

A Multipolar Balancing Act

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Over the past two years, the global geopolitical landscape has undergone a significant paradigm shift. Europe has witnessed the resurgence of war, China's growth has been astronomical, and climate change poses a threat to everything. The emergence of new technologies, such as AI, UAVs, and cyberspace, have transformed the way countries interact when at war and peace. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States (US) and European Union (EU) have released their respective strategic concepts and compasses, which serve as public-facing attestations of their goals, values, and intentions for the global order.

This research paper aims to compare the most recent versions of these strategy documents, namely the US' National Security Strategy (NSS) and the EU's Strategic Compass (ESC), to acquire a better understanding of each actor's current stance towards China. First, the validity of using strategic documents to infer an actor's intentions and the limitations of such an approach will be established and addressed. Next, the paper will analyze how the actors' stances vis-à-vis China have developed in recent years. Finally, the documents will be placed in conversation with one another, finding that the EU finds itself at an inflection point, attempting to balance priorities while reaching for a consensus on "strategic autonomy."

I: ANALYTICAL APPROACHES

The NSS and NSC differ in scope, background, and purpose — not to mention authors. However, the academic and analytical precedent for comparing these documents to one another is well-

established.¹ Strategy documents do not tell the entire story, and while many writers use them as material to be analysed, a smaller camp decries their utility. The most common charge leveled against strategic documents is that they become dead letter far too quickly — indeed, the war between Russia and Ukraine broke out while the ESC was in its final stages before publication leading to a scramble in the European Commission to update it.² It is impossible to fit the entirety of an actor's approach to any threat (let alone all of them) in a single document, but a passage from a *Lawfare* blog post summarizes why we turn to strategy documents — and their Achilles' heel:

Though still a worthwhile exercise, there are limitations to the revelations one can glean from going through each NSS with a fine-toothed comb. There's an old Washington adage that says that no one in government really reads the thing. It's also a static document that reflects the time and place in which it was written. And even the most well thought out strategies can be overtaken by events, through no fault of the document's authors. As Mike Tyson famously said, 'Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.'³

Even if nobody in the government might reads the documents, those outside the state pay close attention. That these documents are the focus of numerous articles, blog posts, news articles, and press

¹ For example, see Alexandru, Major Alina. 'Nato 2022 Strategic Concept – the European Union's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. Comparing Views and Approaches'. *Annals: Series on Military Sciences* 14, no. 2 (1 December 2022): 30–48; and Berenskoetter, Felix Sebastian. 'Mapping the Mind Gap: A Comparison of US and European Security Strategies'. *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 1 (March 2005): 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010605051925>.

² Håkansson, Calle. 'Where Does the Compass Point? The European Commission's Role in the Development of EU Security and Defence Policy'. *European View* 21, no. 1 (April 2022): 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17816858221086425>; Koenig, Nicole. 'Putin's War and the Strategic Compass: A Quantum Leap for the EU's Security and Defence Policy?' *Jacques Delors Centre* (blog), 29 April 2022. <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/detail/publication/putins-war-and-the-strategic-compass-a-quantum-leap-for-the-eus-security-and-defence-policy>.

³ McBrien, Tyler, and Saraphin Dhanani. 'A Tale of Two Strategies: Comparing the Biden and Trump National Security Strategies'. *Lawfare* (blog), 4 November 2022. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/tale-two-strategies-comparing-biden-and-trump-national-security-strategies>.

conferences attests, however, to their analytical value. They are read by analysts, foreign policymakers, leaders, and academics, their content and form subjected to as much praise as critique. There are real limits to analyzing strategic documents in a void, but by understanding them as another “edition” within a wider series and accepting their comparability, they gain context that allows real conclusions to be drawn. I address these limits by providing historical context to each document and by involving external events and commentaries to support my analysis. Some see “such a Grand Strategy more as a way of getting the narrative right after the facts rather than as a real agenda for future policy. But even that can be important, especially if some players stubbornly refuse to accept the facts.”⁴ Even if the documents I analyze here are simply narratives (a position I do not hold to be true), they are representations of the publishing actor’s interpretation of the world and their position in it. So long as we understand and accept these analytical limits we can draw meaningful conclusions without overstepping the bounds inherent in the material studied.

II: THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

The National Security Strategy of the United States is published approximately every two years, providing a “common understanding of the strategic environment and the administration’s intent as a

⁴ Biscop, Sven. ‘Biden’s National Security Strategy: Three Important Truths for Europe’. *Egmont Institute Royal Institute for International Relations* (blog), November 2022. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/bidens-national-security-strategy-three-important-truths-for-europe/>.

starting point for future dialogue.”⁵ President Biden published the most recent NSS in 2022, following an Interim NSS Guidance released in March 2021. President Obama and President Trump released versions in 2010, 2015, and 2017 during their respective terms in office.

The contemporary US stance toward China first began developing in 2010 as the nation officially became the world’s second-biggest economy.⁶ Many saw the writing on the wall before then: President Bush’s 2006 NSS mentions China’s rapidly growing economy but is positive about the nation’s ability to make “important contributions” to the global order and welcomes “the emergence of a China that is peaceful and prosperous and that cooperates with us to address common challenges and mutual interests.” It does, however, urge China to “move to a market-based, flexible exchange rate regime — a step that would help both China and the global economy.”⁷ Four years later, Obama’s 2010 NSS maintains the importance of a “positive, constructive, and comprehensive” relationship with China — “essential to address the major challenges of the 21st century” — but also acknowledges its rapid military growth (Chinese spending had broken the 100 billion USD mark in 2010⁸), and rising global “influence.”⁹

⁵ Snider, Don. ‘The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision’. Strategic Studies Institute, 1995. 5.

