



CHAPTER 1

EU Foreign Policy and the Fragmentation of the International Order: A Framework for Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is currently in the midst of a significant reevaluation of its international role. Several key events have prompted this reassessment, including Brexit, the Trump Presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Individually, each of these moments has exposed vulnerabilities in the liberal international order (LIO), which the EU views as the cornerstone of international society. However, when considered collectively, they are not merely isolated incidents but manifestations of broader trends: the weaponization of interdependence, technological innovation utilized as a tool of great power politics, and trade serving as a vehicle for geopolitical rivalries.

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The EU has come to recognize, albeit uncomfortably, the rapid pace and trajectory of these changes in the international landscape, prompting both EU member states and institutions to grapple with how best to address them.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy already acknowledged the need to navigate a difficult, more interconnected, contested and complex world. In 2019, during his pre-appointment hearing by the European Parliament for the position of High Representative and Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP), Josep Borrell remarked that the world had undergone dramatic changes, and not for the better. He noted that while it might not be the world the EU desired, the Union was prepared to confront its challenges (European Parliament, 2019). Approximately two and a half years later, and shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the 2022 EU's Strategic Compass was released. The document portrayed a world marked by growing strategic competition, complex security threats, and direct assaults on the European security order. Adopted unanimously by all EU member states, the Strategic Compass emphasized that both the world and the EU were confronted with a "competition of governance systems accompanied by a real battle of narratives" (EEAS, 2022).

The broader changes in the international order can be described as a fragmentation of the LIO, which encompasses the norms, institutions, and power relationships that have defined international political and economic relations in recent decades. Fragmentation is propelled, among other factors, by the resurgence of spheres of influence (Ferguson & Hast, 2018), the regionalization of globalization (Wang & Sun, 2021), the (in-)ability of existing institutions to accommodate ascending powers (Mukherjee, 2022), the divergence of technology standards (Seaman, 2020), and a shift towards a less universalistic understanding of human rights (Stoeckl & Medvedeva, 2018). In essence, fragmentation represents "the transformation of the global rules-based order into a new global ordering architecture characterized by diversity and plurality" (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022: 466).

We do not wish to overstate the degree to which these trends involve a departure from previous historical international orders that have also been described as liberal (Buzan & Lawson, 2015). If anything, what any historic evolution of the LIO demonstrates is its malleability. Some scholars have searched for the core features of any LIO (Ikenberry, 2018: 11), an effort that runs the risk of painting a "selective and exaggerated" picture of the LIO (Acharya, 2018: 5; Huang, 2021), or contributing to

the “myth of the liberal international order” (Allison, 2018). Our claim is more modest and contextual: the post-Cold War version of the LIO is undergoing a process of fragmentation, not against any essentialized understanding of what it stands for, but against its own institutional and normative reality.

We also do not wish to paint a one-sided, simple picture of the normative implications of the LIO and its fragmentation in this volume. All orders, including the LIO, embed power relationships, directly and through norms and institutions, which can perpetuate “frozen configurations of privilege and bias” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005: 52). Norms and institutions need to be contestable if they want to be legitimate (Wiener, 2014). For many emerging powers, the LIO represents Western domination, double standards, uniformity, and unequal political and economic relations (Bajpai & Lakshmana, 2023; Mahbubani, 2018; Sabataram & Laffey, 2023). For these actors, fragmentation signals the potential for a more complex and decentralized order, without a hegemonic power (Acharya, 2018). However, for others, the LIO symbolizes (or aspires to) a predictable, rules-based, highly integrated order that mitigates uncontrolled great power competition and could evolve into a more post-national global political organization (Ikenberry, 2009). From this perspective, fragmentation implies a shift towards a less cooperative and more conflict-prone order, dominated by zero-sum situations and unconstrained great power rivalry.

The experience of the EU with the fragmentation of the LIO “has not been all that benign”, as it has made its “place in the world [...] more uncertain” (Martill & Sus, 2019: 6). Kelemen and McNamara (2022: 965) have argued that the peaceful international order in which the EU developed, an order “without the pressure of war or perceived immediate military threat”, has shaped its development as a polity: “the EU has developed into a legal colossus, but remains weak or entirely impotent” in terms of the core coercive powers of states (including fiscal and administrative coercive powers) (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022: 964). From this point of view, the EU is *itself* a product of the LIO (in its different versions from the second half of the twentieth century). Consequently, current debates about the future of the EU discuss to what extent the Union is also made for this more complex order and capable of navigating the choppy waters ahead.

