

# EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) has faced increasing political, economic and existential challenges. The EU Global Strategy of 2016 opened with the following statement: ‘We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned’ (European External Action Service, 2016). This assessment remained ever more relevant by 2024. The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in Europe in early 2020 and the Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine that commenced in February 2022 have served to compound the difficulties faced by the EU as an international actor. However, such challenges also bring opportunities, as increasing interdependence allows for increased co-operation on issues of common interest, not only within the EU, but also at the global level.

This essay examines the principal challenges and opportunities confronting the EU in the 21st century. It explores the EU’s efforts to foster peace and democracy in its ‘neighbourhood’ (countries to the east and south of the EU) over the years, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The essay also examines the EU’s attempts to build an autonomous security and defence policy and the EU’s role in a more multi-polar and geopolitical world. Finally, it reflects on the prospects for the EU’s foreign and security policy in the wake of the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU in January 2020 (commonly referred to as Brexit) and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Securing the EU’s Neighbourhood to the East and the South

As the EU has expanded over the years through the process of enlargement, it has come closer to new neighbours to the East and the South, but also to new threats emanating from these countries (conflicts, failed states, terrorism, human trafficking and organized crime). Thus, one of the main priorities for the EU has been to promote security and stability beyond its borders, particularly through the promotion of peace and democracy. First and foremost, the EU’s enlargement policy has been the main mechanism to achieve this policy goal, as exemplified by the enlargements to admit countries from, *inter alia*, Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007, with the newest member, Croatia, admitted in 2013. The fact that other Western Balkan

countries and Türkiye (known as Turkey until mid-2022) have applied to become members of the EU testifies to the historic success of the enlargement policy, which was widely deemed the EU’s most effective foreign policy initiative. By early 2022 five countries had been granted official candidate status: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. In June, as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and neighbouring Moldova. Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had submitted an application for EU membership in February 2016, was recognized as a candidate country in December 2022. Last but not least, Georgia gained candidate status in December 2023, bringing the total of EU candidate countries to nine. Meanwhile, the status of Kosovo remained unclear, as five EU member countries (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) do not recognize its independence. This has not prevented the EU from developing its relations with Kosovo through the signature of a Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2015.

However, the success of enlargement has been called into question by several developments. ‘Enlargement fatigue’ and the rise of Euroscepticism and populism in some European countries, as illustrated by the results of the European Parliament (EP) elections in May 2024, have eroded support for enlargement. The exit of the UK from the EU in January 2020 also added to this disenchantment with the EU project as, for the first time in the Union’s history, a country left (rather than joined) the EU. Bilateral disputes between EU member states and candidate countries have also impeded progress. Negotiations on accession with North Macedonia and Albania were stalled from November 2020, owing to a Bulgarian veto imposed over a linguistic and historical dispute. Formal accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania were launched only in July 2022, after North Macedonia committed to amending its Constitution to recognize the existence of a Bulgarian ethnic minority.

The fact that the adoption of reforms in many of the candidate countries has been slow has also contributed to this state of affairs. In Bosnia, secessionist rhetoric from Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik and deep disagreements among the three ethnic groups have hindered the country’s governance. In the case of Serbia, democratic backsliding, as well as the conflict with neighbouring Kosovo, have negatively affected the country’s accession prospects. Although the Ohrid Agreement, signed in March 2023 between the Serbian and Kosovar leaders, was supposed to contribute to the normalization of relations, tensions have continued to escalate following disputed mayoral elections in Kosovo. The likelihood of Turkish accession has also decreased in recent years, owing to the increasingly authoritarian style of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Other points of contention in relations between the EU and