⁶ Cité de l’Economie et de la Monnaie. ‘10000 Years of Economy’. Citeco. Accessed 14 May 2023. <http://www.citeco.fr/10000-years-history-economics/contemporary-world/china-becomes-the-world-s-second-largest-economic-power-by-gdp-in-current-dollar-terms>.

⁷ The White House. *2006 National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2006. 41.

⁸ Macrotrends. ‘China Military Spending/Defense Budget 1989-2023’. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CHN/china/military-spending-defense-budget>.

⁹ The White House. *2010 National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2010. 43.

Since 2010, however, tensions have followed a downward trajectory. President Xi took power in 2012, and by 2015, tensions over the South China Sea and Taiwanese independence had grown. Defense Secretary Ash Carter stated that year that “we’ve seen the region’s complex security environment become more fraught,” calling for an “immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation by all claimants” because of the area’s role in global supply chains and trade.¹⁰ Obama’s second NSS in 2015 continued the trend: “the scope of our cooperation with China is unprecedented, even as we remain alert to China’s military modernization and reject any role for intimidation in resolving territorial disputes.”¹¹

A: RUSSIA VS. CHINA

And this pattern has persisted for the last decade. The two most recent NSS publications (2017 and 2022) paint China as a significant and growing threat to US global interests. These worries were paired with careful optimism about working on shared problems, particularly climate change (save for the infamously isolationist Trump NSS). Indeed, these documents underscore the fact that Trump’s and Biden’s policy approaches to China are similar.¹² The most notable difference between the 2017

¹⁰ *BBC News*. ‘US Calls for Land Reclamation “halt” in South China Sea’. 30 May 2015, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32941829>.

¹¹ The White House. *2015 National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2015. 3.

¹² Of course, Biden and Trump’s approaches differ in small ways. However, compared to other differences between Biden and Trump’s NSSs, the shift in view on China is minor, maintaining tariffs and policy enacted during the Trump presidency. For more on the similarity between the documents, see Adesnik, David. ‘Biden’s New National Security Strategy: A Lot of Trump, Very Little Obama’. *Foreign Policy*, 17 October 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/17/national-security-strategy-nss-biden-trump-obama-china-russia-geopolitics/>; Khalid, Imran. ‘US’ New Security Strategy on China: Distrust, Acrimony’. *Daily*

and 2022 editions, however, is the type of challenge Russia and China pose, and whether they are commensurate.

In 2017, the NSS used the phrase “Russia and China” eight times, compared to three in 2022; of the 30 times China is mentioned in 2017, 14 of those are in conjunction with Russia. Overall, one walks away from Trump’s NSS thinking that Russia and China pose the same problem and are equally threatening to America. Both are “revisionist powers” that “want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests,” contesting the US’ “geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor.”¹³ Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Ryan Hass indicates the danger of “painting China and Russia with black and white brushes,” as it

obscures that those countries do not have perfectly aligned interests. Russia is more of an arsonist of the existing international order, whereas China seeks to be an architect of a revised order... Since China is still rising while Russia is not, Beijing has more to lose and hold at risk than Moscow. Recognizing such distinctions is a critical step toward crafting approaches to act upon them.¹⁴

Sabah, 25 November 2022, sec. Op-Ed. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/us-new-security-strategy-on-china-distrust-acrimony>; Koenig, ‘Putin’s War and the Strategic Compass; Macrotrends. ‘China Military Spending/Defense Budget 1989-2023’; Malley, Blaise. ‘Biden Can Do Better Than Trump’s China Policy’. *The American Prospect*, 26 July 2021. <https://prospect.org/api/content/5928c1c4-ec00-11eb-b471-1244d5f7c7c6/>; Mousavizadeh, Philip. ‘The Biden Administration’s China Policy: An Inventory of Actions to Address the Challenge’. *Just Security*, 8 July 2022. <https://www.justsecurity.org/82252/the-biden-administrations-china-policy-an-inventory-of-actions-to-address-the-challenge/>.

¹³ The White House. *2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2017. 2.

¹⁴ Hass, Ryan as quoted in Brookings. ‘Around the Halls: Assessing the 2022 National Security Strategy’, 14 October 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/10/14/around-the-halls-assessing-the-2022-national-security-strategy/>.

While China and Russia are “increasingly aligned” with one another¹⁵ — clear in China’s refusal to denounce the invasion, growing trade, and President Xi’s recent visit to Moscow¹⁶ — the revised NSS emphasizes that the challenges they pose are distinct. Unlike the 2017 version’s depiction of Russia and China as analogous global threats, the 2022 NSS stresses that China “is the *only* competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”¹⁷ The timing of the NSS’ release highlights the focus on China, as it was (intentionally) published less than a week before the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party — a direct jab at President Xi.¹⁸

Of the two nations, the 2022 NSS clearly prioritizes China over Russia, whereas the 2017 NSS placed them on a more-or-less equal level of concern; per Biden, it is Russia that has changed in priority and threat levels, not China. In a recent journal article, Kochegurov observes that “the American expert community [between 2017 and 2022 has stuck to] to the same approaches to China and gives approximately similar recommendations to the US government.”¹⁹ The threat that China poses in 2022 (in its essence, not scale) is like the threat it posed in 2017 — Russia, however, went from a

¹⁵ The White House. *2022 National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2022, 23.

