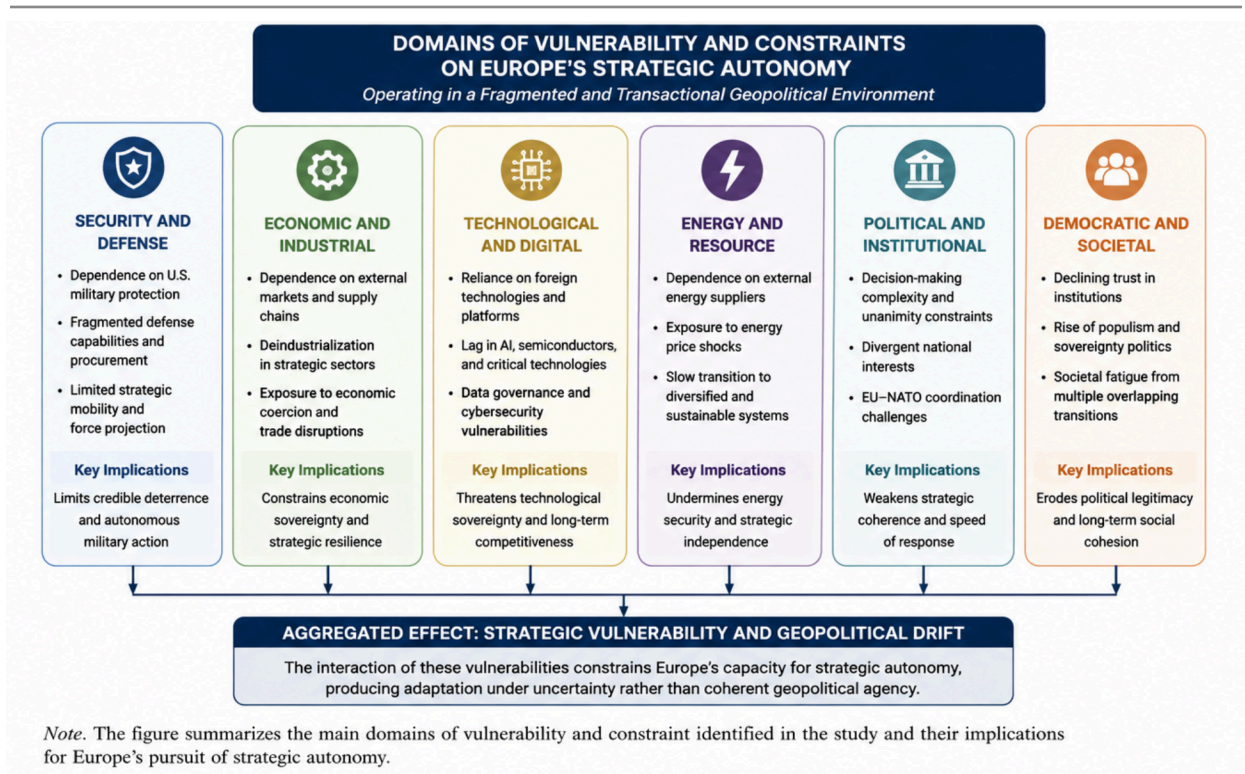
Political legitimacy often depends upon narratives capable of organizing uncertainty. Yet the gap between symbolic autonomy and material capability also risks generating frustration if institutional performance fails to meet geopolitical expectations.

The comparative analysis of American and European strategic discourse further highlighted divergent temporal orientations. American geopolitical narratives, even when internally polarized, tended to emphasize decisiveness, leadership, and strategic competition. European discourse appeared considerably more cautious, procedural, and fragmented, often balancing competing priorities simultaneously without fully resolving them. This contrast reinforced perceptions among participants that Europe struggles less with absence of strategic awareness than with difficulties translating awareness into rapid coordinated action.

Several inconsistencies within the findings deserve attention. Although many participants emphasized Europe's vulnerabilities, others noted that the Union has demonstrated greater adaptive capacity than commonly acknowledged, particularly regarding sanctions coordination, energy diversification, and collective responses to external crises. Similarly, while concerns surrounding democratic fatigue were widespread, evidence of complete institutional delegitimation remained limited. Public trust appeared strained rather than collapsed. These ambiguities matter because they suggest that Europe's geopolitical condition cannot be understood adequately through narratives of either inevitable decline or imminent strategic consolidation.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Europe increasingly inhabits a condition of geopolitical drift characterized by continuous adaptation without fully stabilized strategic orientation. Strategic autonomy remains politically compelling precisely because existing dependencies have become more visible and potentially more dangerous. Yet the pursuit of autonomy simultaneously exposes tensions within the European project itself concerning governance capacity, democratic legitimacy, economic openness, and geopolitical identity. Europe appears neither strategically powerless nor strategically coherent. Instead, it occupies an intermediate condition shaped by overlapping crises, partial adaptation, and unresolved contradictions that continue to redefine the meaning of political agency under conditions of transactional global power.