Türkiye include the Cyprus conflict, maritime disputes between Türkiye and Greece, the involvement of Türkiye in regional conflicts (notably Libya and Nagornyi Karabakh) and competition over the exploitation of gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The principal challenge to enlargement and, more generally, to EU democracy promotion, has come from the Russian invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022. Prior to this, the EU had tried to manage the emergence of an ‘arc of instability’ from the East to the South (European External Action Service, 2015) with the establishment of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. The ENP governed relations between the EU and 16 neighbours to the East and the South. It sought to spread democracy beyond its borders and promote reforms in exchange for financial incentives and closer relations with the EU; however, the offer of membership was explicitly excluded. It soon became apparent that this approach was not going to create the necessary momentum for reform and that some differentiation between the Eastern and Southern countries was needed. Hence, the Eastern Partnership, adopted in March 2009, was designed to advance the EU’s relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

A series of external crises in the 2010s highlighted the challenges faced by the EU’s neighbourhood policies. The so-called Arab Spring of popular uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent conflicts that engulfed the Middle East, from Egypt to Libya to the Syrian Arab Republic, provided evidence of the failure of the EU (and the West) to promote ‘deep’ democracy in this region. The revised ENP strategy adopted by the EU in 2011 constituted an attempt to respond to these events, by placing increased emphasis on the need to support the promotion of democracy and the use of positive and negative conditionality. None the less, subsequent events, such as the deterioration of the respective situations in Libya and Yemen, the civil war in Syria, and the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (subsequently renamed Islamic State), suggested that the ENP remained a dysfunctional policy lacking real impact.

The turn to a more pragmatic or geopolitical foreign policy envisaged by the EU Global Strategy of 2016 was also linked to Europe’s attempt to safeguard its ‘homeland security’, particularly in relation to the threat of terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis that affected the EU in 2015. Following large-scale terrorist attacks on French territory in 2015–16, France became actively involved in the armed campaign against Islamic State and requested the support of other EU member states. Although the direct challenge posed by Islamic State subsequently diminished considerably as the group continued to lose territory, the overall threat of Islamist terrorism remained, as demonstrated by fatal terrorist attacks carried out in several EU countries. Instability in Libya, Lebanon and the Sahel, as exemplified by coups in Mali in 2021 and Niger in 2023, continued to add to the EU’s troubles in the Southern neighbourhood. However, the war in Gaza undoubtedly poses the biggest challenge yet. Since the major attack by Hamas on southern Israel on 7 October 2023 and the start of Israel’s retaliatory offensive in the Gaza Strip, EU member states have appeared to be divided and unable to stop the violence and humanitarian disaster.

The refugee crisis caused by the civil conflict in Syria contributed to exacerbating the sense of insecurity felt by many EU citizens (fuelled by Eurosceptic populist parties and the media). EU member states and institutions were caught both

unprepared and divided regarding how to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of people fleeing one of the worst civil wars in the 21st century. The failure to deal with the crisis increased support for populist and Eurosceptic governments across the EU, including in Poland and Hungary. Although by 2022 the high volume of refugee flows from the Southern neighbourhood had been reduced, a new refugee exodus was caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. By March 2024 approximately 6m. Ukrainian refugees were hosted by European countries—mainly Germany and Poland—although there was a large influx of refugees into Central and Eastern European countries too. At the time of the Russian invasion, the EU responded more effectively, and member states agreed in March 2022 to implement, for the first time, a Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which grants Ukrainian nationals the right to live, work and access a range of social services in EU member states for up to three years without the need to apply for asylum (subsequently extended until March 2026).

The activation of the TPD highlights the extent to which the conflict in Ukraine constitutes an unprecedented challenge for the EU and demonstrates the remarkable speed and unity that has characterized the EU’s response so far. This is particular evident when compared with the EU’s response to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. In November 2013 the Ukrainian Government decided to suspend its preparations for the signature of an Association Agreement (including free trade arrangements) with the EU, for which negotiations had been concluded. This led to anti-Government demonstrations opposing President Viktor Yanukovych and the occupation of Independence Square in the centre of the capital, Kyiv. The protests had dramatic consequences, ultimately leading to the collapse of the Yanukovych regime, the Russian Federation’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and open conflict in the Donbas region. It took the EU several months to respond to the annexation of Crimea with the adoption of a package of sanctions, but sanctions did not go far enough to deter Russia from supporting separatist forces in the Donbas region. Moreover, it was obvious that the EU member states continued to disagree over how relations with Russia should be conducted in the long term.