¹⁶ Fadel, Leila, and Charles Maynes. ‘China’s President Xi Jinping Is in Moscow for a 3-Day State Visit with Russia’s Putin’. *NPR*, 20 March 2023, sec. Asia. <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/20/1164641641/chinas-president-xi-jinping-is-in-moscow-for-a-3-day-state-visit-with-russias-putin>; Reuters. ‘China’s 2022 Trade with Russia Hit Record \$190 Bln - Customs’. *Reuters*, 13 January 2023, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-customs-says-trade-with-russia-hit-new-high-2022-2023-01-13/>.

¹⁷ *2022 National Security Strategy*, 23.

¹⁸ Khalid, ‘US’ New Security Strategy on China’

¹⁹ Kochegurov, D. A. ‘Formation of an Anti-Chinese Consensus among US “Think Tanks”: From D. Trump to J. Biden’. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92, no. Suppl 7 (2022): S601–11. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622130044>.

troubling authoritarian nation to an actively aggressive one.²⁰ Carl Bildt, co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, critiques the NSS by arguing that “while Russia is described as both an imminent and a persistent threat, the challenge of China is seen less in terms of any imminent threat but more in the light of the long-term implications of the shifting power relationship between the US and China.” Bildt further observes, however, that the change of China’s depiction in the NSS “is more a question of a continuous sharpening of the focus and a hardening of the language.”²¹ Meanwhile, as Michael O’Hanlon, Senior Fellow and Director of the Strobe Talbott Center, points out:

The elevation of China as our top national security concern seems incongruous with the reality that Russia is waging a hot war and making nuclear threats on the other side of the planet. Although the language used to describe China is carefully chosen, and muted — it is a “pacing challenge,” or our “most consequential strategic competitor” according to the NSS — one cannot help but walk away with the sense the administration views China as public enemy number one.²²

As Antony Blinken said in a recent address, “even as President Putin’s war continues, we will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order — and that’s posed

²⁰ Of course, many saw the strategic threat Russia posed long before then, and whether or not the war truly changes geopolitics significantly is a question for another time; John McCain’s 2008 predictions during the presidential debate against Obama seem prophetic today, stating that the Russia “thing has got a lot to do with Ukraine, Crimea, the base of the Russian fleet in Sevastopol. And the breakdown of the political process in Ukraine between Tymoshenko and Yushchenko is a very serious problem... so watch Ukraine, and let’s make sure that we — that the Ukrainians understand that we are their friend and ally.” See Byers, Dylan. “Watch Ukraine... Crimea”: Behind the Republican Prescience on Russia’. POLITICO, 4 March 2014. <https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2014/03/watch-ukraine-crimea-behind-the-republican-prescience-on-russia-184438>.

²¹ Bildt, Carl. ‘The Evolution of US Strategic Priorities’. Policy Brief. European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-evolution-of-us-strategic-priorities/>.

²² O’Hanlon, Michal as quoted in Brookings, ‘Around the Halls: Assessing the 2022 National Security Strategy’.

by the People's Republic of China.”²³ But the shift in priority has not been accompanied with any substantive change in policy, instead being a change only in language. The copious numbers of similarities between Trump and Biden's policies to China are well-documented.²⁴ Divergences appear, though, as Biden's policies are “torn between the need to be stern, and the desire to distance itself from the Trumpian rationales”²⁵ — a struggle evident in their respective approaches to bi- and multilateralism.

B: APPROACHES AND BILATERALISM

While the 2017 and 2022 NSS publications both arrive to the same conclusion, albeit in different words — that China is “public enemy number one,” be it a solo or shared rank — they differ in their approach to the problem. Trump's NSS takes an “unapologetically U.S.-centric” and isolationist stance, where the inclusion of international partners is for the benefit of American economic competitiveness.²⁶ In opposition, Biden's strategy argues that multilateral collaboration is necessary for addressing expanding Chinese influence and even is an opportunity: “though allies and

²³ *The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China*. The George Washington University, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

²⁴ For example, see Mishra, Vivek. ‘From Trump to Biden, Continuity and Change in the US's China Policy’. Issue Briefs and Special Reports. Observer Research Foundation, September 2022. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/from-trump-to-biden-continuity-and-change-in-the-uss-china-policy/>; Morris, Lyle J. ‘Cooperate, Compete, Confront, or Conflict: Comparing the China Components of the National Security Strategies of the Trump and Biden Administrations’. Asia Society Policy Institute, 2023. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/cooperate-competes-confront-or-conflict-comparing-china-components-national-security-strategies-trump>.

²⁵ Vivek. ‘From Trump to Biden’.

²⁶ Morris, ‘Cooperate, Compete, Confront, or Conflict’.

partners may have distinct perspectives on the PRC, our diplomatic approach, and the PRC's own behavior, has produced significant and growing opportunities to align approaches and deliver results.”²⁷ Analysts have noted that the NSS and NATO's recent Strategic Concept, the first of its series to mention China²⁸ are congruent — China is not a threat to Article 5 (or physical American safety), but it is a challenge to Western “interests, security and values.”²⁹ However, as Mark Webber observes, “NATO's approach to China has been largely declaratory,” despite the recent meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers on the topic.³⁰ Whereas the 2017 NSS accentuated that American military and economic primacy are the best ways to handle China, the 2022 NSS turns to international partners — while keeping the 2017 Trumpian undercurrent.