As an international actor, the EU advocates for a rules-based foreign policy and defends a rules-based international order. However, challenges

arise when the international order itself becomes problematic. Hence, key policymakers have called for strengthening the EU's ability to respond to a more complex international environment. French President Emmanuel Macron has linked European sovereignty with "our capacity to exist in the current world and to defend our values and interests" (Élysée, 2017). Similarly, former President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker advocated for the development of "Weltpolitikfähigkeit," the capacity for the EU to engage in global politics (European Commission, 2018). Likewise, the then HRVP Josep Borrell (2020) defined strategic autonomy as the "ability to think for oneself and to act according to one's own values and interests". Given the central role of multilateralism in EU foreign policy, the crisis of multilateral institutions poses new challenges for EU decision-makers and potentially contentious debates (Barbé et al., 2016).

The EU's response to this situation has been to become more "strategic" across various policy areas, including multilateralism (Commission, 2021), security (Martill & Sus, 2019), trade (protectionism, foreign investment screening, public procurement; see Koenig & Wernert, 2021: 3), and energy (Siddi & Kustova, 2021). However, both rhetoric and actions are shaped by complex political processes, often leading to clashes between key actors with differing views on the future international order and the role the EU should play within it.

This volume explores how EU actors, including member states, institutions, and political groups in the European Parliament, have responded to the fragmentation of the LIO and whether they believe these transformations necessitate significant changes in EU foreign policymaking. We want to understand the politics of the process through which the EU is attempting to make sense of its international role. We do so across various issue areas and dimensions of EU foreign policy, broadly understood to include both CFSP, external relations and the externalization of internal policies (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014). In this introductory chapter, we will propose an approach to grasp the diversity of interpretations and the associated political agendas. This involves considering a range of interpretations of the term "strategic autonomy", which has played a central role in discussions regarding the EU's adaptation to a fragmenting LIO.

THE EU AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The EU has firsthand experience with the fragmentation of the LIO. The departure of the United Kingdom, the faltering of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism, the pre-Ukraine fragilization of the transatlantic alliance, the COVID-19-related emergencies, and the return of armed claims over spheres of influence in Europe have all impacted fundamental aspects of the EU's foreign policy. In the face of a changed and increasingly hostile international environment, Europeans have been in need "to rethink many of their assumptions about the world order and the best way of defending their interests, values, and the rules-based system that has been the foundation of European foreign policy in the last few decades" (Leonard & Shapiro, 2019: 3).

Indeed, EU decision-makers have acknowledged these changes, and the language used has evolved accordingly. In its European Security Strategy of 2003 (European Council, 2003), the EU still depicted the international environment as "one of increasingly open borders", wherein "flows of trade and investment, the development of technology, and the spread of democracy have brought freedom and prosperity to many people". Even the acknowledgment that "others have perceived globalization as a cause of frustration and injustice" underscored that this was someone else's viewpoint, one not shared by the EU. In such a world characterized by "global threats, global markets, and global media", the primary objective was to construct "an effective multilateral system" and foster the development of a "stronger international society". This entailed "widening the membership" of the World Trade Organization (China had already acceded in December 2001, while Russia was negotiating its entry), as well as that of the International Financial Institutions (European Council, 2003).

The shift towards a more fragmented LIO was clearly reflected in the language of the EU Global Strategy of 2016. The times were characterized by an "existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union", with the Union itself perceived as "under threat". While emphasizing the importance of a "rules-based global order" with multilateralism as its "key principle" for unlocking "the full potential of a prosperous Union", the EU expressed readiness to explore alternative paths if necessary. Recognizing that "soft power is not enough" in such a fragile world, the EU asserted the need to prioritize the security of the EU

and develop “an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy”. The vision entailed the construction of “cooperative regional orders” in “a de-centred world” caught between “global pressures and local push-back” (EUGS, 2016). The perception of this change as hostile to the EU is perhaps best captured by Nathalie Tocci (2017), who described the early 2000s as years of “optimism, confidence, idealism, and yes, hubris”, contrasting them with the new environment where one could easily fall into conveying “a political message of closure, defensiveness, defeatism, or crude realpolitik” (Tocci, 2017: 55).