To illustrate the multifaceted nature of Europe's vulnerabilities and constraints, Figure 2 maps the key domains shaping Europe's capacity for strategic autonomy under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation.



Source: Authors' own conceptual contribution

Figure 2: *Domains of Vulnerability and Constraints on Europe's Strategic Autonomy in a Fragmented Geopolitical Environment*

The analysis revealed a complex and often contradictory geopolitical landscape in which Europe's aspirations for strategic autonomy continue to coexist with persistent structural vulnerabilities, institutional fragmentation, and growing pressures generated by transactional global power dynamics.

- Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy is increasingly constrained by structural dependencies in defense, technology, energy, and economic governance.
- The findings revealed a growing perception among policymakers and experts that Europe operates within a condition of "permanent crisis management" rather than stable long-term strategic planning.
- Institutional discourse has shifted significantly from themes of globalization and cooperation toward resilience, sovereignty, security, and strategic protection.
- Strategic autonomy is rarely understood as full independence from the United States; instead, it is interpreted as reduced vulnerability and greater strategic flexibility.
- Participants expressed strong concerns regarding Europe's technological and industrial dependencies, particularly in areas such as AI, semiconductors, digital infrastructure, and supply chains.

- The research identified tensions between Europe's commitment to open markets and increasing pressures toward economic securitization and protectionism.
- Democratic fatigue and the rise of populist movements were linked not only to ideology, but also to prolonged economic insecurity, institutional distrust, and cumulative societal pressure.
- Many respondents viewed European societies as experiencing "strategic overload," being asked to simultaneously absorb military, ecological, digital, and economic transitions.
- Transactional geopolitics and unstable alliances are reshaping Europe's external environment, reducing predictability in transatlantic and global governance structures.
- The study found that Europe's geopolitical identity remains fragmented, with differing interpretations of sovereignty, leadership, and strategic responsibility across member states and policy communities.
- Strategic autonomy often functions symbolically as a narrative of reassurance and political cohesion, even where material capabilities remain limited.
- Europe appears neither fully autonomous nor geopolitically powerless; rather, it occupies an unstable intermediate position characterized by adaptation, fragmentation, and strategic ambiguity.
- The concept of "geopolitical drift" emerged as a defining analytical framework describing Europe's continuous negotiation between competing crises, dependencies, and political expectations.
- Despite structural vulnerabilities, the findings also indicated that Europe has demonstrated greater adaptive capacity than some decline-oriented narratives suggest, particularly regarding sanctions coordination, energy diversification, and crisis response mechanisms.
- The results ultimately suggest that the future of European integration will depend less on restoring previous geopolitical certainties and more on managing instability within an increasingly fragmented and transactional international order.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings complicate several dominant assumptions currently shaping debates on European strategic autonomy and geopolitical transformation. Much of the contemporary literature oscillates between two interpretative extremes: either Europe is portrayed as an emerging geopolitical actor gradually emancipating itself from dependency structures, or it is described as structurally incapable of strategic coherence under conditions of intensifying global competition. The empirical material supports neither position entirely. Instead, the analysis suggests that Europe increasingly operates within a condition of negotiated adaptation where strategic agency and systemic vulnerability coexist simultaneously, often in uneasy tension.

This ambiguity becomes particularly visible in relation to strategic autonomy itself. Existing scholarship frequently conceptualizes autonomy through institutional or military capacity

indicators (Biscop, 2020; Cottey, 2023), yet the findings indicate that political actors rarely understand the concept in purely operational terms. Strategic autonomy appears increasingly discursive as much as material. It functions not only as a geopolitical objective but also as a narrative framework through which European institutions attempt to restore strategic confidence amid growing uncertainty. This symbolic dimension is important because geopolitical legitimacy depends partly upon perceptions of collective agency. At the same time, symbolic autonomy may generate frustration if political rhetoric continuously exceeds institutional delivery. Several participants implicitly acknowledged this tension, particularly regarding defense integration and technological sovereignty.