This disjunction is also present in the respective documents' view on collaborating directly with China. In 2017, the NSS only made a passing mention of the possibility of cooperation with China, whereas the 2022 version heavily emphasizes not only the possibility, but the *necessity*, of a healthy relationship:

In short, we'll engage constructively with the PRC wherever we can, not as a favor to us or anyone else, and never in exchange for walking away from our principles, but because working together to solve great challenges is what the world expects from great powers, and because it's directly in our interest. No country should withhold progress on existential transnational issues like the climate crisis because of bilateral differences.³¹

²⁷ *2022 National Security Strategy*, 25.

²⁸ Khalid, ‘US’ New Security Strategy on China’.

²⁹ NATO. ‘NATO 2022 Strategic Concept’. NATO, 2022. 5.

³⁰ Morcos, Pierre. ‘NATO's Pivot to China: A Challenging Path’. Center for Strategic and International Studies (blog), 6 August 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/natos-pivot-china-challenging-path>.

³¹ *2022 National Security Strategy*, 25.

Remembering that the document was published at a calculated moment to infuriate China and Nancy Pelosi's recent visit to Taiwan, the rhetoric of collaboration seems hollow. Moreover, Biden's policies, particularly the Inflation Reduction Act, have harmed key bilateral partners, such as the EU, just as much as it has China. It has led to a " x steps forward, y steps back" dynamic³² — news feeds about US-China relations seem to be overwhelmingly filled with bad news.

In this light, the 2022 NSS is a continuation of the trajectory that the relationship between the US and China has been following for over the last decade, despite the change in administration.³³ In many ways, Biden's policies "represent an escalation of former President Donald Trump's tariffs and trade disputes against Beijing that could ultimately do more to slow Chinese technological and economic development — and divide the two economies — than anything the 45th president did while in office."³⁴

III: THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRATEGIC COMPASS

Moving across the pond, the European Union's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, unlike the NSS, is the first to bear the title. While publications concerning defence-related topics are not uncommon for the Union to release, such a comprehensive overview is the first of its kind,

³² Mishra, 'From Trump to Biden, Continuity and Change in the US's China Policy'.

³³ For more on this view, see Morris, 'Cooperate, Compete, Confront, or Conflict'; Werner, Jake, and Michael Swaine. 'How Biden's New National Security Strategy Gets China Wrong'. Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 13 October 2022. <https://quincyinst.org/2022/10/13/how-bidens-new-national-security-strategy-gets-china-wrong/>.

³⁴ Bade, Gavin. "A Sea Change": Biden Reverses Decades of Chinese Trade Policy'. *POLITICO*, 26 December 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/12/26/china-trade-tech-00072232>.

building on a the “EU Threat Analysis in 2020 [that helped] develop a common understanding of the threats and challenges that the EU will face in the near future.”³⁵ The widespread consensus is that the Compass’ purpose is similar to that of previous EU strategy documents, particularly the 2003 European Security Strategy, the 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS), and 2018 Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises. I will focus on the EUGS, as have others who have analysed the ESC.³⁶ The documents differ subtly in their finer points, but the broad strokes are the same.³⁷ Before the ESC’s announcement, Sven Biscop wrote that “‘Strategic compass’ is not an established term in the field of strategy, hence its meaning is not intuitively clear. A compass tells you where the north is, which is

³⁵ European Union. ‘A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence’. European Union, 2022. 17. Hereafter *ESC*.

³⁶ For example, see Bargués, Pol. ‘The EU Strategic Compass: A Blueprint for a European Defensive and Securitisation Policy’. Text. *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 26 May 2022. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eu-strategic-compass-blueprint-european-defensive-and-securitisation-policy>; Blockmans, Steven. ‘The EU’s Strategic Compass: A Guide to Reverse Strategic Shrinkage?’ *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 10 March 2022. <https://icds.ee/en/the-eus-strategic-compass-a-guide-to-reverse-strategic-shrinkage/>; Yuksel, Saban. ‘A Quick Overview of the Strategic Compass’. *Beyond the Horizon*, 6 April 2022. <https://behorizon.org/a-quick-overview-of-the-strategic-compass/>.

³⁷ Indeed, the EUGS sparked somewhat of a “renaissance” in European defence. As a direct result of the document, in 2017 the Council launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to increase European military interoperability and collaboration, and the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD), which helps analyse military spending to find possible areas of collaboration. Regardless, the ideal of a Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) has been far from easy, with PESCO being limited by pandemic-related budget cuts and deeper concerns over national sovereignty, NATO, and the US. The development of the ESC was similarly bumpy, with the first draft being “widely viewed as underwhelming and lacking in ambition,” “long on rhetoric and short on content,” and full of “serious deficits.” See Hunter, Robert E. ‘The Three Ds — and a Fourth’. In *The European Security and Defense Policy*, 1st ed., 33–44. NATO’s Companion - or Competitor? RAND Corporation, 2002. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1463ndri-re.13> and Panda, Jagannath. ‘The EU’s Strategic Compass: Building Consensus Ahead of Strategy?’ Institute for Security and Development Policy (blog), 1 April 2022. <https://www.isdp.eu/the-eus-strategic-compass-building-consensus-ahead-of-strategy/>.

