

Journal of International Relations, Diplomacy & Global Affairs



Europe Between Washington and Beijing: A Systematic Review of Strategic Autonomy, De-Risking and Triangular Diplomacy in U.S.-China Rivalry

Oscar Roberts & Tommy Brooks

Europe Between Washington and Beijing: A Systematic Review of Strategic Autonomy, De-Risking and Triangular Diplomacy in U.S.-China Rivalry

Oscar Roberts & Tommy Brooks
Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom

How to cite this article: Robersts O. & Brooks T. (2026). Europe Between Washington and Beijing: A Systematic Review of Strategic Autonomy, De-Risking and Triangular Diplomacy in U.S.-China Rivalry. *Journal of International Relations, Diplomacy & Global Affairs*, Vol 1(1) pp. 76-91.

Abstract

Great-power competition between the United States and China has transformed Europe from an arena of parallel economic engagement into a contested strategic space. This article systematically reviews how the European Union (EU) has responded through strategic autonomy, open strategic autonomy and, since 2023, de-risking. The study addresses a persistent problem in the literature: defence dependence, economic security, technological competition, member-state fragmentation and EU-China diplomacy are often analysed separately, making it difficult to determine whether Europe is balancing, hedging, aligning with Washington or constructing an autonomous pole. A PRISMA-informed qualitative review was undertaken of 33 peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and August 2026, supplemented by seven official EU and U.S. policy documents for contextual triangulation. The synthesis shows, first, that strategic autonomy has expanded from defence into trade, technology, investment, industrial policy and supply-chain resilience. Second, Europe has moved closer to Washington on security and selected technology questions, but this has not produced automatic alignment across all domains. Third, de-risking represents a distinct European geoeconomic approach that seeks targeted diversification and resilience rather than comprehensive decoupling from China. Fourth, European autonomy remains sectorally uneven: it is comparatively stronger where the EU can mobilise regulatory and market power, but weaker where hard-security, cloud, semiconductor and other critical technological dependencies remain pronounced. Fifth, internal EU cohesion is a decisive condition because external influence is most effective when member-state or subnational fragmentation creates openings for wedging. The article concludes that Europe is best understood as pursuing selective alignment with autonomous capacity-building rather than equidistance or full strategic independence. Policy should therefore combine deeper European capability, tighter internal coordination, structured transatlantic consultation and continued issue-specific engagement with China where risks are manageable.

Keywords: *European Union, strategic autonomy, de-risking, U.S.-China rivalry, triangular diplomacy, economic security*

1. Introduction

The intensification of U.S.-China rivalry has made Europe simultaneously a consequential actor and a strategic arena in twenty-first-century international politics. The EU's own policy vocabulary captures this shift: the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook described China at once as a cooperation partner, negotiating partner, economic competitor and systemic rival, signalling that the earlier assumption of progressively convergent economic engagement was no longer sufficient for European policy (European Commission & High Representative, 2019). Scholarship has subsequently characterised Europe as both a "player" and a "playground" because its market size, technological capabilities, diplomatic reach and alliance relationships make European choices strategically valuable to Washington and Beijing, while its internal institutional complexity creates multiple channels through which outside powers can seek influence (Simón & Fiott, 2025; Fiott, 2025).

Strategic autonomy emerged as the central European response to this environment, but its meaning has expanded substantially. Initially associated primarily with security and defence, the concept increasingly refers to the EU's capacity to define and implement preferences under conditions of external dependence, while preserving cooperation where interdependence remains beneficial (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022; Steinbach, 2023). The 2021 Trade Policy Review translated this logic into "open strategic autonomy," combining openness with a more assertive capacity to protect European interests, and the 2023 European Economic Security Strategy moved the debate further toward the management of risks arising from supply chains, critical technologies, infrastructure and economic coercion (European Commission, 2021; European Commission & High Representative, 2023).

The European shift has occurred without a clean break from either side of the U.S.-China triangle. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reinforced the indispensable role of the United States and NATO in European hard security, while also strengthening EU-level efforts to build economic, industrial and regulatory capacity (Helwig, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2022). At the same time, China remains deeply embedded in European trade, manufacturing inputs, green technology value chains and institutional diplomacy; the 25th EU-China summit in July 2025 therefore combined sharper language on reciprocity and geopolitical disagreement with a continued commitment to engagement on shared global challenges (European Council, 2025; Men, 2025).

The resulting pattern is more complex than a binary choice between the United States and China. Studies of trade, technology, Taiwan, Chinese influence and transatlantic relations show varying degrees of European alignment, resistance, hedging and internal binding depending on the issue area and the distribution of dependence (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025; Calcara et al., 2025; Hopewell, 2025; Tercovich & Meijer, 2025). Recent work further shows that Beijing's response has evolved as Europe's geopolitical trajectory has shifted: Chinese strategies increasingly seek to limit additional European movement toward Washington rather than to produce wholesale European realignment (Simón & Cheung, 2026; Budeanu et al., 2026).

This article therefore asks: How has European strategic autonomy evolved under intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, and what recurring mechanisms explain Europe's policy choices across security, trade, technology and diplomacy? By systematically synthesising recent peer-reviewed research, the article advances an integrative interpretation of European behaviour. Its central argument is that Europe is neither constructing equidistance between Washington and Beijing nor simply abandoning autonomy in favour of Atlantic alignment; rather, it is developing a pattern of selective alignment with autonomous capacity-building, in which transatlantic security anchoring coexists with targeted efforts to preserve independent choice,

reduce coercive dependencies and maintain conditional engagement with China (Didier, 2026; Helwig, 2023; Yang, 2023).