The language of the 2022 Strategic Compass was even darker, to the extent that some have questioned whether the “doom-laden worldview of its threat assessment” aligns with the decisions the EU can realistically be expected to take (Tallis, 2022). The Strategic Compass portrays a world marked by “conflicts, military build-ups, and aggressions”, with “sources of instability increasing in our neighborhood and beyond”, resulting in “severe humanitarian suffering and displacement”. In this environment, “interdependence is increasingly conflictual”, and there are “growing attempts of economic and energy coercion” (European Union, 2022: 10). Multilateral institutions appear unable to address these trends adequately, as their crises “are leading to increasingly transactional relations among states” (European Union, 2022: 14). This led HRVP Borrell, in his foreword, to advocate for the EU to “speak the language of power”, asserting that “if you want dialogue, diplomacy, and multilateralism to succeed, you need to put power behind it” (Borrell, 2022: 6). The fact that the last draft of the Compass had to be updated after February 24th to include, by one count, at least 15 references to Russia (Bell, 2022) underscores the rapid deterioration of the EU’s security environment. While the draft initially called for a “step change” in EU security and defence policies, the final version aspired to a “quantum leap”. Whereas the former suggested “selective engagement with Moscow”, the latter regarded the Russian invasion of Ukraine as “a tectonic shift in European history” (Koenig, 2022: 4; European Union, 2022: 14).

At the heart of debates concerning the future of EU foreign policy lies the political interpretation of interdependence. The post-Cold War consensus on “Wandel durch Handel” (change through trade) has been eroded by the weaponization of interdependence, now seen as a permanent aspect of the contemporary international system in an “age of unpeace” (Leonard, 2021), where “everything became war” (Brooks,

2016). However, no alternative consensus has emerged. This raises questions for EU policymakers: Which interdependencies should the EU relinquish? To what extent is the fragmentation of the LIO inevitable, or is it a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Answers to these questions vary across issue areas and among different actors. Indeed, these EU actors can opt to integrate long-held preferences into proposals tailored to the new international realities. We interpret the terms “strategic autonomy” and “European sovereignty” precisely in this manner, as speech acts aimed at promoting policy options that have not previously enjoyed consensus but could find new traction going forward. In this context, the European Council on Foreign Relations has discussed the emergence of a broad coalition, termed by Krastev and Leonard as “strategic sovereigntists,” which includes both “disillusioned globalists who have come to recognize that their vision of a multilateral world of global governance cannot be realized” under current conditions, and “nationalists [who] are beginning to realize that their states can only be sovereign as part of a European bloc” (Krastev & Leonard, 2020: 18).

The following section provides guidelines for systematically exploring how the fragmentation of the LIO is reshaping the politics of EU foreign policy.

MAPPING OUT RESPONSES

The Discourse on Strategic Autonomy

A common response to this state of affairs has been the call for a greater degree of strategic autonomy for the EU, highlighting the risks of relegating the EU to “strategic dependence” (Grevi, 2019). In a world of increased competition and rising nationalism, such a situation is seen as not sustainable politically by most EU actors. In fact, strategic dependence “would be both a symptom and a multiplier of centrifugal forces within the EU” (Grevi, 2019: 4). This discourse acknowledges the broader fragmentation of the LIO and its accelerators, such as the Trump Presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and advocates for various policies and measures that would enable the EU to respond. However, understanding strategic autonomy as a bundle of different proposals and unpacking it provides a more nuanced understanding of how different EU actors plan to position the Union in an increasingly hostile international environment. The

meaning of strategic autonomy evolves over time, across users, and within various policy domains. It is precisely this ambiguity, its capacity to refer to several different projects, that has made it attractive to a broad range of participants in the debate over the international role of the Union. Therefore, for our analysis, we need to unpack the different dimensions of this concept.

Security and defence are areas in which strategic autonomy can be traced back further in European debates. The 1998 Franco-British agreement of Saint-Malo advocated for a European “capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so”. It is also in this area that strategic autonomy seemed to provide “a counter-Brexit narrative” after the British referendum of 2016 (Järvenpää et al., 2019: 6). In this field, the literature has identified strategic autonomy as comprising three different dimensions: political, operational, and industrial (Kempin & Kunz, 2017; Arteaga, 2017). These dimensions respectively refer to the capacity to make autonomous decisions, the ability to own and deploy the capabilities necessary to implement them, and the possession of an industrial base to produce such capabilities, thereby reducing dependence on their transfer by third parties. These three components can also be identified in other issue areas, especially if the industrial variable is broadened to include ownership of other types of assets. The authority to make decisions can be analytically separated from the ability to execute them, and both from the availability of homegrown resources to do so, whether from a technological, industrial, informational, corporate, or scientific perspective.