useful – if you know in which direction you are heading. In that sense, the EUGS itself is our compass, which tells us where to go.”³⁸

Touted as a “strong signal of unity,” the ESC can be seen as the European version of the NSS in scope and purpose, and has been interpreted as such by commentators.³⁹ However, the document was released at an inopportune moment — Russia’s invasion of Ukraine having started at the very end of the ESC process — leading some to question its relevancy, despite the flurry of activity behind the scenes attempting to update the document.⁴⁰ The ESC has been contentious, with reactions ranging from being hailed as a turning point in EU foreign policy to being called a “wind chime,” “brand new, [and] already obsolete,” and “simply been overtaken by events.”⁴¹ Despite critical voices, the fact that the document is only obliquely influenced by the Russo-Ukrainian War has a silver lining: it allows us to understand the EU’s priorities beyond the mainland. Had such a document been prepared

³⁸ Biscop, Sven. ‘From Global Strategy to Strategic Compass: Where Is the EU Heading?’ Security Policy Brief. Egmont Institute Royal Institute for International Relations: Egmont Institute, December 2019.

³⁹ For example, see European External Action Service. ‘Questions and Answers: A Background for the Strategic Compass’. European External Action Service, 21 March 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/questions-and-answers-background-strategic-compass_en; Atlamazoglou, Constantine, and Jason C. Moyer. ‘A Strategic Compass: The European Union Expands Its Toolbox’. *Wilson Center* (blog), 1 June 2022. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/strategic-compass-european-union-expands-its-toolbox>.

⁴⁰ See Atlamazoglou and Moyer, ‘A Strategic Compass’.

⁴¹ For selected critiques, see Sweeney, Simon, and Neil Winn. ‘Understanding the Ambition in the EU’s Strategic Compass: A Case for Optimism at Last?’ *Defence Studies* 22, no. 2 (3 April 2022): 192–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2036608>; Kaim, Markus, and Ronja Kempin. ‘Compass or Wind Chime?: An Analysis of the Draft “Strategic Compass” of the EU’, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C03>; Witney, Nick. ‘The EU’s Strategic Compass: Brand New, Already Obsolete’. *European Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 31 March 2022. <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-eus-strategic-compass-brand-new-already-obsolete/>.

following the war, it likely would have been overly focused on the conflict — still, Russia is mentioned 25 times, and China only nine, and the emphasis, unlike the NSS, is clearly on Russia.

A: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The EUGS and ESC share the goal of leading the EU into a more strategically independent position, what many refer to as “strategic autonomy” — “the capacity of the EU to act autonomously — that is, without being dependent on other countries — in strategically important policy areas. These can range from defence policy to the economy, and the capacity to uphold democratic values.”⁴² As the Executive Summary in the ESC explains,

This Strategic Compass will enhance the EU’s strategic autonomy and its ability to work with partners to safeguard its values and interests. A stronger and more capable EU in security and defence will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members. These two go hand in hand.⁴³

The EU understands that cooperation (within and outside the Union) is necessary to enact any substantive change towards achieving strategic autonomy. This desired autonomy has been an ongoing conversation in Europe for years; the EUGS, being the foundation for the later ESC, reaches a similar conclusion:

The Strategy nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union. This is necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values. Yet we know that such priorities are best served when we are not alone. And they are best

⁴² Damen, Mario. ‘EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023: From Concept to Capacity’. European Parliament, July 2022. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733589_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589_EN.pdf).

⁴³ ESC, 23.

served in an international system based on rules and on multilateralism. This is no time for global policemen and lone warriors.⁴⁴

Faced with an EU-skeptical leader in the US — the EU’s self-defined “core partner” on the “broader security agenda”⁴⁵ — and generally poorer outlooks on US-EU relations (in 2020, some European diplomats privately admitted that transatlantic relations were at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War) it is unsurprising that the EU wanted to handle crises independently.⁴⁶ As one analyst put it, “the Compass is still more reactive consensus-building than long-term strategizing.”⁴⁷ The ESC would have better achieved its goal — strategic autonomy — if it had explicitly focused on short-term unanimity, building the accord within the EU necessary to truly reach autonomy. For example, Christian Mölling, who leads the Center for Security and Defense at the Berlin-based German Council on Foreign Relations, stated that Macron was “speaking for himself” when stressing the importance of strategic autonomy, whereas many Eastern European countries⁴⁸ — who are facing a tangible threat from Russia — far prefer American boots on the ground, such as Romania.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ European Union. ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy’, June 2016. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en. 4. Hereafter *EUGS*.

⁴⁵ *EUGS*, 23.

⁴⁶ Whineray, David. ‘Trump Has Irrevocably Changed American Relations With Europe—and Biden Probably Can’t Fix It’. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (blog), 6 May 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/06/trump-has-irrevocably-changed-american-relations-with-europe-and-biden-probably-can-t-fix-it-pub-81739>.

⁴⁷ Panda, Jagannath. ‘The EU’s Strategic Compass: Building Consensus Ahead of Strategy?’ *Institute for Security and Development Policy* (blog), 1 April 2022. <https://www.isdp.eu/the-eus-strategic-compass-building-consensus-ahead-of-strategy/>.

⁴⁸ Machi, Vivienne, Tom Kington, and Andrew Chuter. ‘French Vision for an Autonomous Europe Proves Elusive’. *Defense News*, 9 May 2023, sec. Europe. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2023/05/09/french-vision-for-an-autonomous-europe-proves-elusive/>.

