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A Research Proposal on,

The EU's Quest for Strategic Autonomy: A Geopolitical Power or a Retreat from Multilateralism?

Title

The EU's Quest for Strategic Autonomy: A Geopolitical Power or a Retreat from Multilateralism?

Summary

In response to a shifting geopolitical landscape—marked by US-China rivalry, the war in Ukraine, and questions about transatlantic reliability—the European Union (EU) has increasingly embraced the concept of 'strategic autonomy'. This ambition, articulated through policies like the **Strategic Compass**, PESCO, and the European Defence Fund, aims to strengthen the EU's capacity to act independently in security and defence. Proponents argue this is a necessary maturation, enabling the EU to become a credible geopolitical actor and a stronger partner. However, critics fear this pursuit signals a **realist turn** away from the EU's foundational identity as a normative, multilateral power. They suggest it could undermine NATO, promote a 'Fortress Europe' mentality, and prioritize power politics over the rules-based international order. This study will analyze the discourse and policy manifestations of EU strategic autonomy. Using a qualitative approach, it will examine key EU documents and academic literature to assess the central tension: Is this a pragmatic evolution of the EU's global actorness, or does it represent a fundamental break with its multilateral principles?

Research Question

Does the European Union's pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' primarily strengthen its capacity as a responsible geopolitical actor, or does it fundamentally challenge and undermine its traditional identity as a multilateral, normative power?

Proposed Outline

- Introduction - Contextualizing the rise of the 'strategic autonomy' debate and outlining the research puzzle.

- Conceptual Framework - Exploring theories of the EU as a Global Actor (Normative Power vs. Geopolitical Actor) and the tension between multilateralism and realism in EU foreign policy.

- The Drivers of Strategic Autonomy - Analyzing the external shocks (e.g., Trump presidency, Brexit, War in Ukraine) and internal pressures driving the new security and defence agenda.

- Key Policy Manifestations - A critical analysis of the Strategic Compass, PESCO, and the European Defence Fund as practical applications of strategic autonomy.

- Strategic Autonomy and Key Partners - Examining the implications for the EU's relationship with NATO and the United States, focusing on the 'decoupling' vs. 'complementarity' debate.

- Discussion - Evaluating whether strategic autonomy is a tool for 'effective multilateralism' or a pivot towards unilateral, power-based interests.

- Conclusion - Reassessing the EU's evolving role as a global actor in light of its quest for autonomy.

Preliminary References

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