Different combinations of these three components of autonomy (political, operational, and asset-related) lead to different kinds of strategic autonomy. Along these lines, Fiott (2018) has proposed a three-fold distinction between distinct political projects behind the concept of strategic autonomy: as responsibility, as hedging, and as emancipation. These projects appeal to actors with different views on the EU’s international role. Examining them it is important to bear in mind that they were originally primarily referred to the domain of security and defence.

Strategic autonomy as responsibility can be seen as *autonomy to*, and it “links directly to the notion that European states should take up a greater share of the burden” inside the West, and “when appropriate, through the EU” (Fiott, 2018: 2). Since this is about providing Europe

greater autonomy to execute decisions independently from the US, but not against its opposition, it mainly demands operational autonomy.

The logic of autonomy as hedging is tantamount to *autonomy in case*, and it stems from “the uncertainties surrounding the transatlantic relationship” and the subsequent need to ensure that a potential realignment of the US strategic priorities (if the US withdraws from Europe) would not leave the EU unable to reproduce the resource base on which its security and foreign policy objectives rest (Fiott, 2018: 4). In other words, hedging could be seen as a way to “allow general alignment behind a hegemon, but with one eye on developing the capabilities needed for independent action” (Fiott, 2018: 4). On top of operational autonomy, hence, it includes an asset-ownership dimension.

Finally, emancipation is the most ambitious version of strategic autonomy and it would imply allowing the EU “to reach its full potential as a global power”, combining the operational, asset-related, and political dimensions of strategic autonomy (Fiott, 2019: 8). It can hence be seen as an *autonomy from*. Table 1.1 summarizes this argument.

In sum, strategic autonomy as responsibility (*autonomy to*) implies a greater level of operational capabilities; hedging (*autonomy in case*) requires also a certain level of asset autonomy since the EU cannot rely on US resources if it is to diversify its alignments; and finally, autonomy as emancipation (*autonomy from*) involves also a larger degree of decisional autonomy. We propose that *mutatis mutandis*, this three-partite distinction is at least partially relevant to policy areas beyond defence, although achieving each of these milestones poses different challenges in different policy areas, as analyzed in detail in the thematic chapters of this volume.

Table 1.1 Unpacking Strategic Autonomy

	<i>Operational autonomy</i>	<i>Asset autonomy</i>	<i>Decisional autonomy</i>
Responsibility (StA to)	X		
Hedging (StA in case)	X	X	
Emancipation (StA from)	X	X	X

Source Own elaboration based on Fiott (2018)

Beyond Strategic Autonomy

The diverse projects that exist under the label of strategic autonomy do not exhaust the range of stances that actors (member states, EU institutions, parties at the EP, knowledge communities, and interest groups) can take when they sense that the international order is fragmenting. We expect there to be greater variation in how different European actors perceive and react to the fragmentation of the LIO. Such variation stems from the underlying diversity of worldviews held by actors. They interpret international trends and events differently and defend different projects and understandings of how to insert their local reality into international politics (i.e. they have different broad geopolitical orientations). The point is that such worldviews will mediate the impact of systemic changes on EU decision-making. In other words, since “structures do not come with an instruction sheet” (Blyth, 2003), we expect actors’ perceptions and normative preferences to shape their takes on what international structural shifts mean for the EU as an international actor. To be sure, there is no need to essentialize actors’ worldviews. They can change, as policymakers shape their assessments in an environment populated by other practitioners, think tanks, and opinion makers.

We map out a number of such options. We start by differentiating between three broad and long-lasting approaches to EU foreign policy—nationalism, Atlanticism, and Europeanism. The latter two are a key cleavage in the development of EU foreign policy that remains very much relevant. It is a key divide between different national strategic cultures in the EU (Dyson, 2013), and it has a bearing on more recent debates. Atlanticists and Europeanists differ over the “definition of EU strategic autonomy and whether this amounts to hedging against the prospect of US withdrawal, a necessary reinforcement of [the Western alliance], or even an emancipation from dependence upon a fickle United States” (Kunz, 2018: 5; Tonra, 2021: 11). Atlanticists and Europeanists think of their countries’ participation in international relations as mediated, respectively, by their belonging to the West and Europe/the EU. In contradistinction, nationalists will rather think of their nation-state as an individual participant in international affairs, unencumbered by alignments, commitments, and solidarities imposed by membership in broader blocks. We can think of this as an expression, in the foreign policy realm, of demarcationist attitudes as described by Kriesi et al. (2006), among others. To be sure, there are ways to combine nationalism, Europeanism,

and Atlanticism into politically cohesive proposals. Nationalism can go together with Atlanticism and weaken the role of the EU in global affairs. Atlanticists might want to hedge their bets with a stronger EU, and Europeanists might see the Atlantic alliance as temporarily necessary before the EU is able to flex its own muscles by itself (and all member states are convinced that it can). National attachment has traditionally been part of and transformed by an interest in European integration. There is a wide array of possible combinations. We should expect to find mixed, impure expressions of such worldviews. However, we claim that there is leverage in keeping them analytically distinct and being able to identify the ways in which they collide and coalesce over time.