⁴⁹ In January, Romania celebrated the US’ decision to keep several thousand troops there for at least nine months, contributing to what Lt. Gen. Iulian Berdila, chief of the country’s land forces, described

B: CHINA AND MULTILATERALISM

The EUGS mentions China only thrice, whereas the ESC mentions it nine times, committing the EU to “engage [with] China based on respect for rule of law, both domestically and internationally. We will pursue a coherent approach to China’s connectivity drives westwards by maximising the potential of the EU-China Connectivity Platform, and the ASEM [Asia–Europe Meeting] and EU-ASEAN [EU-Association of Southeast Asian Nations] frameworks.”⁵⁰ While “security tensions in Asia are mounting,” a growing Asian market presents the EU with an unmissable economic opportunity.⁵¹ “With most world growth expected to take place outside the EU in near future,” according to the EUGS, “trade and investment will increasingly underpin our prosperity: a prosperous Union hinges on a strong internal market and an open international economic system.”⁵² But there’s a hitch: “in China’s economic partnership with Europe, the two sides do not share the same goals,” not to mention ideology.⁵³ Regardless, the EU made “modest attempts” at addressing Chinese growth with their 2016 New EU Strategy on China and enactment of EU-China Connectivity Platform, created to merge the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative with the EU’s Trans-European Transport Network, which enables

“predictable deterrence and defense together.” See Jakes, Lara. ‘U.S. Extends Troop Deployment in Romania, at Ukraine War’s Doorstep’. *The New York Times*, 21 January 2023, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/21/us/politics/us-troops-romania-ukraine.html>.

⁵⁰ EUGS, 38.

⁵¹ EUGS, 7.

⁵² EUGS, 8.

⁵³ Godement, François. ‘Rebooting Europe’s China Strategy’. Institut Montaigne, May 2022. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/publications/rebooting-europes-china-strategy>.

the EU to increase its supervision and enforcement of regulations in projects that receive Chinese support.⁵⁴

In a Joint Communication in early 2019, the European Commission viewed China as “simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”⁵⁵ The ESC maintains this emphasis on collaboration but uses sterner rhetoric than its predecessor:

China is a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. With China, we can address matters of global concern... China is increasingly both involved and engaged in regional tensions... [it] has been substantially developing its military means... *China's development and integration into its region, and the world at large, will mark the rest of this century.* We need to ensure that this happens in a way that will contribute to uphold global security and not contradict the rules-based international order and our interests and values. This requires strong unity amongst us and working closely with other regional and global partners.⁵⁶

Competition, not cooperation, is now the name of the game. An April 2022 fact sheet began with, “over the past year, EU-China bilateral relations have deteriorated,” and that “the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted over time.” Still, the ever-bilateral EU remained “committed to engagement and cooperation given China’s crucial role in addressing global

⁵⁴ Soula, Etienne, and Erik Brattberg. ‘Europe’s Emerging Approach to China’s Belt and Road Initiative’. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed 14 May 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/19/europe-s-emerging-approach-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-77536>.

⁵⁵ European Commission and HR/VP. ‘EU-China — A Strategic Outlook’. Brussels: European Commission, 2019. <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>; Meijer, Hugo. ‘The European Union’s China Policy: Convergences or Divergences?’ *Centre de Recherches Internationales*, Preprint 2021. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2870/0827>.

⁵⁶ ESC, 18.

and regional challenges.”⁵⁷ A recent meeting of EU Ministers supported the move to make the EU less economically reliant on China, and according to reports on Josep Borrell’s — the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy — press conference about the meeting, “foreign ministers gave broad backing to a plan to adjust policy on China to place greater emphasis on its role as a political rival, while continuing also to see Beijing both as a partner on global issues and an economic competitor.”⁵⁸ A paper presented at the meeting reportedly argued that “China and Europe cannot become more foreign to each other. Otherwise there is a risk that misunderstandings will grow and spread to other areas,” calling for a “de-risking” approach to “ensure predictability and transparency in our economic and trade relations, while promoting a secure, rules-based approach.”⁵⁹ Borrell stressed that the goal is not de-coupling the nations, but re-balancing the relationship; Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, reflected this “de-risking” approach in an address shortly before her visit to China:

I believe it is neither viable – nor in Europe’s interest – to decouple from China. Our relations are not black or white – and our response cannot be either. This is why we need to focus on de-risk – not de-couple. And this is part of the reason why I will soon be visiting Beijing together with President Macron. Managing this relationship and having an open and frank exchange with our Chinese counterparts is a key part of what I would call the de-risking through diplomacy of our relations with China... But I believe we must leave space for a discussion on a more ambitious partnership and on how we can make competition fairer and more disciplined. And more broadly, we need to think about how we can work together productively in the

⁵⁷ European External Action Service. ‘EU-China Relations’. European External Action Service, April 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet_en.

⁵⁸ Gray, Andrew, and Sabine Siebold. ‘EU Ministers Back Plan to Reduce Economic Reliance on China’. *Reuters*, 12 May 2023, sec. China. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/eu-plans-tweak-china-policy-keep-balanced-approach-2023-05-12/>.