The study also extends existing discussions concerning the transformation of the liberal international order. Acharya's (2017) argument regarding a multiplex world and Scholte's (2020) analysis of geopolitical fragmentation both identify the erosion of centralized global governance structures, though the present findings suggest that fragmentation is experienced within Europe less as a clearly defined transition toward multipolarity and more as persistent strategic instability without stable replacement structures. Participants repeatedly emphasized unpredictability rather than coherent systemic reorganization. This distinction matters because many geopolitical frameworks continue to assume emerging equilibrium between major powers, while the empirical material instead reflects perceptions of prolonged volatility, temporary alignments, and increasingly transactional forms of cooperation.

The findings further reinforce concerns raised by Mearsheimer (2019), Kagan (2018), and Walt (2018) regarding the weakening of liberal geopolitical assumptions underpinning post-Cold War international relations. Yet the European case introduces additional complexity. Europe's strategic difficulties do not stem solely from external pressure or declining American reliability. They are also linked to the historical success of European integration itself. Decades of economic interdependence, regulatory governance, and post-sovereign institutionalism created political cultures less oriented toward classical geopolitical competition. Under conditions of renewed strategic rivalry, these same characteristics now generate both resilience and vulnerability. Europe's institutional sophistication supports coordination and crisis management, though it can simultaneously slow rapid strategic adaptation.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between geopolitical insecurity and democratic legitimacy. Existing literature on populism and democratic fatigue frequently emphasizes ideological polarization or anti-liberal backlash (Mounk, 2018; Zielonka, 2018). The present findings partially support these interpretations but also suggest that democratic fragmentation increasingly emerges from cumulative societal exhaustion generated by overlapping transitions and prolonged uncertainty. Participants repeatedly referred to inflation, ecological transition, defense spending, migration pressure, and technological disruption as interconnected rather than isolated challenges. Public skepticism toward institutional governance therefore cannot be understood solely through cultural or ideological explanations. It also reflects the growing difficulty of maintaining social cohesion while simultaneously pursuing geopolitical transformation, economic restructuring, and fiscal discipline.

Interestingly, the study challenges deterministic narratives portraying populist or sovereignty-oriented discourse as entirely external to the European project. In several interviews, demands for greater national control or strategic protection were interpreted less as rejection of Europe itself and more as reactions to perceived institutional distance and vulnerability exposure. This does not imply equivalence between democratic resilience and nationalist politics, although it does indicate that the relationship between integration and legitimacy has become increasingly unstable. Europe's future coherence may depend not only on external strategic capacity but also on its ability to maintain political legitimacy under conditions of sustained societal pressure.

The findings additionally contribute to debates surrounding economic sovereignty and strategic dependency. Rodrik's (2011) globalization paradox appears particularly relevant in explaining Europe's current predicament. The Union seeks simultaneously to preserve openness, maintain democratic legitimacy, and strengthen strategic control over critical sectors. Yet the material increasingly suggests that these objectives are becoming progressively more difficult to balance. Participants expressed substantial concern regarding technological dependency, supply-chain fragility, and industrial competitiveness, particularly vis-à-vis the United States and China. At the same time, there was evident hesitation toward abandoning open economic frameworks entirely. Europe therefore appears caught between competing geopolitical logics: interdependence remains economically necessary while strategic insulation increasingly appears politically unavoidable.

The notion of "geopolitical drift" proposed in this paper attempts to capture precisely this unstable condition. Drift should not be interpreted simply as strategic weakness or indecision. Rather, it describes a mode of political existence characterized by continuous adjustment under conditions where stable geopolitical orientation becomes difficult to sustain. Europe's responses to recent crises demonstrate considerable adaptive capacity, especially regarding sanctions coordination, energy diversification, and collective crisis governance. Yet adaptation does not necessarily produce coherence. Institutional responses frequently remain fragmented across policy domains, with security, economic, ecological, and democratic priorities advancing according to partially competing temporalities.

Several limitations should temper broader interpretation of the findings. The qualitative orientation of the study necessarily privileges interpretative depth over statistical representativeness. Furthermore, geopolitical conditions evolved substantially throughout the research process itself, particularly regarding transatlantic political uncertainty and European fiscal debates. Strategic perceptions may therefore shift rapidly depending on future institutional developments, electoral outcomes, or security crises. The concept of transactional power also remains somewhat fluid analytically. While participants widely referenced growing unpredictability and situational alliances, there was less agreement regarding whether transactional geopolitics represents a temporary disruption or a longer-term transformation of international order.