We also differentiate between two different reactions to a fragmenting LIO. Actors can either embrace or resist fragmentation. Those who embrace it can do it because of a normative preference (because they see it as a promising development) and/or out of the conviction that it is an irreversible trend that one needs to adapt to. On the contrary, others would rather resist the fragmentation of the LIO. This may happen because of principled or strategic reasons (i.e. so as to avoid turning such fragmentation into a self-fulfilled prophecy), or simply because of an inability to change course. In general, they will tend to see the agency as less constrained by structural processes than those who do not see any option but to go along with the full implications of a fragmenting LIO.

We explicitly raise a caveat here. As there are different normative readings of the LIO, there are also different normative reasons to endorse or oppose its fragmentation as a matter of principle. While some will see fragmentation as a harbinger of conflict, norm erosion, and possibly war, others will see it as fostering an order that is more complex and decentred, “culturally and politically diverse” (Acharya, 2018: 8), in which universal norms are strongly localized (Zimmermann, 2017) in a way that allows for “multiple modernities” (Acharya, 2018: 16). We remain agnostic on the normative convenience of any of such options which, again, should be seen as ideal types. But there are surely moral objectives at play in taking sides in this debate, either way an actor decides to do so.

Table 1.2 lays out the six options produced by our 2×3 categorization. For each of the cells, we outline the most general description of (a) their view of the international order; (b) the response to such a state of affairs; and (c) a hint about the basic outlook behind each of these six possible approaches. To be sure, different actors can hold different positions over time (e.g. because they reassess the international context), or

over different issue areas (e.g. because they have different evaluations of the likelihood of the EU becoming an autonomous, influential actor on different policy domains).

We will now examine each of the six cells in more detail. The text is organized by columns and discusses nationalists, Atlanticists, and Europeanists in turn.

Nationalists

Nationalists who embrace the fragmentation of the LIO will choose to participate in this process as sovereign nation-states, rather than as members of a Union. They will view a more localized order as a validation of their communitarian, anti-universalist worldview (Zürn & de Wilde, 2016), and will exploit it to advocate for less European integration. Due to their Euroscepticism, they will also perceive a more fragmented and competitive order as another justification to pursue a more independent orientation for their national foreign policy, distancing themselves from traditional EU alliances and aligning more closely with other great powers that share their preference for a less cosmopolitan international society. For example, the French far-right politician Marine Le Pen, a prominent proponent of this nationalist approach, rejected Macron's position by stating that "there is not and there will never be European sovereignty because there is no European people. (...) By promoting European diplomacy we have only achieved one thing: the weakening, even the erasure of our own diplomacy" (AFP, 2022).

On the contrary, rejecting fragmentation from a nationalist standpoint is rather complex, given the trade-off between universalist and demarcationist claims (Grande & Kriesi, 2015). If advocating for the fragmentation of the EU, the instinct would not be to reject that of the LIO. Nevertheless, only major players can attempt to reconcile this dilemma, as it requires a nation-state's capacity to actively contribute independently to the production of an integrated LIO. The slogan "Global Britain" precisely hints in that direction—despite leaving the EU, the United Kingdom pledged to become a major global power and remain an outward-looking country committed to liberal internationalism. From this perspective, not being constrained by the slow-moving wheels of EU decision-making can be seen as an advantage: an independent state would be more agile in contributing to (and benefiting from) the LIO.