By contrast, the EU’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that commenced on 24 February 2022 was swift and comprehensive. By mid-2024 the EU had agreed to implement 14 rounds of sanctions against Russia, in co-ordination with other Western allies such as the USA and the UK. EU sanctions were aimed at weakening the ability of Vladimir Putin’s regime to finance the war and to impose burdensome costs on Russian oligarchs and members of the country’s political elite. As well as targeting individuals, including Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, sanctions targeted a wide range of financial and economic sectors, prohibiting transactions with Russia’s central bank and other state-controlled banks, the exclusion of several Russian banks from the SWIFT financial messaging system; and banning coal and oil imports. Coal and oil embargoes were among the most significant decisions; but achieving agreement among the EU-27 was not without difficulty, not least because of the sensitive nature of energy dependence from Russia in some EU member states. The EU’s response to the crisis in Ukraine has involved adopting a united front in other areas, including efforts to address the humanitarian and refugee crisis, granting candidate status to Ukraine (as well as to Moldova and Georgia), launching the REPowerEU Plan to reduce energy dependence

on Russia and strengthening the EU's common defence policy (see below). In sum, the war in Ukraine has served as a major catalyst for change in EU foreign policy.

The situation in Belarus has also constituted a significant challenge for the EU's foreign policy in the East. Following claims of electoral fraud after authoritarian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was re-elected for a sixth term in August 2020 and the repression of members of civil society and other activists, the EU imposed new sanctions in October. The situation escalated in early 2021 after further reports of human rights violations in Belarus, and in May a Ryanair flight from Greece to Lithuania was forced by the Belarusian air force to land in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, where Belarusian police officers arrested and detained the journalist and human rights activist Raman Pratashevich and his girlfriend. This prompted the EU to impose further sanctions on Belarus, targeting senior officials and principal sectors of the economy. Belarus was subsequently accused of diverting thousands of Middle Eastern migrants to the Polish border in a bid to destabilize the EU. After Belarus assisted Russia's invasion of Ukraine, EU relations with the Lukashenka regime deteriorated still further.

The successive crises in the East have led to a reinvigoration of the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe and heightened concerns among EU member states about territorial defence. They have also led to increased calls for the EU to strengthen its role in security and defence matters. It is to these issues that the following section turns.

## Developing Autonomous Defence Capabilities and EU Relations with NATO

With the return of war to the European continent, discussions about the need for a strong EU security and defence policy have come back to the table. However, it is important to note that the EU and its member states had already begun to develop European strategic autonomy prior to 2022. Serious gaps in European defence capabilities were already evident during the early 2010s and remain unaddressed today. The financial crisis of 2008 and the austerity policies that followed had reduced what were already very small defence budgets. The result was that many EU member states failed to meet the NATO target of 2% of defence expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product. The problem lies not only in the amount of money that European states spend on defence, but also in the quality of their armed forces. Of a total of 1.8m. troops, fewer than 20% are deployable abroad. Other shortfalls in European capabilities relate to lack of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, strategic air-lift and air-refuelling capabilities, and unmanned vehicles.

The election in November 2016 of US President Donald Trump, who urged Europeans to do more on defence, and preparations for the UK's exit from the EU brought new urgency to this debate, with EU leaders and the European Commission adopting a package of measures to improve the EU's defence capabilities. In November 2016 the Commission proposed the European Defence Fund initiative to provide funding for research projects on defence capabilities and for the development of defence equipment and technologies. Other

initiatives agreed by the EU member states included the establishment of a Military Planning and Conduct Capability for non-executive military capacity building missions and the implementation of the Permanent Structured Co-operation initiative, providing for increased co-operation in defence between EU countries. Under the new EU multi-annual budget (for 2021–27), some €8,000m. (in current prices) was dedicated to the European Defence Fund, and the EU is investing in projects such as the Military Mobility project (which seeks to facilitate the movement of troops more rapidly across Europe). An additional €5,000m. (in current prices) was allocated to the European Peace Facility, which covers initiatives that have military or defence implications under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.