Nonetheless, the study suggests that Europe's geopolitical future will likely depend less on achieving complete strategic autonomy in traditional sovereign terms and more on developing forms of resilient coordination capable of operating under persistent uncertainty. The challenge facing the European Union is not simply external competition with other powers. More fundamentally, it concerns whether political systems historically organized around interdependence and normative governance can maintain legitimacy, cohesion, and strategic relevance within an international environment increasingly shaped by fragmentation, volatility, and transactional calculation. Europe's current condition may therefore foreshadow broader transformations affecting liberal political order itself rather than representing a uniquely European crisis.

6 CONCLUSION

The study examined the evolving tension between Europe's aspirations for strategic autonomy and the structural vulnerabilities shaping its geopolitical position within an increasingly fragmented and transactional international environment. Rather than treating strategic autonomy as either an attainable geopolitical endpoint or a purely rhetorical construction, the research approached it as a contested and uneven process emerging through overlapping crises, institutional constraints, and shifting power relations. The findings indicate that Europe's geopolitical condition is defined less by coherent strategic transformation than by continuous adaptation to instability itself.

The research questions guiding the study were addressed through a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design combining discourse analysis, expert interviews, and comparative interpretation of geopolitical narratives. The results suggest that strategic autonomy is understood by political and institutional actors primarily as reduced vulnerability and increased flexibility rather than complete sovereignty in classical geopolitical terms. Europe's dependence on external military protection, technological infrastructures, energy systems, and global economic networks remains substantial despite intensified political discourse surrounding autonomy and resilience.

At the same time, the findings reveal that Europe's vulnerabilities cannot be explained solely through external geopolitical pressures. Internal fragmentation, democratic fatigue, institutional complexity, and competing political priorities significantly shape the Union's strategic limitations. Participants repeatedly emphasized that Europe is simultaneously attempting to manage defense expansion, green transition, technological competition, fiscal discipline, and social cohesion under conditions of economic uncertainty and declining public trust. These overlapping pressures contribute to what the study conceptualizes as geopolitical drift: a condition characterized by reactive adaptation, fragmented strategic orientation, and continuous negotiation between competing systemic demands.

One of the more significant conclusions emerging from the analysis concerns the transformation of geopolitical legitimacy itself. Strategic autonomy increasingly functions not only as a material objective but also as a symbolic narrative intended to restore confidence, coherence, and political direction after successive crises. Yet the gap between strategic rhetoric and institutional capacity risks generating additional frustration if expectations continue to exceed implementation. Europe therefore confronts not merely a geopolitical challenge but a legitimacy challenge concerning the credibility of its future political trajectory.

The study also highlights the unstable relationship between geopolitical insecurity and democratic resilience. Populist and sovereignty-oriented political movements appear linked not only to ideological polarization but also to prolonged societal exhaustion generated by overlapping crises and perceptions of institutional distance. The findings suggest that Europe's future strategic relevance may depend as much on maintaining social legitimacy and democratic cohesion as on increasing military expenditure or industrial competitiveness. Strategic capacity without political legitimacy may ultimately prove difficult to sustain over time.

Several limitations necessarily affect the broader generalizability of the research. The qualitative orientation prioritized interpretative depth and geopolitical meaning-making rather than large-scale quantitative modelling. Additionally, the rapidly evolving geopolitical environment complicates stable long-term interpretation. European strategic positioning may shift significantly depending on future transatlantic developments, economic conditions, electoral outcomes, technological competition, or security crises. The concept of geopolitical drift itself remains analytically open and may require further refinement through comparative research across different regional and institutional contexts.

Future studies could extend this research by examining how strategic autonomy is interpreted differently across European member states, particularly between central and peripheral regions of the Union. Comparative investigations into technological sovereignty, AI governance, energy transition, and democratic resilience under geopolitical fragmentation may also prove increasingly important. Longitudinal studies following the evolution of European strategic discourse over time would help clarify whether current patterns represent temporary adaptation or deeper structural transformation within the international order.

Ultimately, the paper argues that Europe's future will likely depend less on restoring earlier models of geopolitical stability and more on its capacity to operate within an environment defined by uncertainty, flexible alliances, strategic interdependence, and permanent systemic pressure. Europe appears neither geopolitically powerless nor fully autonomous. Instead, it occupies an intermediate and unstable position shaped by adaptation, fragmentation, and unresolved tensions between normative ambition and structural dependency. Whether this condition evolves into strategic renewal or prolonged drift remains uncertain, though the assumption that previous geopolitical certainties can simply be restored appears increasingly difficult to sustain.

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