Table 1.2 Reactions to the Fragmentation of the Liberal International Order

	<i>Nationalists</i>	<i>Atlanticists</i>		<i>Europeanists</i>
		<i>If US administration Atlanticist</i>	<i>If US administration not Atlanticist</i>	
Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmented order of sovereign nations Euroscepticism and patriotic Europe Transactional re-alignment with other great powers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The West vs the Rest Actorness requires greater operational StA. <i>Autonomy to</i> EU as a responsible partner in a struggling West 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Rest vs a divided West Actorness demands greater operational and industrial StA. Autonomy in case Hope of getting the US back. No deterrent. When hope vanishes, move to next column 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competing regional blocks Actorness requires operational, industrial and decisional StA. <i>Autonomy from</i> Independent EU, including deterrent
Rejection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global order of sovereign nations Euroscepticism and patriotic Europe plus globalist outlook Only available to big players “Global Britain” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuity under more difficult conditions No remarkably higher requirements for actorness. Confidence in US capacities EU-US bilateralism as leverage to reform/defend the LIO 	<p><i>When hope of getting the US back vanishes, move to next column</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperative regional orders Actorness requires operational, industrial and decisional autonomy. But deterrent not critical because order is perceived as less conflictual. <i>Autonomy from</i> EU as mender of the LIO through multiple alliances

Source Own elaboration

In any case, nationalists will view a fragmenting LIO, whether they reject or accept such fragmentation, as further justification to pursue their own national paths, free from the constraints of a common EU foreign policy.

Atlanticists

For European Atlanticists, the fragmentation of the LIO will have varying implications depending on the degree of attachment of the US administration to the Atlantic alliance. Concerns over the future orientation of US presidents will influence their assessment.

If the US administration leans towards Atlanticism, European Atlanticists who accept the fragmentation of the LIO will likely view the EU as part of a besieged Western bloc. They will perceive the alliance with the US as needing reinforcement and as the most suitable strategy to confront the West's rivals in an increasingly conflict-prone international order. From this perspective, the EU must develop autonomous capabilities to make a greater contribution to the Western alliance. This goal is relatively achievable, as maintaining a role will only require greater operational autonomy. The US is unlikely to object to this understanding of autonomy as responsibility; it can even be viewed as a binding strategy to demonstrate reliability to the US and alleviate concerns over burden sharing (Alcaro, 2020: 153; Mazarr & Fiott, 2022).

However, if the US administration is not Atlanticist, or if concerns about this possibility arise, the requirements for EU actorness will be more demanding. A divided West will have less leverage in an increasingly competitive international system, and the benefits of the US alliance will not be that clear anymore for Europeans. Therefore, to remain relevant, the EU must develop strategic autonomy as hedging, encompassing both operational and industrial dimensions of autonomy. Those advocating this position believe that the fragmentation of the LIO and the unreliability of the US as a partner will compel the EU to hedge its bets, possibly by diversifying dependencies and establishing partnerships with other great powers. If hope for reviving the transatlantic alliance fades, there will be a tendency to shift towards the Europeanist camp. Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement in May 2017 that "the times in which we could completely rely on others have somewhat passed" reflects this sentiment and the election of Joe Biden as U.S. President did not entirely reverse her

stance.¹ Uncertainty about the inclinations of future US administrations persists, as evidenced by her speech at the 2021 Munich Security Conference (The Guardian, 2017), where she maintained a somewhat lukewarm response to Biden's election, noting that interests may continue to diverge (Koenig & Wernert, 2021: 8).

The rejection of fragmentation by European Atlanticists will also lead to different outcomes depending on the orientation of the US administration. If the US administration maintains an Atlanticist stance, European Atlanticists can defend the LIO based on the Western alliance, imposing relatively mild new requirements for EU actorhood. This scenario would allow the EU to complement US power and remain hopeful about the endurance of the status quo, under the understanding that the relative decline of the US does not necessarily mean the international order it created will falter if allies shore it up (Massie & Paquin, 2020: 7). Bilateral EU-US deals would be seen as leveraging the combined power of the US and the EU in support of international norms.

Conversely, if the White House adopts a non-Atlanticist stance, European Atlanticists will lack a viable strategy to sustain a universalist version of the LIO. This may prompt them to align themselves with other camps in the table, potentially leaning towards more Europeanist positions.