⁵⁹ Gray, ‘EU Ministers Back Plan’.

global system in the future, and on which challenges. There are some islands of opportunity that we can build on.⁶⁰

However, the EU and China do not exist in a vacuum. An emerging concern, just as (if not more) troubling than China's growth, is the grim state of US-China relations. According to Borrell, the challenge China poses has three facets: "the degree to which China is changing with nationalism and ideology on the rise; *the hardening of the US-China competition affecting all policies areas*; and the fact that China is a key player in regional and global issues."⁶¹ The Biden administration's recent Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), was a "real win for U.S. climate advocates, but much of the bill is also aimed squarely at enhancing competition with China," having the unintentional side effect of "rattling" European nations and companies.⁶² As Borrell stated in 2020, "US-China strategic rivalry will probably be the dominant organising principle for global politics" so the EU should follow its "own path," which "does not mean [it] should be equidistant from the two protagonists."⁶³ Still, as the ESC points out, "on all these efforts, we must deepen partnerships where it serves EU values and interests."⁶⁴ The trouble is that EU-US relations, which have been slowly improving under the current

⁶⁰ Ursula von der Leyen. 'Speech by the President on EU-China Relations'. Text. European Commission - European Commission, 30 March 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

⁶¹ Gray, 'EU Ministers Back Plan'.

⁶² Mazzocco, Ilaria. 'Why the New Climate Bill Is Also about Competition with China'. *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (blog), 25 August 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-new-climate-bill-also-about-competition-china>.

⁶³ Borrell, Josep. 'China, the United States and Us'. *European External Action Service* (blog), 31 July 2020. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china-united-states-and-us_en.

⁶⁴ ESC, 23.

administration and bolstered by the war, are still fragile, and no-one “wants to rekindle trade tensions that damaged transatlantic relations during the Trump administration,” according to EU officials.⁶⁵

IV: A BALANCING ACT

The US and EU are attempting to strike a balance between a myriad of priorities in an increasingly multipolar world. The actors find themselves at a crossroads when it comes to China: Europe is caught in a trade war between the US and China and their interests are in the crossfire. While China is still central to the EU’s economy — making up 22% of imports and 10% of exports in 2021 — the US and its contributions to NATO remain the backbone of EU security, with the US still being the destination for 18% of their exports and largest NATO contributor.⁶⁶

A joint statement by the US and EU in March claimed the pair “share the most comprehensive and dynamic economic relationship in the world... based on shared values and principles.”⁶⁷ Despite the balancing act, the ESC further shows that the EU is becoming increasingly disillusioned with

⁶⁵ Reuters. ‘Explainer: Why the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act Has Rattled Europe’. *Reuters*, 1 February 2023, sec. Markets. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/why-us-inflation-reduction-act-has-rattled-europe-2023-02-01/>.

⁶⁶ Eurostat. ‘China-EU - International Trade in Goods Statistics’. Eurostat. Accessed 14 May 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics.

⁶⁷ The White House. ‘Joint Statement by President Biden and President von Der Leyen’. The White House, 10 March 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/10/joint-statement-by-president-biden-and-president-von-der-leyen-2/>.

China, particularly as the latter nation refuses to condemn Russia's invasion and respect human rights.⁶⁸ As Lizza Bombassi, Deputy Director of Carnegie Europe, stated,

The European tendency has so far been to hedge its bets depending on the issue it wants to toe the middle line on and whether it can get all European member states to agree on a clear course of action. That translates, in practice, into situations where sometimes China is the partner, and at other times, it's the United States... In the end, for Europe, it's about balancing a transactionalist approach with a heavy dose of pragmatism and clearly prioritizing areas it will want to influence in its favor, such as economic stability or cybersecurity. All this while simultaneously identifying its most-likely allies and building alliances in a game of quid-pro-quo. No easy juggling act considering all the aspects that need to be taken into account.⁶⁹

But signs indicate the EU is aligning itself with the US and NATO more so than China. Bilateral talks on contentious American legislation, such as the IRA, demonstrate that the Western nations want to reach a consensus to address China — and that such talks are needed to further European strategic autonomy. Indeed, a 2021 RAND Europe report advised that “constructive dialogue” between the US, NATO, and EU are necessary for strategic autonomy, while also

Encouraging a proactive and unambiguously supportive US stance towards European strategic autonomy in defence, providing concrete backing to EU defence integration that recognises a stronger Europe as being in the interest of both the U.S. and NATO, while dampening divergent preferences of individual EU member states and seeking to avoid duplication with NATO.⁷⁰

Consensus across the Atlantic, not only within the EU, is necessary to reach the goal of strategic autonomy, which, in turn, will support European resilience during US-China trade spats. But

⁶⁸ Eurostat, ‘China-EU - International Trade in Goods Statistics’

⁶⁹ Lizza Bombassi as interviewed in Dempsey, Judy. ‘Judy Asks: Can Europe Influence U.S.-China Rivalry?’ *Carnegie Europe* (blog), 16 February 2023. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/89059>.

