

The virtues of a less incomplete superpower

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Executive summary

Rising geopolitical tensions and the return of Donald Trump to the White House have exposed the European Union's structural vulnerability. The EU faces a strategic choice: (i) align more closely with the United States, attempt to become a fully-fledged superpower, or (ii) evolve into a more coherent and capable – yet distinct – global actor.

This paper argues that the first two options are neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, the EU should (iii) embrace its position as an “incomplete superpower” and focus on reducing the internal constraints that limit its capacity to act. While the EU already holds significant economic and regulatory power, institutional fragmentation, limited defence capabilities and internal divisions weaken its global role.

Building a European superpower is neither feasible nor desirable. But the world would benefit from a less incomplete European Union.

A less incomplete EU could play a central role in building coalitions with middle powers and supporting a renewed rules-based international order. To do so, it must:

1. strengthen defence capabilities;
2. reform decision-making;
3. complete the single market;
4. reinforce its external action, and;
5. operationalise its economic security tools.

Neither a vassal nor a fully-fledged superpower

The world is going astray. The upheaval triggered by Trump's return to the White House becomes clearer. The escalation in the Middle East is the latest and most dramatic example. The European Union (EU) and its member states have been caught unprepared – and, in fairness, did not prepare – for Trump 2.0.

The vertigo of the polycrisis¹ shaking the globe is partly obscuring the existential threat the EU now faces. There can be little doubt that the Trump administration is on a collision course with the EU and its liberal democratic values. It is explicitly promoting regime change in European countries to align them with the America-First vision of the world.² As stated in the National Security Strategy document released last November, “American diplomacy should continue to stand up for genuine democracy, freedom of expression, and unapologetic celebrations of European nations' individual character and history. America encourages its political allies in Europe to promote this revival of spirit, and the growing influence of patriotic European parties indeed gives cause for great optimism. Our goal should be to help Europe correct its current trajectory”.³

Against this backdrop, the EU and its member states face stark choices (gradual adaptation is no longer an option) and must assess the merits of three broad alternatives: (i) becoming vassals of Trump's America, with the risk of a drift towards illiberal democracy; (ii) pursuing the transformation into a fully-fledged superpower independent from the US; or (iii) evolving into a less “incomplete” superpower, able to work with middle powers to promote new alliances and possibly a new world order.

The first option, as outlined by US State Secretary Rubio in his speech at the Munich Conference, would require European countries to join “the path that President Trump and the United States has embarked upon ... It is a path we have walked together before and hope to walk together again. For five centuries, before the end of the Second World War, the West had been expanding – its missionaries, its pilgrims, its soldiers, its explorers pouring out from its shores to cross oceans, settle new continents, build vast empires extending out across the globe”.⁴ It is worth noting that this vision differs significantly from the post-World War II, transatlantic alliance based on liberal democracy and a rules-based order, but rather echoes earlier periods of Western imperialism.

Such a “reinvigorated” alliance would require European countries to align with Trump's ethno-nationalist, America First vision of the world structured around spheres of influence.

Adopting the US path toward illiberal democracy would require hollowing out EU institutions. This shift seeks to replace supranational “guilt and shame” with an unapologetic celebration of national sovereignty, removing what the Trump administration views as a bureaucratic obstacle to “America First” objectives.

By following this path, European countries would *de facto* become vassals of the American superpower. While they might benefit from some of the extractive policies that the US will impose on the rest of the world, the drawbacks would likely outweigh these gains: European countries would have to accept deals even more asymmetric than

the Turnberry trade agreement, face greater external interference in domestic affairs and operate under US leadership in world affairs. In such an alliance, the US would get the lion's share, with European partners footing the bill.

A radical alternative would be the transformation of the European Union into a fully-fledged superpower, equipped with real strategic autonomy and no longer dependent on the US for its security. This idea occasionally emerges among European policymakers and commentators, exasperated by Trump's rhetoric and contempt towards his allies. However, in practical terms, such a transformation is almost impossible, as it would require a substantial transfer of sovereignty to the EU level, which remains politically unrealistic.

More fundamentally, pursuing a superpower status is not desirable, even if it were feasible. Given Europe's historical experience – including its colonial past, which, contrary to

Rubio's apparent stance, is nothing to be proud of – this path risks undermining efforts to rebuild a new rules-based world order.⁵ When a country or a coalition becomes a superpower, even with the intention of acting as a “benevolent hegemon”, the temptation to exploit that power in its own interest is strong and often difficult to resist, as recent developments in Trump's America illustrate.