Europeanists

Europeanists who accept or welcome the reality of a more fragmented order perceive fragmentation as the emergence of competing regional blocs. They advocate for the full development of strategic autonomy, understood in this context as emancipation. Their ultimate goal is to reduce risky dependencies on other poles. This entails achieving political, operational, and industrial autonomy, and in its most advanced form, the development of an EU deterrent that would significantly weaken the Atlantic alliance. French President Emmanuel Macron made gestures in this direction during the Trump administration, warning of NATO's "brain death" and that Europe stood on "the edge of a precipice",

¹ However, there is nothing unavoidable in this trend. Days before the US election of 2020, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Defence Minister of Germany, wrote that "Europeans [would not be able to replace America's crucial role as a security provider]" and that consequently "illusions of European strategic autonomy [had to] come to an end" (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020).

given doubts about “the commitment of the US” with its defence (The Economist, 2019). This led him to propose a “strategic dialogue with our European partners” on the role of the French nuclear deterrent in collective security (Macron, 2020). Some former Atlanticists, who believe that EU and US security interests will diverge in the future, may also adopt a more Europeanist stance and align with this position. However, the hope of re-engaging the US in Europe may pull them back towards the Atlanticist camp, albeit with a more cautious hedging strategy.

Finally, Europeanists who resist fragmentation perceive the world as composed of cooperative regional orders. They view forming alliances with multiple, possibly issue-specific groups of like-minded states as the best approach to strengthening multilateral institutions, with the EU serving as a stabilizing force in the LIO. In this scenario, the US does not necessarily need to be the primary partner. Instead, alliances will vary depending on the specific issue, reflecting the understanding that while factors may be driving the fragmentation of the LIO and there may be limited broad coalitions opposing this trend, it is still possible to form specific alliances to defend particular international institutions. The European Commission seems to point in this direction in its reflections about multilateral institutions: “Non-traditional coalitions and formats should be explored, building on lessons from processes such as the EU, China and Canada co-convoked Ministerial Meeting on Climate Action, the Paris Peace Forum and Finance in Common summit” (Commission, 2021: 14). Sustaining EU actorship in this context will require greater autonomy in operational, industrial, and decisional terms. However, this version of strategic autonomy as emancipation stops short of advocating for the construction of an independent deterrent, as actors in this camp do not perceive the international context as sufficiently conflictual to justify such a drastic measure.

CONTRIBUTIONS

In Chapter 2, Patricia García-Durán and Johan Eliasson examine the EU response to the fragmentation of global trade policies, including the rejection of previously accepted norms, declining rule adherence, and trade wars. Great power competition and geoeconomic concerns now shape important aspects of international trade. The authors understand the EU’s trade strategy as a defensive move, forced by the fragmentation of the LIO. New trade instruments are designed to protect rather than to attack,

to serve as deterrence, only to be used when other means to compel rule adherence fail. This has pushed the EU closer to the US, such as with investigations into Chinese electric vehicle industries. At the same time, the Commission is cognizant of the fact that the EU can also be at the receiving end of new Trade Defence Instruments and can be negatively affected by changes to industrial policy, the net-zero transition, and state aid such as in the case of the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act. The potential for a Europeanist approach is hence built into recent developments.

Chapter 3, by Eva Michaels and Monika Sus, discusses debates on European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) in the field of security and defence, viewing it as the main response of the EU and its member states to the fragmentation of the LIO in this domain. The authors trace the evolution of EU and national approaches in debates over three key components of security and defence: industry, crisis management, and relations with global powers, and conclude that there is no overarching permissive consensus on these topics. This lack of an EU-wide shared understanding of the direction and applicability of ESA has rendered it impracticable as an answer to the fragmentation of the LIO. This is an upsetting conclusion for the handful of EU actors who believe ESA could be an effective response, but the authors see little indication that the majority of member states are keen to breathe life into the idea. To be sure, a good deal of them have paid lip service to the concept as long as it has remained vague. However, they are not ready to commit to its effective implementation.

Diego Badell and Esther Barbé devote Chapter 4 to the analysis of international norms over violence against women and EU views and responses to its ever more contested character. The chapter focuses on the processes of ratification of the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe both by EU member states and the EU itself (which took place in May 2023, six years after its adoption). The Convention has become a bone of contention between two broad camps, both containing civil society actors and Member States. On one hand, there are opponents who see the Istanbul Convention as imposing “gender ideology” (just as they see the EU as a vehicle for that same worldview) and who claim that its implementation either clashes with their national traditional values or should take place only under the aegis of national authorities. On the other hand, there are proponents who hold a universalist side of Human Rights and side with the Convention and a common EU position.

Chapter 5, by Óscar Fernández and Robert Kissack, deals with global health. The Covid-19 pandemic added to the density, diversity, and scope

of the global health architecture, while also exacerbating geopolitical tensions. However, health multilateralism was already fragmenting before great power competition became a factor. Contrary to the other contributions to this book, it was the liberalization of the international order after the end of the Cold War that made this regime complex more regionally and vertically differentiated, and more prone to engage with different constellations of state and non-state actors in each of those dimensions. The EU has accepted this state of affairs but at the same time has promoted expansive ontologies of global health, such as “One Health” and “Health in All Policies” and rejected further fragmentation. In this situation, the EU and EU member states have pivoted between the classical EU agenda of reinforcing the WHO and the (Western) inclination for market-oriented solutions.