2. Problem Statement

The scholarly and policy problem is that "strategic autonomy" has become more important at the same time that it has become more conceptually diffuse. Literature now applies the term to defence, trade, digital infrastructure, industrial policy, investment screening, research security, economic coercion and diplomacy, producing competing measures of whether Europe is becoming more or less autonomous (Miró, 2023; Schmitz & Seidl, 2023; Kübek & Mancini, 2023). A defence-centred assessment can portray Europe as strongly dependent on the United States, whereas an economic or regulatory assessment can identify significant EU capacity to shape external behaviour through market access, common commercial policy and autonomous instruments (Helwig, 2023; Steinbach, 2023).

A second problem is that much of the evidence is sector-specific. Research on U.S. influence emphasises alliance structures, unilateral measures and transatlantic asymmetry; research on Chinese influence focuses more heavily on economic inducements, institutional asymmetry and subnational channels; and research on technology identifies supply-chain structure as a key conditioning variable (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025; Budeanu & Breslin, 2025; Calcara et al., 2025). These literatures are individually rich but can generate fragmented conclusions when they are not examined within a common framework.

A third problem concerns internal European heterogeneity. The EU can act as a collective market power, yet external actors can also exploit differences among member states or between national and subnational levels, making formal European policy less effective in practice (Lovato & Simón, 2025; De Decker & Pepermans, 2026). Consequently, the central empirical question is not merely whether Europe prefers autonomy, but under what institutional and sectoral conditions it can convert that preference into practical decision-making freedom.

Finally, the adoption of de-risking has created a new interpretive challenge. European leaders explicitly distinguished de-risking from decoupling in 2023, but Chinese perceptions often interpret the policy as closely connected to U.S.-led containment, while European scholarship differs on whether de-risking is a genuinely autonomous strategy or a softer form of alignment with Washington (von der Leyen, 2023; Budeanu et al., 2026; Hopewell, 2025). An updated systematic synthesis is therefore needed to connect strategic autonomy, de-risking, internal cohesion and external influence within one explanatory account.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study pursued four objectives. First, it traced the evolution of European strategic autonomy from a predominantly security-centred concept to a multidomain agenda encompassing trade, technology and economic security. Second, it synthesised how U.S. and Chinese influence operates within Europe and identified the conditions under which external binding or wedging is more effective. Third, it assessed whether de-risking constitutes an operational expression of European strategic autonomy or mainly reflects growing transatlantic alignment. Fourth, it developed policy implications for EU diplomacy, transatlantic coordination and future EU-China engagement.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Conceptualising European Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy is most usefully treated as a relative capacity for purposeful action rather than as a binary condition of independence. Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022) show that the term has accumulated multiple meanings across European debates and argue that its ambiguity can

be analytically productive when autonomy is examined as capacity under conditions of interdependence. Steinbach (2023) similarly demonstrates that the EU's strategic-autonomy turn spans multiple policy instruments and legal domains, while Helwig (2023) distinguishes autonomy from external actors from autonomy to act, the latter placing greater emphasis on collective capacity than on disengagement.

This interpretation helps explain the emergence of open strategic autonomy in EU trade policy. Schmitz and Seidl (2023) find that the geopoliticisation of trade altered the European Commission's understanding of how openness should serve European interests, producing a doctrine of qualified openness rather than a rejection of globalisation. Miró (2023) locates the same shift within a broader European response to global disorder, while Kübek and Mancini (2023) show that the expansion of autonomous trade instruments creates both opportunities for resilience and tensions with the EU's constitutional commitment to openness and international law.

Because autonomy is relational, its meaning depends on both the external actor and the policy domain. Casarini (2022) describes a European search for a strategic "third way" between the transatlantic alliance and the Chinese market, whereas Yang (2023) argues that the EU's more consistent pattern is to remain allied with the United States while avoiding complete dependence and preserving practical cooperation with China. Fiott (2025) further conceptualises strategic autonomy through three ideal types - responsibility, hedging and independence - and demonstrates that European agency interacts dynamically with U.S. and Chinese attempts to bind or wedge Europe.

4.2 Binding, Wedging, Hedging and Alliance Asymmetry

The binding-wedging framework provides a bridge between alliance theory and European integration. Wedging describes efforts to weaken or prevent alignment among other actors, while binding refers to efforts to maintain or strengthen alignment; in Europe, these mechanisms operate both externally and internally because the EU is simultaneously a multilevel political system and a target of great-power influence (Lovato & Simón, 2025; Izumikawa, 2025). European strategic autonomy therefore depends not only on material resources but also on whether EU institutions and member states can bind themselves around common preferences before external influence exploits internal divisions (Fiott, 2025).

U.S. influence is structurally advantaged by NATO, dense institutional ties and shared political-security networks, but this does not eliminate European agency. Anderson and Steinberg (2025) show that U.S. influence occurs within an asymmetrical alliance and that unilateral American policies can unintentionally create wedges by imposing costs on European partners. Desmaele (2025) similarly finds that U.S. attitudes toward European autonomy vary according to Washington's tolerance for alliance costs and its expectations of European alignment on China, making a stronger Europe simultaneously useful and potentially difficult for U.S. leadership.

Chinese influence operates through a different institutional environment. Budeanu and Breslin (2025) argue that outcomes depend on the institutional asymmetry between China and the European target, including the degree to which national or subnational structures facilitate economic or political leverage. Su and Liu (2025) find that Chinese views of European strategic autonomy are cautiously optimistic because a more independent Europe may resist U.S. pressure, yet Beijing also recognises that European autonomy can produce policies contrary to Chinese interests. Huang (2024) similarly treats China's role in European autonomy as embedded in a wider transition in world order rather than as a simple bilateral contest.