One of the first decisions adopted by the EU in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was to mobilize funds from the European Peace Facility to support the transfer of lethal weapons from EU member states to Ukraine. This was the first time that the EU had agreed to fund the purchase of arms, illustrating both the scale of the threat posed by the war and the degree of unity among its member states. By July 2024 the EU had mobilized €11,100m. (in current prices) for Ukraine under this initiative. In March 2023 EU leaders also decided to launch an initiative to provide more ammunition to Ukraine and to ramp up the procurement and production of ammunition within the EU (via the Act in Support of Ammunition Production). Furthermore, the war has accelerated integration in security and defence, following the adoption of the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in March 2022, the launch of a European Industrial Defence Strategy and Denmark joining the military dimension of EU security policy, thereby ending its longstanding defence opt-out. Most European countries have also committed to increasing national defence budgets, including Germany, which announced that it was to increase defence spending by some €100,000m.

The conflict in Ukraine that commenced in 2014 also contributed to revitalizing NATO and its role in territorial defence in Europe. At NATO summits in Newport, Wales, UK (2014) and Warsaw, Poland (2016), the alliance emphasized its commitment to collective defence in the face of a resurgent Russian threat. It also supported these declarations with some concrete operational measures, such as the deployment of US troops to Eastern Europe. At the Warsaw summit of June 2016, the EU and NATO declared their intention to co-operate more closely, for instance in the area of hybrid threats, cyber security and maritime security, and by co-ordinating exercises. However, increasing co-operation between the two organizations has not always mirrored co-operation across the Atlantic. The election of Trump as US President led to increasing tensions between the EU and the USA, as a result of differing approaches to international crises, such as those relating to nuclear proliferation, climate change and international trade, and owing to Trump's vacillating commitment to NATO's Article 5 (the mutual defence guarantee). Furthermore, Western tensions over how to deal with Iran remained, following the USA's unilateral decision in 2018 to withdraw from the EU-backed deal negotiated with Iran in 2015, and designed to guarantee the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme. The new Administration of US President Joe Biden, who took office in January 2021, vowed to strengthen ties across the Atlantic.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has resulted in a further strengthening of the alliance. Together with new commitments from its members to additional deployments in Eastern Europe,

NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept at its 2022 summit, held in Madrid, Spain, in June. The document reiterates the deterrence role provided by the organization and identifies Russia as the ‘most significant and direct threat’ to the Allies’ security. In 2023 and 2024 NATO welcomed the accession of Finland and Sweden, respectively, as new members of the alliance. However, the prospect of a second Trump Administration raised concerns among European allies, especially after Trump stated in February 2024 that if he was re-elected, the USA would not protect Europeans, if they were attacked by Russia.

While the war in Ukraine has received significant attention and resources, the EU has continued to be actively involved in conflict prevention and crisis management elsewhere with the deployment of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations. Over 30 civilian and military operations have been deployed in Europe, Africa and Asia since 2003. Recent examples include a military training mission in Mozambique launched in 2021 and the EU Military Training Mission in Ukraine—one of its most ambitious missions too, as it plans to train 60,000 Ukrainian soldiers by mid-2024. Its most recent naval operation, *Aspides*, was launched in February 2024 to protect shipping crossing the Red Sea from attacks by Yemeni-based Houthi rebels acting in support of the Palestinian people in Gaza. These examples demonstrate that the EU is well placed to deal with a wide variety of security challenges and, in particular, to support peacebuilding and capacity building in the security sector in countries that have recently undergone a period of conflict. However, these and other CSDP missions also demonstrate the EU’s weaknesses in responding to more challenging security threats beyond ‘soft’ security issues and, in particular, in being a relevant defence actor. In this area, EU member states still rely on NATO—and, more generally, on the USA—as demonstrated by responses to the war in Ukraine. Whether the initiatives mentioned earlier can actually improve the EU’s defence capabilities in a context of increasing insecurity in the neighbourhood is still unclear.