Martijn Vlaskamp’s chapter 6 examines the responses of the EU and EU actors to the fragmentation of the LIO in relation to the trade in critical raw materials, i.e. economically and strategically important materials for the EU, whose supply is vulnerable and insecure. While the order has experienced some degree of fragmentation compared to its state 10–15 years ago, the EU’s actions are primarily driven by its dependence on China and concerns about the associated vulnerability to a rival great power. Access to such materials is no longer about the removal of trade barriers, but it requires geopolitical decisions to strategically direct sources and chains of supply. This view, Vlaskamp argues, is widely shared among EU actors, and as a result, most debates focus not on the necessity of strategic autonomy in this specific issue area, but rather on determining the most effective EU responses to address the challenge.

Eduard Soler i Lecha authors Chapter 7, examining the Global Gateway—an EU flagship project and among the most ambitious responses to great power competition in connectivity and infrastructure within Europe. The EU, concerned about the trend toward deglobalization amidst multipolar competition and the impact of external shocks such as COVID-19 on trade and supply chains, presents the Global Gateway as a comprehensive and inclusive initiative. It claims that its objective is to establish connections where others seek dependencies, a stance that echoes the EU’s response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, aligning with the EU’s revitalized geopolitical reflexes. However, the challenges in implementing this project do not primarily arise from intra-EU differences in geopolitical strategies or diverging perceptions of the international order and how to address its challenges. Instead, they

stem from bureaucratic inertia, vested interests, and the availability of partnerships, both within the public and private sectors. These hurdles, though less glamorous, wield significant influence and are just as crucial as geopolitical factors in foreseeing the EU's cohesion in advancing this project.

Chapter 8 by Giovanni Briganti Dini explores how the EU is responding to the fragmented governance of Artificial Intelligence, an area that will remain critical for decades to come. In contradistinction to other chapters in this volume, this one does not describe any process of fragmentation of previously existing regimes, as the governance of Artificial Intelligence has been fragmented from its inception. However, the existence of separate governance schemes does contribute to the broader fragmentation of the international order. EU institutional actors have deployed a mostly Europeanist response to such trends, defending what they perceive to be European preferences. States have added national interests into the mix, without advocating for a national response (with the exception of Hungary). There is also a shared understanding that the opportunity for the United States to become a partner needs to be cultivated. The US-EU Trade and Technology Council, set up shortly after the election of President Biden, embodies precisely that hope and has fostered a rapprochement between US and EU chips reshoring policies and a modicum of two-way convergence on regulating Artificial Intelligence.

Chapter 9, by Benjamin Kienzle, examines how the EU and its member states have responded to three key challenges in the area of non-proliferation and arms control: the development of nuclear weapons in violation of the basic non-proliferation norm; the grievances of non-nuclear weapon states regarding nuclear disarmament; and the disintegration of great power cooperation, especially between the United States and Russia. The chapter argues that the EU's actions to address these challenges are limited to its traditional support for international non-proliferation institutions and export controls of sensitive items. The ability to provide more forceful responses is hampered internally by divisions among member states, particularly concerning nuclear disarmament, and externally by the primacy of great power politics. In other words, in this terrain, the reaction of the EU to a more challenging environment has been to adhere to its usual repertoire of policies due to its inability to expand it.

Finally, Chapter 10 concludes the volume, reflecting on both the fragmentation of the LIO and the EU response to it. As regards the former,

Oriol Costa and Esther Barbé note the ways in which the current fragmentation, driven by great power competition and the contestation of liberal norms, sits on top of previous fragmentations, some of them built into the system by design, some of them a consequence of the success and liberal aspect of LIO. When it comes to the ways in which the EU is responding to fragmentation, they make three claims. First, the EU “has not mounted any systematic opposition to the fragmentation of the LIO”, but has generally accepted its logic. Second, the EU and EU actors show little exclusive nationalism, i.e. nationalist positions that exclude any combination with Europeanism or Atlanticism. Hungary is the most consistent exception to this. And finally, actors participating in EU debates are prone to combine elements of Europeanism and Atlanticism, which seem to appear together quite frequently” (Costa and Barbé, this volume).

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