4.3 Geoeconomics, Weaponised Interdependence and De-Risking

The geoeconomic literature explains why trade and technology have moved to the centre of strategic autonomy. Farrell and Newman (2019) show how states occupying central positions in global networks can convert interdependence into coercive leverage, making efficiency-oriented dependencies politically consequential. European debates after the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's use of energy leverage reinforced this concern and encouraged policies aimed at identifying critical dependencies without abandoning cross-border economic exchange (European Commission & High Representative, 2023; Helwig, 2023).

De-risking is the clearest policy expression of this shift. Von der Leyen's 2023 formulation explicitly rejected wholesale decoupling from China and instead emphasised diplomatic engagement, diversification and protection in areas of strategic vulnerability (von der Leyen, 2023). Yet the strategy remains contested: Hopewell (2025) demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining EU strategic autonomy under U.S.-China trade competition, while Budeanu et al. (2026) identify a perception gap in which Chinese actors often interpret EU de-risking as an extension of U.S. containment rather than as an autonomous European role.

Empirical research shows that de-risking is not implemented only at the Brussels level. Kamiński (2025) highlights the relevance of subnational authorities to dependency reduction, and De Decker and Pepermans (2026) show how fragmented federal authority in Belgium can create implementation gaps in the EU's economic-security agenda. Schüller (2025) reaches a related conclusion from Germany, where national China policy operates under simultaneous pressure from geopolitical conflict, economic interdependence and EU-level de-risking. These studies suggest that economic security is a multilevel governance challenge rather than a single centralised policy.

4.4 Empirical Literature on the EU-U.S.-China Triangle

The 2025 special issue of the Journal of European Integration provides the most concentrated recent body of research on Europe in U.S.-China rivalry. Simón and Fiott (2025) frame Europe as both player and playground; Lovato and Simón (2025) identify internal cohesion as a condition for resisting external wedging; and Izumikawa (2025) argues that European autonomy varies considerably by policy area. Together, these studies displace the idea of a single, uniform European position and direct attention toward the interaction of issue-specific dependence, institutional structure and external pressure.

Sectoral studies reinforce this conclusion. Calcara et al. (2025) show that technology value-chain structures condition European autonomy and external leverage, while Tercovich and Meijer (2025) demonstrate that EU institutions can help member states manage U.S. and Chinese pressures concerning Taiwan and the arms embargo on China. Pugliese (2024), however, finds increasing European security alignment with U.S.-led Indo-Pacific partners, indicating that strategic autonomy can coexist with - and sometimes be constrained by - stronger alignment in particular domains.

Trade and investment evidence likewise points to differentiated autonomy. Kuang et al. (2024) interpret the rise and subsequent political freezing of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment as an illustration of open strategic autonomy in practice, where market interests, values and geopolitical pressure interact. Li and He (2022) show how U.S.-China antagonism reshaped China-Europe relations, while Men (2025) identifies a durable institutional core in EU-China relations even as political trust, technology and security become more contested. Higher education research further demonstrates that de-risking can coexist with knowledge diplomacy and selective cooperation rather than producing uniform separation (Liu et al., 2025).

5. Methodology

5.1 Review Design

The study used a systematic qualitative literature-review design to integrate theoretical, empirical and policy-relevant research on Europe's position in U.S.-China rivalry. The approach was PRISMA-informed in its emphasis on transparent eligibility, structured searching, screening and documented synthesis, but it did not conduct a quantitative meta-analysis because the included studies used heterogeneous concepts, methods and outcome measures. The review question was: How does the recent literature explain the evolution, mechanisms and practical limits of European strategic autonomy under U.S.-China rivalry?

The principal review window was January 2019 to August 2026. The starting point captures the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook and the period in which U.S.-China competition became more explicitly institutionalised in European foreign economic policy, while the end point permits inclusion of the newest 2026 scholarship on de-risking and geopolitical distancing. Farrell and Newman (2019) was retained as a foundational theoretical contribution on weaponised interdependence because it directly informs the geoeconomic mechanisms examined in the later European literature.

5.2 Search Strategy and Selection

Structured searches were conducted across major publisher platforms and scholarly repositories, including Taylor & Francis Online, Oxford Academic, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library, SAGE Journals, Cambridge Core and university research repositories. Search combinations included "European strategic autonomy," "open strategic autonomy," "EU strategic autonomy," "U.S.-China rivalry," "United States China Europe," "de-risking China Europe," "economic security EU China," "wedging binding Europe," "technology autonomy Europe China" and "Taiwan EU strategic autonomy." Reference chaining from highly relevant 2025 and 2026 articles was used to identify earlier conceptual work.

Studies were eligible when they were peer-reviewed, written in English, published within the review window, and centrally addressed the EU or European states in relation to strategic autonomy, U.S.-China competition, China policy, transatlantic influence, economic security or de-risking. Studies concerned only with U.S.-China relations without a substantial European component were excluded, as were newspaper commentary, non-refereed opinion pieces and purely descriptive material lacking analytical relevance. The final scholarly synthesis comprised 33 peer-reviewed studies. Seven official EU and U.S. policy documents were analysed separately as contextual evidence and were not counted as peer-reviewed studies.

