

# EU TALKS

Dialoghi sul futuro dell'Europa

ValEUs Edition

**Ongoing Conflicts and the Role of the EU**  
**Student Position Paper**

# Ongoing Conflicts and the Role of the EU

## Student Position Paper

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### Executive Summary

*This position paper discusses the role of the EU and its shortcomings on the world stage, particularly in the context of ongoing international conflicts. It begins by outlining the main wars and crises that have raised doubts about the EU's ability to mediate diplomatically and act politically through tools such as sanctions and military support. The EU's response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and Israel's military assault on Gaza and Palestinians following October 7<sup>th</sup> are significant examples that highlight the EU's limited ability to present a consistent and coherent voice in international affairs. These situations also reflect its failure to uphold the values enshrined in its treaties, particularly the rule of law and the defence of human rights. To address these shortcomings, the paper argues that while a lack of political will is certainly a factor, the root cause is structural. It advances two proposals:*

- *EU treaty reform to enable a more effective response to global challenges*
- *Increased strategic autonomy in sectors such as energy*

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## 1. Introduction

We are undoubtedly living in a period of cascading crises that, now more than ever since WWII, are giving rise to international conflicts across multiple regions simultaneously. From the ongoing war in Ukraine to the devastating military assault on Gaza, from tensions in the South China Sea to instability across the Sahel, armed conflicts and geopolitical confrontations have become a defining feature of the current international order. This trend has directly affected and continues to affect the European continent, forcing the Union to confront the growing distance between the values it proclaims and the decisions it actually makes. That distance, it turns out, can be vast.

The European Union was founded upon a set of core values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights (Treaty on European Union, 1992). These principles were not merely aspirational declarations; they were conceived as the foundational grammar of a new political community, born from the ashes of two world wars and shaped by the conviction that shared values could serve as a bulwark against violence and authoritarianism. In this sense, the EU is not simply a political and economic union; it is, at its very core, a normative project.

### Europe's security fragmentation in the face of contemporary threats

The world today faces a growing number of simultaneous conflicts that pose direct and indirect threats to Europe's security. Yet despite the urgency of this landscape, Europe lacks a coherent, unified understanding of its core geopolitical threats.

The EU's responses to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza reveal a striking absence of strategic cohesion: while Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 initially prompted a degree of unity in the adoption of sanctions and military support, significant disruptions have since emerged in the mechanisms and consistency of that response. On the other hand, the 2023 Gaza crisis exposed even deeper political divisions among member states, both in terms of political discourse and concrete security mechanisms. Two conflicts, both marked by severe humanitarian consequences, have produced fundamentally different European reactions — highlighting not strength, but fragmentation.

At the same time, threats to the EU are no longer abstract or distant; they are direct, persistent, and increasingly hybrid. Russia's war has already spilled into EU territory through repeated drone and missile incursions: Russian drones have violated the airspace of Poland and Romania multiple times, with confirmed crashes on Romanian territory near the Danube in 2023, and similar incidents raising alarms in Estonia and Latvia. Beyond physical breaches, Europe faces an intensifying wave of cyberattacks: Spain, among others, has reported sustained attacks on government and critical infrastructure networks attributed to pro-Russian groups since 2022.

Meanwhile, a "shadow front" is emerging in the Baltic Sea, where suspicious damage to undersea cables and pipelines, such as the 2023 Balticconnector incident, has underscored Europe's vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure, alongside growing concerns about Russian submarine activity and sabotage capabilities.

Together, these developments point to a dangerous reality: while the EU debates how to interpret distant crises, it is already under pressure from multidimensional threats operating at its borders and within its systems.

### Structural constraints on EU foreign policy

As this paper will show, the obstacles are not only a matter of political will and differences. They are structural: a decision-making architecture that still requires unanimity in key foreign policy domains; deep energy, army, and economic dependencies that quietly shape what the Union is willing to see and name (Beaucillon, 2023) and a hard power deficit that limits the EU's capacity to act decisively when words are not enough (Wrange, 2026).