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Towards a less incomplete superpower

Rather than becoming a third superpower competing with the US and China for supremacy, the EU should instead embrace its status as an incomplete superpower – that is, an entity whose characteristics partially match, and in some areas even exceed, those of existing superpowers. This include the size of Europe's economy and the strength of its soft power (notably humanitarian and development aid), while lacking the institutional framework and military might of a fully-fledged superpower.⁶ Because of this incompleteness, the EU is compelled to work with other countries to build the foundations of a new and fairer rule-based international order, an objective much more consistent with its principles and values.

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The EU status could prove particularly beneficial in the establishment of an alliance of middle powers, as advocated by the EPC and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney.⁷ In geopolitical terms, the EU is *de facto* a middle power. Militarily, it remains a composite of middle and small powers with limited external projection.

Its ambition to achieve strategic autonomy is not conceived in isolation and can be strengthened through international cooperation. The EU's relative geopolitical weakness may therefore reassure potential partners, who might otherwise resist the emergence of a hegemonic role within such an alliance.

At the same time, in geoeconomic terms, the EU is indeed a superpower. Its GDP is comparable to that of China,⁸ its economy is more open than that of the US or China, its standard-setting power is strong and its soft power exceeds that of both.⁹ In economic terms, the EU possesses the critical mass that most middle powers lack when seeking to resist pressure from the US or China. This critical mass would enhance the alliance's leverage and credibility in resisting coercive practices by the two superpowers.¹⁰

However, the EU's current model significantly constrains its role on the global scene. Its cumbersome decision-making process, increasingly inter-governmental dynamics, persistent divisions among member states and the strong defense of national prerogatives all limit its capacity to act. At the same time, difficulties in mobilising resources to boost productivity and keep pace with US and Chinese technological advances further narrow its margins of manoeuvre. While these constraints were already problematic in a more stable and predictable international environment, they have become a structural weakness in a context increasingly shaped by geostrategic competition and the need for rapid and bold decisions.

Five recommendations

If it wants to remain a major international player and avoid becoming an easy prey for the two superpowers, the EU must reform itself and become a less incomplete superpower.¹¹ This implies moving forward rapidly on five issues:

1. **Lay the foundations of a European defense system** able to deter military threats and intervene beyond the continent in missions mandated by the United Nations. The defense commitments agreed by European countries at the NATO Summit in June 2025 for the next decade should, in principle, be sufficient to achieve this objective. The problem lies in their effective implementation. European countries are not yet willing to do whatever it takes to use these commitments efficiently – as illustrated by the absence of clear guidelines for the implementation of Article 42(7), which should entail mutual military assistance to fend off hostile military actions. Progress is also needed to develop a European defense industry that significantly reduces dependence on US weapon systems, and to establish coordination and deployment mechanisms that do not rely on US troops and intelligence to protect European territory. As long as the EU remains heavily dependent on the US for its security, its strategic autonomy will have serious limitations.*
2. **Introduce essential institutional reforms** to simplify and improve decision-making. The most evident step would be the removal of member states' veto. On critical foreign policy issues, the possibility of enhanced cooperation or Schengen-type agreements among member states should also be considered.
3. **Complete the single market and advance a genuine banking and financial union.** This would enhance the resilience of the European economy, improve the allocation of European savings and create a more favourable environment for the expansion of high-tech and green industries.¹² These efforts should be complemented by an ambitious programme of public and private investment in line with the blueprint laid

down in the Draghi Report.¹³ Together, these measures would help narrow the gap with the US and China and reduce European dependencies.

4. **Recalibrate the EU's approach to global challenges,** particularly climate change, by strengthening links with humanitarian and development agendas. This would attract more support from low-income countries and emerging economies while reinforcing its soft power.
5. **Strengthen Europe's economic security strategy** by clarifying how and when to deploy existing instruments – for instance, the Anti-Coercion Instrument – and leveraging means at its disposal, such as strategic chokepoints, more effectively. The EU has real power in areas such as trade, but has been reluctant to exert it both due to political weakness and lack of operational readiness.¹⁴

Nothing of this is new. On each of these five issues, work is underway. However, there is still no coherent plan that brings them together and allows for a convincing narrative towards European citizens as well as international partners. A plan built around these priorities would greatly enhance the EU's credibility within an alliance of middle powers and strengthen its external negotiating power.