Table 1: Systematic Review Protocol

Review Element	Specification
Review period	January 2019-August 2026
Core focus	European strategic autonomy, de-risking and EU/U.S./China triangular relations
Primary retrieval channels	Major journal publisher platforms and university/institutional research repositories
Search concepts	Strategic autonomy; open strategic autonomy; U.S.-China rivalry; China-Europe relations; de-risking; economic security; technology; Taiwan; wedging; binding
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed English-language research with a substantial European component and direct relevance to the review question
Scholarly synthesis	33 peer-reviewed studies
Contextual policy evidence	Seven official EU and U.S. policy documents, analysed separately
Synthesis method	Qualitative thematic coding and cross-domain comparison

5.3 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

For each included study, the review extracted the publication year, geographical level, policy domain, research method, conception of strategic autonomy, evidence of U.S. or Chinese influence, role of EU institutions, and principal conclusion. Coding combined deductive categories derived from the research question - security, trade, technology, institutions and diplomacy - with inductive categories that recurred across studies, including binding, wedging, internal cohesion, sectoral dependence, perception gaps, damage limitation and institutional resilience.

Comparative synthesis was then used to identify findings that were robust across different methods and cases. Greater interpretive weight was placed on conclusions supported by multiple studies, cross-national evidence or explicit process-tracing than on isolated claims. Policy documents were used for contextual triangulation, particularly to establish the evolution from the 2019 Strategic Outlook to open strategic autonomy, the 2022 Strategic Compass, the 2023 Economic Security Strategy and the 2025 EU-China summit, rather than to substitute official positions for independent scholarly evidence (European Commission & High Representative, 2019, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2022; European Council, 2025).

5.4 Review Limitations

The review has four principal limitations. First, it is restricted to English-language scholarship and may underrepresent research published in Chinese or other European languages. Second, the literature is uneven across policy domains, with trade, technology and great-power influence receiving more attention than climate, health or people-to-people diplomacy. Third, several important 2026 publications are recent and their longer-term influence on the field cannot yet be assessed. Fourth, because the evidence base contains qualitative case studies, legal analysis, interviews, discourse analysis and policy research, the synthesis identifies mechanisms and patterns rather than a single statistically pooled effect.

6. Key Results and Findings

6.1 Strategic Autonomy Has Become a Multidomain Project

The first and most consistent finding is that European strategic autonomy has expanded far beyond defence. Earlier debates focused heavily on military capacity and the ability to act without U.S. support, but the post-2019 literature increasingly locates autonomy in trade policy, supply-chain resilience, investment control, critical technologies, digital infrastructure and industrial capacity (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022; Schmitz & Seidl, 2023; Steinbach, 2023). This expansion is visible in official policy: the 2021 Trade Policy Review linked resilience to strategic autonomy, while the 2023 Economic Security Strategy institutionalised risk assessment across supply chains, technology leakage, critical infrastructure and economic coercion (European Commission, 2021; European Commission & High Representative, 2023).

This multidomain shift changes how autonomy should be measured. A narrow defence test understates the EU's capacity because it ignores its regulatory, commercial and legal instruments, while an exclusively economic test would overstate autonomy by neglecting security and technological dependencies (Helwig, 2023; Calcara et al., 2025). The literature therefore supports a functional understanding in which European autonomy varies according to the capacity available in each policy field and the intensity of external leverage (Izumikawa, 2025; Simón & Fiott, 2025).

6.2 Europe Shows Selective Atlantic Alignment Rather Than Equidistance

The second finding is that Europe has moved closer to Washington in strategically sensitive domains without abandoning an autonomous-policy agenda. The war in Ukraine reinforced U.S. centrality in European defence, and European Indo-Pacific policy increasingly reflects

cooperation with U.S.-aligned partners on China-related security concerns (Council of the European Union, 2022; Pugliese, 2024). Yang (2023) likewise finds that the EU's most consistent trajectory is continued alliance with the United States combined with efforts to avoid full dependence and retain practical cooperation with China.

However, alignment is not automatic. Anderson and Steinberg (2025) show that U.S. unilateralism in industrial policy, export controls and alliance initiatives can generate transatlantic tensions and stimulate European binding, while Desmaele (2025) demonstrates that U.S. support for European unity varies with expectations of European behaviour on China. Didier (2026) interprets the EU's conduct not as simple muddling-through but as an increasingly strategic pragmatism characterised by realism, contingency and compromise. Taken together, these studies indicate that the EU's movement toward Washington is conditional, issue-specific and partly shaped by its own effort to preserve room for manoeuvre.

The evidence therefore does not support equidistance. Security structures, political affinity and post-2022 geopolitical conditions make the United States qualitatively different from China in Europe's strategic environment, and the EU has not positioned itself midway between the two powers (Helwig, 2023; Pugliese, 2024). Yet the same evidence also rejects a model of complete bandwagoning because the EU repeatedly seeks independent trade instruments, regulatory choices and diplomatic channels that do not simply reproduce U.S. policy (Hopewell, 2025; Tercovich & Meijer, 2025).

6.3 De-Risking Institutionalises European Economic Security

The third finding is that de-risking has become the operational centre of European geoeconomic strategy toward China. It translates strategic autonomy into concrete questions about which dependencies are tolerable, which technologies require protection, where diversification is necessary and when economic relations create coercive vulnerability (European Commission & High Representative, 2023; Farrell & Newman, 2019). Unlike comprehensive decoupling, the European concept aims to preserve trade and cooperation outside high-risk sectors, consistent with von der Leyen's explicit formulation of "de-risking, not decoupling" (von der Leyen, 2023).

Research supports the distinction but also reveals its political ambiguity. Hopewell (2025) finds that EU trade autonomy is constrained by simultaneous U.S. and Chinese pressure, while Budeanu et al. (2026) show that Chinese observers often reject the EU's self-presentation as a defusing actor and instead read de-risking through the lens of U.S.-led containment. This perception gap matters diplomatically because policy labels do not determine how counterparties interpret intent; the legitimacy of de-risking depends partly on whether the EU can demonstrate proportionality, sectoral specificity and genuinely European risk assessments.