### Closing the gap between principles and practice

A values-based foreign policy applied only when strategically convenient risks undermining the very credibility it seeks to build. The challenge, therefore, is not only to diagnose why the EU struggles to act as a coherent global actor during conflicts, but to identify the concrete reforms that would allow it to finally close the gap between its principles and its practice.

## 2. Analysis of the EU and its dependencies

The European Union's ability to act as a coherent global actor is limited by its institutional structure and decision-making processes. In particular, the requirement of unanimity in foreign policy allows individual member states to use veto power strategically, often slowing down or blocking collective action. This contributes to the EU's reputation for slow responses and weak power projection in international crises. Beyond decision-making rules, deeper structural issues, such as institutional fragmentation between intergovernmental and supranational policies, reduce policy coherence and effectiveness. Internal disagreements and shifting national priorities further lead to inconsistent and diluted outcomes, preventing the EU from developing strong, long-term strategies. Ultimately, diverging national interests and the persistence of national sovereignty in foreign policy make it difficult for the EU to speak with a single voice, limiting its capacity to act as a unified and influential actor on the global stage.

In this paper, particular attention has been devoted to the European Union's structural dependencies, with a specific focus on energy dependency and military dependency. These two dimensions are especially relevant, as they directly affect the European Union's ability to act

autonomously on the international stage. On the one hand, reliance on external energy suppliers exposes the EU to geopolitical vulnerabilities and external pressure. On the other hand, dependence on external security frameworks, most notably NATO, limits its capacity to act independently in conflict situations. Together, these dependencies highlight the structural constraints that continue to shape and, in many cases, restrict the EU's strategic autonomy.

## 2.1 Energy dependency

These structural dependencies become particularly visible in policy areas where national sovereignty remains deeply rooted and interests are especially sensitive. Energy policy stands out as a key example. The combination of geopolitical pressures, economic interests, and divergent national priorities clearly illustrates how internal divisions limit the EU's capacity to act in a cohesive and unified manner. In this context, the Union's energy dependency is especially significant: as of 2024–2025, the EU continues to rely heavily on external suppliers, importing approximately 58–60% of its total energy needs. In 2024, the largest partners for EU imports of petroleum oils were the United States (16.1%), Norway (13.5%) and Kazakhstan (11.5%). The United States provided almost half of the imported liquefied natural gas (45.3%), ahead of Russia (17.5%) and Algeria (10.7%). A major part of the natural gas in gaseous state came from Norway (45.6%). Algeria followed with 19.3%, ahead of Russia with 16.6%.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the European Union adopted the REPowerEU plan as a strategic response aimed at rapidly reducing its energy dependence on the Russian Federation. The initiative was conceived as part of a broader effort to enhance the resilience of the European energy system through a dual approach: the diversification of external energy suppliers and the acceleration of the green transition, in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal. The plan does not explicitly articulate the notion of “strategic autonomy,” however, it implicitly advances this objective by underscoring the structural risks associated with excessive reliance on a single external energy provider. If on the one hand the EU has gradually reduced its reliance on Russian gas, on the other hand this progress masks a new vulnerability, because the Russian supplies have been substituted mainly with a progressive increase of the imports from Norway and the U.S.A. Nonetheless, this reconfiguration of supply chains has not eliminated external dependencies but rather transformed their nature. The growing reliance on U.S. LNG introduces a distinct set of vulnerabilities. Moreover, U.S. export capacity is contingent upon domestic regulatory decisions, infrastructural constraints, and political priorities, thereby limiting the degree of control exercised by European actors over supply stability. This dependence on imported energy supplies could make the EU more vulnerable to external energy supply shocks, including geopolitical conflicts.

## 2.2 Military dependency

Closely linked to these dynamics is the issue of military dependency, which represents another key structural constraint on the EU's external action. The Union's limited hard power capabilities in conflict situations highlight the gap between its ambitions and its actual capacity to act. Although the EU increasingly frames itself through the concept of strategic autonomy, its ability to operate independently in the fields of security and defense remains constrained in practice. Strategic autonomy thus appears both as a political objective and as a long-term ambition aimed at enabling the EU to act autonomously and exert greater influence in international relations. However, its realization largely depends on the political will of Member States and remains inconsistent across policy areas, particularly in defense.