The EU is not, and should not seek to become, a full-fledged superpower. On the contrary, it should turn its incompleteness into a strength, using it to build coalitions and promote cooperative solutions instead of imposing unilateral ones. As Adam Posen put it,¹⁵ a rules-based system is becoming an increasingly scarce commodity worldwide and hence its value is going up. By following the above five-pronged agenda, the EU would leverage it. This would not immediately restore the EU's influence in shaping crises such as in the Middle East, nor provide a silver bullet to stop Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, a less incomplete and more coherent Europe would represent a step – however modest – towards a less Hobbesian world.

* To be clear: we are not recommending an end of NATO. Its sheer existence, even in the context of a more militarily autonomous Europe, significantly enhances credibility and deterrence. To take a page from economists' book, we are not calling for a military decoupling from the United States, but rather for de-risking to mitigate the costs of possible US military disengagement and to lend Europe real strategic autonomy on defence

- ¹ Emmanouilidis, Janis et al. (2025), [A Test of Times: Permachange through enlargement and EU reform](#), Brussels, European Policy Centre.
- ² Krastev, Ivan and Leonard, Mark (2025), "[Trump's European revolution](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations; De Gruyter, Caroline, "[Trump is working on regime change in Europe — fact, not conspiracy theory](#)", *EUobserver*, 8 July 2025; Freedland, Jonathan, "[Donald Trump is pursuing regime change – in Europe](#)", *The Guardian*, 12 December 2025.
- ³ The White House (2025), "National security strategy of the United States of America", Washington, DC.
- ⁴ Rubio, Marco, "[Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference](#)", Munich Security Conference, U.S. Department of State, 14 February 2026.
- ⁵ Bertoldi, Moreno and Buti, Marco (2025), "[The EU in a pincer between an 'extractive' and a 'dependency' power](#)", Robert Schuman Centre Working Paper No. 2025/35, European University Institute; Bertoldi, Moreno and Buti, Marco, "[The promise of a middle-power alliance](#)", Project Syndicate, 30 January 2026.
- ⁶ Bertoldi, Moreno and Buti, Marco (2025), "[What the EU's updated economic security doctrine still lacks](#)", European Institute of Policymaking, Bocconi University, 9 December.
- ⁷ Zuleeg, Fabian et al (2025), [Turning the Tide: Towards Open Economic Security - Ten Reflections](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre; Buti, Marco and Bertoldi, Moreno, "[The Promise of a Middle-Power Alliance](#)", Project Syndicate, 30 June 2026.
- ⁸ According to the IMF World Economic Outlook, in 2025, the US, EU and Chinese GDP at current prices were respectively \$30.6 trillion, \$21.1 trillion and \$19.4 trillion, while the EU's humanitarian and development aid (which was around \$100 billion in 2025) was at least the double of those of China and the US.
- ⁹ Bradford, Anu (2019), *The Brussels effect: how the European Union rules the world*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Bjerkem, Johan and Harbour, Malcolm (2020), [Europe as a global standard-setter: The strategic importance of European standardisation](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ¹⁰ Bertoldi, Moreno and Buti, Marco, "[Why Europe risks losing its strategic moment](#)", European Institute of Policymaking, Bocconi University, 17 March 2026.
- ¹¹ Jones, Erik and Matthijs, Matthias, "[The biggest threat to Europe: it's not Trump—it's the EU's weak defence policy and stagnant single market](#)", Foreign Affairs, 13 January 2025; Bertoldi and Buti, "The EU in a pincer between an 'extractive' and a 'dependency' power".
- ¹² Letta, Enrico (2024), [Much more than a market](#), European Commission, Brussels.
- ¹³ Draghi, Mario (2024). [The Future of European Competitiveness—A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe](#), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- ¹⁴ Garcia Bercero, Ignacio and Poitiers, Nicolas, "[From strategy to doctrine: the next steps for European economic security](#)", Bruegel, 2 December 2025; Bertoldi, Moreno and Buti, Marco, "[What the EU's updated economic security doctrine still lacks](#)", IEP@BU Substack, 9 December 2025.
- ¹⁵ Adam Posen, "[How Europe should navigate the new economic geography](#)", Third EMU Lab Annual Lecture, European University Institute, 18 March 2026.

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