At the implementation level, de-risking is a coordination challenge. Kamiński (2025) demonstrates that subnational governments can either reinforce or weaken resilience, while De Decker and Pepermans (2026) show how fragmented Belgian governance can produce policy paralysis. Schüller (2025) similarly identifies tensions between German economic interests and the strategic turn in EU China policy. De-risking therefore depends on the vertical coherence of European governance as much as on the design of Brussels-level instruments.

6.4 European Autonomy Is Sector-Specific

The fourth finding is that autonomy varies markedly by sector. The EU is comparatively strong where its large market, regulatory competences and common commercial policy can be mobilised, giving it meaningful leverage in trade, competition policy, standard-setting and investment regulation (Kübek & Mancini, 2023; Steinbach, 2023). By contrast, autonomy is

more limited where Europe depends on external security guarantees or on concentrated technological value chains that cannot be replaced quickly (Helwig, 2023; Calcara et al., 2025).

Technology is especially revealing. Calcara et al. (2025) show that the structure of technological value chains conditions the effectiveness of U.S. and Chinese influence, meaning that European agency cannot be inferred from political preference alone. Semiconductor equipment, cloud infrastructure, artificial intelligence ecosystems, telecoms and critical raw materials involve different combinations of European capability, U.S. leverage and Chinese market or supply-chain power. The practical implication is that strategic autonomy should be evaluated through sector-specific dependency maps rather than a single aggregate label.

Foreign-policy autonomy is similarly uneven. Tercovich and Meijer (2025) show that member states facing external pressure over Taiwan and the arms embargo on China can use the EU framework to mitigate bilateral vulnerability, but the degree of collective action remains dependent on member-state preferences and institutional competence. Pugliese (2024) finds stronger alignment in Indo-Pacific security, while Men (2025) identifies continued institutional engagement with China in economic, climate and diplomatic domains. Europe can therefore be more autonomous in one relationship dimension while simultaneously becoming more aligned in another.

6.5 Internal Cohesion Is the Pivotal Variable

The fifth finding is that internal cohesion is the most recurrent political condition of external autonomy. Lovato and Simón (2025) argue that a critical mass of member states and sufficient institutional centralisation are necessary for the EU to repel external wedging, while Fiott (2025) identifies internal binding as central to all credible variants of European strategic autonomy. This means that strategic autonomy is partly an internal-governance outcome: external independence is difficult to sustain when member states cannot coordinate preferences or implement common decisions.

Empirical evidence at national and subnational levels supports this conclusion. Budeanu and Breslin (2025) show that institutional asymmetry shapes the effectiveness of Chinese influence, and De Decker and Pepermans (2026) demonstrate how fragmented sovereignty within a member state can weaken EU-wide de-risking. Kamiński (2025) adds that local and regional authorities are relevant to resilience because investment, infrastructure and research relationships often operate below the national level. The EU's vulnerability is therefore not reducible to Chinese or U.S. power; it also reflects how European authority is distributed and coordinated.

This result has an important theoretical implication. The autonomy of a multilevel political system cannot be assessed in the same manner as the autonomy of a unitary state. The EU's combined economic resources are substantial, but they generate external leverage only when institutions can aggregate preferences, allocate costs and sustain solidarity under pressure (Simón & Fiott, 2025; Lovato & Simón, 2025). Internal cohesion is therefore both a source of power and a potential target for external influence.

6.6 U.S. and Chinese Influence Operates Through Different Mechanisms

The sixth finding is that Washington and Beijing influence Europe through structurally different channels. U.S. influence is embedded in alliance institutions, security dependence, intelligence ties, technology ecosystems and long-standing political networks, giving Washington a lower threshold for producing alignment on high-security issues (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025; Desmaele, 2025). Yet this embeddedness can also make unilateral U.S. actions politically costly because Europeans may interpret them as violations of alliance consultation and respond by strengthening internal coordination.

Chinese influence is less institutionalised in European security but can be significant through trade, investment, market access, infrastructure, technology and subnational relationships. Budeanu and Breslin (2025) show that influence depends on institutional asymmetries rather than on economic size alone, while Su and Liu (2025) identify a Chinese preference for a Europe that possesses sufficient autonomy to resist U.S. containment but remains open to cooperation with Beijing. The implication is that Chinese support for European autonomy is conditional: autonomy is welcomed when it reduces U.S. influence but resisted when it produces stronger European screening, de-risking or geopolitical opposition (Budeanu et al., 2026).

These differences explain why the same European policy can be interpreted differently by the two external powers. Washington may view stronger European capabilities as burden-sharing when they reinforce common security goals, but as problematic independence when they obstruct U.S. China policy; Beijing may praise strategic autonomy rhetorically while criticising instruments that constrain Chinese access or technology relationships (Desmaele, 2025; Su & Liu, 2025). European diplomacy therefore operates within a continuous negotiation over the meaning and consequences of autonomy.

6.7 China's Strategy Has Shifted Toward Damage Limitation

The seventh finding is that China's approach toward Europe has become more defensive as Europe's geopolitical trajectory has moved closer to the United States. Simón and Cheung (2026) show that China shifted from a more ambitious 2016-2020 wedge strategy aimed at creating greater separation between Europe and the United States toward post-2020 damage limitation, in which Beijing seeks to prevent additional European alignment with Washington on specific issues. This change reflects adaptation to deteriorating political trust, stronger transatlantic coordination and the EU's more explicit economic-security agenda.