Furthermore, NATO's central role in Europe's security architecture, despite ongoing efforts to enhance defense cooperation, restricts the development of entirely independent EU military capabilities. Particularly in conventional conflicts where military force is indispensable, this structural dependence diminishes the EU's capacity to respond immediately and decisively to crises. Consequently, strategic autonomy is perceived as a continuous process that is influenced by structural constraints and integration gaps, rather than as a capability that has been attained. As a result, the EU's capacity to respond decisively in high-intensity conflicts is still limited, further reinforcing the gap between its global objectives and its actual capability to influence outcomes.

Of course, there have already been different examples of strategies to guarantee a European defence strategy which relies less on external actors. One can cite the historical example of the European Defence Community (EDC) in the 1950s, which strived to create a supranational European defence force. Ultimately, this proposal was derailed because of the sovereign interests of a member state, showing that these kinds of projects are difficult to implement in a European community affected by division.

However, there already exist structures which have the potential to allow a more immediate and uncomplicated consolidation of European military power. For instance, the Organization for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR), the European Defence Agency and the Defence Force could serve as a basis for further cooperation and conjoined exercises.

The latest discussions regarding the European defence and security have revolved around the determination to decisively strengthen Europe's defence readiness by 2030, reduce strategic dependencies, and address critical capability gaps through a comprehensive "360° approach." This marks a shift from a largely rhetorical commitment to strategic autonomy toward a more operational and capability-driven agenda.

In parallel, efforts to deepen the integration of the European defence market have gained prominence. Enhancing cross-border access to defence supply chains, particularly for small and

medium-sized enterprises, has been identified as a key priority, not only for improving military capabilities but also for boosting overall European competitiveness.

Beyond conventional military capabilities, the evolving threat landscape that's characterized by hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns has further expanded the scope of the debate. Persistent hybrid campaigns by actors such as Russia have underscored the need to strengthen resilience, protect critical infrastructure, and enhance preparedness across Member States. In this regard, innovation and lessons drawn from Ukraine's experience particularly in areas such as drone warfare and rapid technological adaptation have become increasingly relevant.

### 3. Conclusion

As identified throughout this position paper, the European Union suffers from important constraints derived from political, institutional and structural limitations. This significantly reduces its capacity to have a more prominent role in the current state of international affairs. In this last section, we identify what we think would be some reforms that would enhance the European Union's role as an international player and that would allow it to better respond to ongoing global conflicts.

- **Transition from unanimity to QMV:** Our first proposal would be to push for EU treaty reform that centers on a strategic shift from unanimity to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) to overcome institutional paralysis. In the current geopolitical climate, the requirement for a consensus often allows single member states to block critical actions, particularly within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). By adopting QMV for sensitive issues like sanctions and enlargement, the Union aims to transform into a more agile and credible international actor, capable of executing rapid, unified responses against global aggressors. Beyond mere efficiency, this structural overhaul seeks to bolster democratic accountability by empowering the European Parliament. This includes granting it greater legal standing to challenge non-compliance before the European Court of Justice, thereby reinforcing the rule of law and ensuring that a more streamlined executive process is balanced by robust institutional oversight.
- **Increasing strategic autonomy:** Our second point would be to achieve true strategic autonomy, which could be done with the Union's evolution from a collection of coordinated markets into a cohesive sovereign entity. This requires a fundamental shift in how the Union fuels its economy and protects its borders. By integrating energy and defense policies, the EU can move from a position of external dependence to one of global leadership. True independence requires a "True Energy Union." This involves building high-voltage interconnectors to ensure that wind energy from the North Sea or solar power from the Mediterranean can be distributed seamlessly across the bloc, eliminating "energy islands." By accelerating the deployment of domestic solar, wind, and green hydrogen, the EU systematically removes the leverage held by fossil-fuel-exporting autocracies. This transition secures price stability and ensures that EU foreign policy is no longer constrained by the need to secure oil and gas routes.

- **Diversifying European Union's partners:** another solution already outlined by former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2022) could be diversifying partnerships all around the globe in order to avoid falling into the same trap of single dependencies by developing new or already existing diplomatic relations, possibly with consolidated democracies like Europe has done with Norway.

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