## Responding to the Rise of the Emerging Economies in a Post-COVID-19 World

Western countries, and the EU, have struggled to deal with the challenges associated with the rise of emerging economies. The global financial crisis accelerated the shift in the international balance of power from the West to ‘the rest’. As a result, European countries were confronted not only with the prospect of a relative decline in power—as other world powers emerged—but also with an absolute decline in power as a consequence of the effects of the crisis in the eurozone. The eurozone crisis also highlighted the increasing gap in global governance structures, which led some EU member states to give up some of their decision-making power at international forums in reforms agreed between 2008 and 2010. The demands of the emerging economies for greater democratization of the international system were partially addressed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and with the increasing role of the Group of 20 leading industrialized and developing nations (G20) in global economic and financial issues. However, these reforms did not fully redress the under-representation of

emerging and developing economies in global governance structures, in particular in the UN system.

Given the inability of individual European countries to deal with this challenge on their own, the EU, acting as a bloc and as a single political entity, could thus become an important force, as it had demonstrated in the past in trade issues. However, too often the EU’s position has been undermined by disagreements among its member states and a preference among them for conducting bilateral, rather than multilateral, relations. Moreover, the EU’s response to the emergence of a multipolar world and the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) has been characterized by ‘ad hocism’, an emphasis on trade issues—rather than political and security matters—and the lack of a clear strategy. As a result, the EU’s attempts to establish strategic partnerships with emerging powers have so far failed to deliver concrete results. Increasing geopolitical tensions, particularly between the People’s Republic of China and the USA, also risk sidelining the EU and undermining the multilateral system that is a cornerstone of both the liberal order and the EU’s foreign policy paradigm. Geopolitical tensions between the USA and China deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the USA and China each engaging in a damaging exchange of blame. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, followed by the war in Gaza, have also illustrated the fragility of the rules-based order and the inability of the West to mobilize support from the ‘rest’.

Economic and political relations with China remain of crucial importance to the EU. Historically, there have been tensions between China and the EU over several issues, including the bloc’s longstanding arms embargo on China, China’s status as a market economy, tensions in the South China Sea and accusations of China’s violation of the human rights of religious minorities. On these and other issues, the EU has remained cautious and often divided, and China did not hesitate to exploit these divisions, favouring the conclusion of bilateral deals with member states. Member states expressed concern about economic competition from cheap Chinese exports, but at the same time they have sought to benefit from the opportunities offered by a growing Chinese economy in the form of exports and investments through bilateral and multilateral deals. An example of the latter was the Co-operation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries 17+1 (17 Central and Eastern European countries, plus China, until the withdrawal of the Baltic states), which sought to advance the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative in Europe. A paper published by the European Commission in 2019 summed up the EU’s relationship with China by acknowledging the potential benefits of a partnership with China, but also identifying the country as ‘an economic competitor’ and ‘a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance’.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought some of these issues to the fore. China’s assistance to some individual EU member states in the early stages of the crisis was well received, but suspicions remained regarding China’s alleged attempts to conceal the severity of the COVID-19 crisis in Wuhan at the beginning of the outbreak and its aggressive ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy. Similarly, although a majority of EU member states preferred to adhere to the EU’s vaccine rollout programme (which comprised vaccines manufactured in the EU and the USA), some countries, such as Hungary, purchased and used Chinese-made vaccines. The EU has also grown concerned about Chinese involvement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Political tensions have affected EU–Chinese trade

relations, too. Hailed as an important milestone, the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment was signed in December 2020, but the EU in effect suspended progress towards ratification of the agreement in May 2021. This was in response to sanctions imposed by China on Members of the EP and other human rights advocates, following the EU's imposition of sanctions on Chinese officials in the Xinjiang Uyghur (Sinkiang Uighur) Autonomous Region of western China who were suspected of involvement in human rights violations against members of the Muslim Uyghur minority ethnic group. China, like other emerging economies such as India, has also avoided direct criticism of Russia over the war in Ukraine, instead using the situation as an opportunity to strengthen Sino-Russian economic and energy ties. This ambiguous position has increased concerns among European policymakers about the rise of China, with EU-Chinese relations in the areas of human rights and the war in Ukraine being described as a 'dialogue of the deaf' (Borrell, 2022). There is also an increased willingness to reduce EU dependencies and vulnerabilities and to protect supply chains, particularly in critical areas such as semiconductors. This strategy of de-risking (rather than decoupling) aims to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy. More recently, the European Commission announced the imposition of tariffs of 37.6% on electric vehicles made in China, following a similar measure by the USA.