Chinese perceptions of European autonomy remain important within this adjustment. Su and Liu (2025) document cautious optimism toward the concept, but Budeanu et al. (2026) show that de-risking has widened a perception gap because Chinese actors often regard it as evidence that the EU is adopting U.S. strategic framing. Huang (2024) also situates Chinese engagement with European autonomy within broader power-transition dynamics, suggesting that Beijing has incentives to encourage European agency without accepting every policy produced by that agency.

The shift toward damage limitation makes issue-specific diplomacy more likely than a grand bargain over Europe's geopolitical orientation. China has stronger incentives to prevent alignment on sensitive technology, Taiwan, trade-defence and security questions while preserving economic and diplomatic channels where interests remain compatible (Simón & Cheung, 2026; Men, 2025). Europe, correspondingly, can use selective engagement more effectively when it distinguishes areas of manageable interdependence from areas of unacceptable vulnerability.

6.8 Engagement Persists Alongside Strategic Rivalry

The eighth finding is that rivalry has not displaced institutional engagement. Men (2025) finds that five decades of EU-China relations have produced bureaucratic routines and sectoral dialogues that remain resilient even as political trust declines. The 2025 EU-China summit similarly demonstrated a dual approach: European leaders emphasised reciprocity, geopolitical disagreement and economic imbalance while reiterating support for constructive engagement and cooperation on global challenges (European Council, 2025).

This coexistence is visible beyond high politics. Liu et al. (2025) show that de-risking in higher education does not necessarily imply disengagement; instead, institutions seek to recalibrate

collaboration around risk awareness, reciprocity and knowledge diplomacy. Kuang et al. (2024) likewise illustrate how investment relations can be re-politicised without eliminating the economic logic that originally supported engagement. The literature therefore points to a durable pattern of competitive interdependence rather than an inevitable transition to comprehensive separation.

Continued engagement also performs a strategic function for the EU. Diplomatic channels allow Europe to communicate the distinction between de-risking and decoupling, test Chinese willingness to address specific concerns, and cooperate on global issues where collective action remains necessary (von der Leyen, 2023; Men, 2025). The practical challenge is to maintain these channels without allowing engagement to recreate the very vulnerabilities that economic-security policy seeks to reduce.

Table 2: Thematic Synthesis of the Review Findings

Theme	Synthesis	Diplomatic Implication
Multidomain autonomy	Autonomy now spans defence, trade, technology, industry and economic security.	EU influence should be assessed by policy domain rather than through a single aggregate label.
Selective Atlantic alignment	Europe is closer to Washington on security but retains independent preferences in several economic and diplomatic domains.	Transatlantic partnership and European autonomy are often complementary, but not identical.
De-risking	Targeted diversification and resilience are preferred to comprehensive decoupling from China.	Credibility requires transparent, proportionate and sector-specific risk criteria.
Sectoral unevenness	EU regulatory and market power is stronger than its hard-security and some critical-technology capabilities.	Capability investment should target the sectors in which external dependence most constrains choice.
Internal cohesion	Member-state and subnational fragmentation creates openings for external wedging.	European coordination is a precondition for external strategic autonomy.
External influence	U.S. leverage is alliance-embedded; Chinese leverage is more economic and institutionally variable.	EU responses should be tailored to the mechanism of influence rather than treating all dependence alike.
Chinese adaptation	Beijing has moved from broader wedging toward issue-specific damage limitation.	EU-China diplomacy is increasingly likely to be transactional and sector-specific.
Institutional resilience	Dialogue and cooperation persist despite competition and strategic mistrust.	Selective engagement remains useful where risks can be contained and reciprocity improved.

7. Discussion

7.1 Selective Alignment with Autonomous Capacity-Building

The synthesis supports a framework of selective alignment with autonomous capacity-building. This concept captures four simultaneous features of European behaviour: a durable Atlantic security anchor; selective convergence with the United States on China-related strategic questions; deliberate investment in EU capabilities that reduce dependence on both external powers; and continued, conditional engagement with China. It therefore avoids the analytical extremes of treating Europe as an emerging equidistant third pole or as a passive extension of U.S. strategy (Yang, 2023; Didier, 2026).

The framework also clarifies that strategic autonomy is not equivalent to distance from the United States. In many sectors, cooperation with Washington can increase European capacity by providing security, intelligence, technology or supply-chain alternatives, thereby expanding the range of choices available to European actors (Helwig, 2023; Desmaele, 2025). Autonomy is diminished only when dependence becomes sufficiently asymmetric that European

preferences cannot be sustained without disproportionate external cost. The relevant measure is therefore the ability to choose and implement policy, not the symbolic degree of geopolitical separation.

The same logic applies to relations with China. High levels of trade do not automatically imply strategic dependence, just as reduced trade does not automatically produce autonomy. Vulnerability depends on concentration, substitutability, switching costs, network position and the political willingness of a counterpart to use leverage (Farrell & Newman, 2019; European Commission & High Representative, 2023). De-risking is strategically coherent to the extent that it reduces high-impact vulnerabilities while preserving welfare-enhancing and diplomatically useful forms of interdependence.

7.2 Implications for European Diplomacy and Global Order

The findings suggest that Europe's role in a more contested global order will be determined less by whether it declares itself a third pole than by whether it can translate institutional scale into coordinated action. Simón and Fiott (2025) emphasise that Europe can alternate between player and playground, and the review indicates that the transition between those roles is strongly conditioned by internal binding, sectoral capability and external pressure. A united EU with credible instruments can negotiate among larger powers; a fragmented EU can offer multiple entry points for external influence even when aggregate European resources are substantial.

Triangular diplomacy also requires managing different perceptions of the same policy. European de-risking is presented internally as a risk-management approach distinct from decoupling, but Beijing may perceive it as alignment with Washington, while some U.S. actors may regard European selectivity as insufficient alignment (Budeanu et al., 2026; Desmaele, 2025). The EU therefore needs not only policy instruments but also a consistent diplomatic narrative explaining the criteria, limits and reciprocity conditions underlying economic-security decisions.