⁷⁰ Retter, Lucia, Stephanie Pezard, Stephen J. Flanagan, Gene Germanovich, Sarah Grand-Clement, and Pauline Paillé. ‘European Strategic Autonomy in Defence: Transatlantic Visions and Implications for NATO, US and EU Relations’. RAND Corporation, 9 November 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1319-1.html. vii.

consensus on the continent is not a foregone conclusion: as during his visit to Washington DC to showcase Poland's support for the US presence in Europe, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated that "European autonomy sounds fancy, doesn't it? But it means shifting the center of European gravity towards China and severing the ties with the US."⁷¹ Per Borell, NATO is crucial for international and domestic collaboration on European defense projects, with appeals for strategic autonomy are cautious not to weaken the Alliance's position. Even France's recent National Strategic Review — remember, Macron infamously called NATO "brain-dead" — which, while less offensive than his comments, takes a strong position vis-à-vis NATO, intending "to maintain a unique position within the Alliance... [and] strengthen its influence and that of the European allies." Still, the French document emphasizes the necessity of bilateral partnerships in the "French and European strategy of sovereignty in the face of an upheaval in global balances." And despite NATO's newfound relevance, strategic autonomy is still the talk of the town across the Union.

Borell also stated, "strengthening solidarity among Europeans, including in security and defense, will reinforce transatlantic unity." Europe is trying to "toe the middle line" as best it can, a task made infinitely more complicated by the war:

Though supporters of ESA [European strategic autonomy] have long demonstrated that strategic autonomy and a strong transatlantic partnership aren't oxymorons, the renewed prominence of NATO's role and the United States' engagement in Europe seems to have made European strategic autonomy more controversial. In the vacuum of conflict, ESA was easy to

⁷¹ Morawiecki as quoted in Koch, Elisabeth. 'European Strategic Autonomy after Macron's Trip to China'. Wilson Center, 9 May 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/european-strategic-autonomy-after-macrons-trip-china>.

agree to, but now with war on Europe's eastern flank, it has shown the sharp divisions in European leaders' support for ESA.⁷²

The EU seems to be trying to play both sides for as long as it can while it reaches a consensus on what autonomy is and how to implement it, not to mention the Russo-Ukrainian War on their doorstep. For example, on March 10 of this year, von der Leyen and Biden held meetings to “deepen our economic relationship,” discussing the ongoing EU-U.S. Task Force on the Inflation Reduction Act.⁷³ Less than a month later, on April 4, von der Leyen and Macron met with Xi in Beijing to develop a relationship that “has a significant impact on our prosperity and our security.” They resumed the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue program with China, a signifier of strengthening trade relations.⁷⁴ During this month, the US underwent the biggest banking crisis since 2008, the anti-China CHIPS act was expanded, and President Xi visited Moscow.⁷⁵ The EU is stuck between a rock, hard place, and a cliff.

⁷² Koch, ‘European Strategic Autonomy after Macron’s Trip to China’.

⁷³ European Commission. ‘Launch of the US-EU Task Force on Inflation Reduction Act’. Text. European Commission - European Commission, 26 October 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_6402; The White House, ‘Joint Statement by President Biden and President von Der Leyen’.

⁷⁴ Fibre2Fashion News Desk. ‘EU Seeks to Restart High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue with China’. Fibre2Fashion, 10 April 2023. <http://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/textile-news/eu-seeks-to-restart-high-level-economic-and-trade-dialogue-with-china-286864-newsdetails.htm>.

⁷⁵ French, David, Echo Wang, and Alun John. ‘SVB Is Largest Bank Failure since 2008 Financial Crisis’. *Reuters*, 11 March 2023, sec. Finance. <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/global-markets-banks-wrapup-1-2023-03-10/>; Nikkei Asia. ‘U.S. CHIPS Act Fund Bars Chipmakers from China Expansion for 10 Years’. Nikkei Asia, 28 February 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/U.S.-CHIPS-Act-fund-bars-chipmakers-from-China-expansion-for-10-years>; Trevelyan, Mark. ‘Putin to Welcome Xi Jinping to Moscow at Critical Moment’. *Reuters*, 20 March 2023, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-welcome-chinas-xi-moscow-critical-moment-2023-03-19/>.

V: CONCLUSION

But a single question remains: what *is* “strategic autonomy”? Is reaching such a point possible with a tyrant waging war to the east? To some, it has “remained to a large extent on the rhetorical level. The concept is ill-defined and the term itself has become a buzzword;”⁷⁶ others argue that “with war on the continent, the EU is putting ‘strategic autonomy’ into practice... [and it] is trickling down to matters beyond Ukraine.”⁷⁷ Indeed, the NSS’ overwhelming emphasis on China and decoupling of the Russian and Chinese threats can be interpreted as the US encouraging European autonomy (beyond the explicit statements attesting to that fact) — if Europe is more autonomous in issues of defense and security, particularly within NATO, it may be feasible for the US to allocate additional resources towards Asia.

The EU and US could benefit from their array of non-military strategies and bilateral diplomatic strengths, combined with a stronger autonomous European defense network that works in tandem with NATO, to tackle China’s systemic challenges effectively. Strategic documents, particularly the NSS and ESC, indicate that the actors they represent are headed — slowly but surely — in the right direction. Like a tightrope walker, the Union has to carefully balance themselves to maintain their relevancy and independence as the world reaches a new geopolitical equilibrium.

⁷⁶ Järvenpää, Jauli, Claudia Major, and Sven Sakkov. ‘European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword’. Tallinn, Estonia: International Centre for Defence and Security, October 2019. https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ICDS_Report_European_Strategic_Autonomy_Järvenpää_Major_Sakkov_October_2019.pdf.

⁷⁷ Dugit-Gros, Louis. ‘How Europe Is Quietly Putting “Strategic Autonomy” into Practice’. *The Hill*, 9 March 2023, sec. Opinion. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3890729-how-europe-is-quietly-putting-strategic-autonomy-into-practice/>.

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