Despite these problems, there are opportunities for the EU to play a stronger role in reshaping global governance. When the EU demonstrates leadership and unity, it can achieve important goals. For instance, by ensuring better diplomatic co-ordination within the EU and with other international actors, agreement was reached at the UN climate change summit held in Paris, France, in December 2015. The EU and China vowed to support the implementation of the Paris climate agreement, and President Biden reversed Trump's decision to withdraw from the agreement in January 2021, immediately upon taking office. A 'green recovery' is one of the principal priority areas for the EU after the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuring co-operation with China and the USA will be essential. Issues such as food and energy insecurity, which have been severely exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, will also require a joint effort at the international level.

Furthermore, the EU needs to avoid becoming a victim of tensions between China and the USA. Hence, achieving strategic autonomy in a more multipolar and geopolitical world seems, if anything, more relevant, given the magnitude of the challenges that the bloc faces currently.

## Conclusion

Over the past 15 years the EU has had to deal with the accumulated impact of a number of crises, from the financial and economic crisis in the eurozone to security and migratory crises in the neighbourhood, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Despite the institutional innovations introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU's early response to these crises was fragmented, reactive and characterized by divisions among member states. In comparison, the joint response to the COVID-19 crisis, with the negotiation in July 2020 of a historic agreement on a new budget and a one-off recovery fund named Next Generation EU—totalling more than €1,824,300m. in 2018 prices—seemed to

represent real progress. This has also been the case regarding the EU's response to the various issues arising from the conflict in Ukraine. However, European unity remains fragile, as demonstrated by the EU's inability to mediate a humanitarian ceasefire during the war in Gaza.

In many cases, this state of affairs reflects the absolute and relative decline in power of European states and increasing geopolitical tensions at the global level. In other cases, the problems are self-inflicted, as a result of a failure to invest in security and defence capabilities, or of the continuing disagreements among the EU member states, which prevent it from speaking with one voice. In this regard, the exit of the UK from the EU has exacerbated some of these problems, for instance by reducing the total resources available for EU foreign policy initiatives. This is particularly true in matters of security and defence, as the UK's defence budget was the largest among the EU member states. A more optimistic interpretation of Brexit, however, is that the removal of the UK (a major veto player that often sought to obstruct closer European co-operation) might ultimately strengthen integration and the potential for strategic autonomy among the remaining EU member states. The EU's deal over the recovery fund, with debt issuance by the EU to fund the initiative, already provides an example of an agreement that might not have been possible with the UK as a member state. Although Brexit negotiations led to animosity between the EU and UK sides during the process ending in Brexit, the need to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought the EU and the UK closer on a number of issues (including sanctions on Russia and the delivery of weapons to Ukraine). The signing of the so-called Windsor Framework in early 2023, in an attempt to resolve the issue of Northern Ireland as part of the UK as well as part of the island of Ireland, can also be interpreted as a promising step towards closer co-operation between two natural partners that share interests and face similar threats in the European continent.

In sum, in the current context, EU countries are confronted with significant challenges resulting not only from the rise of emerging economies (such as China) and regional competitors (Russia), but also from longstanding partners such as the USA, all of which have challenged EU-supported principles such as the pooling of sovereignty, effective multilateralism and international free trade. In this regard, there have been some positive signs since 2016 that have strengthened the EU's strategic autonomy, including plans to move forward in the areas of defence and fiscal integration. Further progress along this path will remain a crucial test of the EU's ability to become a global power in the years to come.

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