The literature further indicates that transatlantic coordination will be more stable when consultation precedes measures that impose substantial externalities on Europe. Anderson and Steinberg (2025) show how U.S. unilateral actions can produce unintended wedging, suggesting that alliance cohesion cannot be assumed even where fundamental security interests converge. Structured consultation on export controls, subsidies, investment screening and critical technologies would reduce the risk that policies intended to address China simultaneously weaken transatlantic trust.

Finally, continued EU-China engagement should be understood as a component of strategic autonomy rather than as evidence against it. A strategically autonomous actor requires diplomatic access, information, bargaining channels and the ability to cooperate selectively where interests overlap (Men, 2025; Liu et al., 2025). The more difficult task is to institutionalise engagement in ways that do not obscure coercive dependencies, weaken reciprocity demands or fragment European positions.

8. Summary

The systematic review identifies a coherent evolution in Europe's response to U.S.-China rivalry. Strategic autonomy has broadened from defence into a multidomain project; Atlantic alignment has strengthened but remains selective; de-risking has become the operational expression of economic security; autonomy varies substantially across sectors; and internal European cohesion repeatedly determines whether external influence succeeds. The evidence also shows that U.S. and Chinese influence operates through different institutional mechanisms, that China's strategy has shifted toward damage limitation as Europe has moved

closer to Washington, and that diplomatic and economic engagement with China remains resilient despite greater strategic mistrust (Simón & Cheung, 2026; Men, 2025; Budeanu et al., 2026).

9. Conclusion

Europe's emerging position in U.S.-China rivalry is best understood as selective alignment with autonomous capacity-building. The EU is not equidistant between Washington and Beijing: the transatlantic alliance, shared security concerns and post-2022 geopolitical environment place Europe structurally closer to the United States. Yet closer alignment has not eliminated European efforts to preserve independent choice, particularly in trade, regulation, economic security and diplomacy. Strategic autonomy therefore survives not as a project of separation from allies, but as a project of reducing the conditions under which any external actor can dictate European choices.

De-risking is central to this project because it converts the language of autonomy into decisions about vulnerability, diversification and resilience. Its success, however, depends on sector-specific analysis, internal EU cohesion and credible communication with both Washington and Beijing. The review also demonstrates that Europe remains simultaneously a player and a playground: its capacity is significant, but its fragmented political structure makes autonomy contingent rather than guaranteed.

The broader international-relations implication is that autonomy in an interdependent order should be understood as managed agency rather than self-sufficiency. Europe's experience shows that states and regional organisations can remain deeply connected to competing powers while still seeking the institutional, technological and economic capacity to resist coercion and preserve policy choice. Whether the EU can sustain that balance will be one of the defining tests of triangular diplomacy in the remainder of the decade.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Policy and Practice

The EU should institutionalise an annual, sector-specific strategic-dependency assessment that distinguishes ordinary interdependence from vulnerabilities capable of producing coercive leverage. Such assessments should combine EU-level economic-security analysis with member-state and subnational data because implementation gaps can arise below the supranational level (Kamiński, 2025; De Decker & Pepermans, 2026). The objective should be diversification and resilience where concentration is strategically dangerous, not blanket reduction of trade with China.

European capability-building should prioritise the domains in which dependence most directly constrains policy choice, including defence readiness, semiconductors, cloud and digital infrastructure, critical raw materials and selected advanced technologies. The technology literature shows that political preferences alone cannot create autonomy where value-chain structures leave Europe without credible alternatives (Calcara et al., 2025). Investment should therefore be linked to measurable substitution capacity, interoperability and access to diversified suppliers.

The EU and the United States should establish stronger prior-consultation mechanisms for export controls, industrial subsidies, outbound-investment measures and other China-related policies that impose significant cross-border effects. Transatlantic coordination is strategically valuable, but unilateral measures can generate avoidable European resistance and weaken alliance cohesion (Anderson & Steinberg, 2025). Consultation should preserve the right of European institutions to adopt distinct measures where risk assessments or legal obligations differ.

EU institutions and member states should strengthen internal binding before major China-policy decisions by developing shared risk definitions, rapid solidarity mechanisms against economic coercion and clearer coordination with subnational governments. The review consistently shows that fragmented authority creates openings for external wedging (Lovato & Simón, 2025; Budeanu & Breslin, 2025). A common European position need not eliminate national variation, but it should prevent bilateral pressure from undermining agreed EU objectives.

Engagement with China should remain active in areas where cooperation is necessary and risks are manageable, including climate governance, selected research fields, global health and multilateral economic stability. Continued diplomacy is compatible with strategic autonomy when it is based on reciprocity, transparency and enforceable safeguards rather than on assumptions of automatic convergence (Men, 2025; Liu et al., 2025). The EU should communicate clearly that de-risking targets coercive vulnerability and excessive concentration, not cooperation as such.

10.2 Areas for Further Research

Future research should move beyond general debates over whether Europe is "autonomous" and develop comparable sector-level measures of decision autonomy, substitution capacity and exposure to coercive leverage. Comparative studies should examine how member-state political economy, coalition structure and subnational governance shape the implementation of EU de-risking, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and smaller member states. Additional work is also needed on how U.S. policy under changing administrations affects European binding, how Chinese damage-limitation strategies evolve after 2026, and how Global South actors interpret European economic-security policies. Longitudinal research linking specific dependency reductions to subsequent bargaining outcomes would provide the strongest test of whether de-risking actually increases European strategic autonomy.

References

- Anderson, J., & Steinberg, F. (2025). The unbalanced transatlantic relationship: Understanding US influence in Europe. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 885-903.
- Budeanu, A., & Breslin, S. (2025). Understanding Chinese influence in Europe: An institutional asymmetry approach. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 905-923.
- Budeanu, A., Carta, C., & Klose, S. (2026). Mind the perception gap: Chinese responses to EU de-risking. *European Journal of International Security*, 1-22.
- Calcara, A., Teer, J., & Zaccagnini, I. (2025). Technological underpinnings of European autonomy and US-China competition. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 943-963.
- Casarini, N. (2022). A European strategic "third way?" The European Union between the traditional transatlantic alliance and the pull of the Chinese market. *China International Strategy Review*, 4(1), 91-107.
- Council of the European Union. (2022). A strategic compass for security and defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security.
- De Decker, V., & Pepermans, A. (2026). Fragmented sovereignty: How Belgium's policy paralysis undermines Europe's China 'de-risking' strategy. *The Pacific Review*, 39(4), 811-835.
- Desmaele, L. (2025). European strategic autonomy as a double-edged sword? US perspectives in an era of Sino-American competition. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 843-863.

- Didier, B. (2026). The European Union's navigation of the United States-China rivalry: Muddling through, or strategizing? *International Affairs*, 102(3), 767-785.
- European Commission. (2021). Trade policy review: An open, sustainable and assertive trade policy (COM(2021) 66 final).
- European Commission, & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. (2019). EU-China: A strategic outlook (JOIN(2019) 5 final).
- European Commission, & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. (2023). European economic security strategy (JOIN(2023) 20 final).
- European Council. (2025, July 24). 25th EU-China summit: EU press release.
- Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized interdependence: How global economic networks shape state coercion. *International Security*, 44(1), 42-79.
- Fiott, D. (2025). The three images of EU strategic autonomy: Perspectives on wedging, binding and hedging. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 825-842.
- Helwig, N. (2023). EU strategic autonomy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Europe's capacity to act in times of war. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61(S1), 57-67.
- Helwig, N., & Sinkkonen, V. (2022). Strategic autonomy and the EU as a global actor: The evolution, debate and theory of a contested term. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 27(Special Issue), 1-20.
- Hopewell, K. (2025). Between Scylla and Charybdis: Navigating EU strategic autonomy amid US-China trade competition. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 925-942.
- Huang, J. (2024). China's role in the EU's search for strategic autonomy: Nonhegemonic power relations during world order transition. *China International Strategy Review*, 6, 254-284.
- Izumikawa, Y. (2025). Wedging, binding and Europe in the US-China competition: Theoretical and policy implications. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 987-1002.
- Kamiński, T. (2025). Subnational dimensions of the EU's de-risking strategy in relations with China. *Asia Europe Journal*, 23, 509-517.
- Kuang, S., Orbie, J., & Blancquaert, S. (2024). The rise and fall of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment: 'Open strategic autonomy' in action. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32(3), 772-786.
- Kübek, G., & Mancini, I. (2023). EU trade policy between constitutional openness and strategic autonomy. *European Constitutional Law Review*, 19(3), 518-547.
- Li, Y., & He, Z. (2022). The remaking of China-Europe relations in the new era of US-China antagonism. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 27(3), 439-455.
- Liu, W., Løkke Jakobsen, M., Yu, C., Huang, C., Malinen, O.-P., & Zhang, X. (2025). Knowledge diplomacy in the de-risking context: What does "de-risking" mean for EU-China higher education collaboration? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 29(2), 256-274.
- Lovato, M., & Simón, L. (2025). Divided we stand? Examining the European Union's ability to withstand external wedging. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 805-823.
- Men, J. (2025). EU-China relations at 50: Continuity, change, and institutional resilience. *China International Strategy Review*, 7, 242-257.
- Miró, J. (2023). Responding to the global disorder: The EU's quest for open strategic autonomy. *Global Society*, 37(3), 315-335.

- Pugliese, G. (2024). The European Union and an “Indo-Pacific” alignment. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 31(1), 17-44.
- Schmitz, L., & Seidl, T. (2023). As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary: Understanding the rise of open strategic autonomy in EU trade policy. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61(3), 834-852.
- Schüller, M. (2025). Geopolitical conflicts and economic disruptions: Germany’s China policy under pressure. *Asia Europe Journal*, 23, 489-496.
- Simón, L., & Cheung, O. (2026). Damage limitation: How China and Russia try to mitigate Europe’s geopolitical distancing. *International Affairs*, 102(3), 1041-1061.
- Simón, L., & Fiott, D. (2025). Player and playground: Europe in US-China competition. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 785-803.
- Steinbach, A. (2023). The EU’s turn to ‘strategic autonomy’: Leeway for policy action and points of conflict. *European Journal of International Law*, 34(4), 973-1006.
- Su, R., & Liu, H. (2025). Cautious optimism: Unravelling Chinese views on European strategic autonomy. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 865-883.
- Sweeney, S., & Winn, N. (2022). Understanding the ambition in the EU’s Strategic Compass: A case for optimism at last? *Defence Studies*, 22(2), 192-210.
- Tercovich, G., & Meijer, H. (2025). The EU’s strategic autonomy in foreign policy: European responses to American and Chinese influence over the arms embargo on China and Taiwan. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(6), 965-985.
- The White House. (2022). National security strategy.
- von der Leyen, U. (2023, March 30). Speech on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre.
- Yang, N. (2023). How China perceives European strategic autonomy: Asymmetric expectations and pragmatic engagement. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 16(4), 482-505.