

EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: CONCEPTUAL. EVOLUTION, AUTONOMY LEVELS, AND POLICY COHERENCE

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Abstract

This article theorises the European Union's (EU) strategic autonomy through the concrete prism of its Indo-Pacific engagement. Rather than treating autonomy as a slogan, the analysis reconstructs its trajectory from treaty provisions, Arts 21, 31(1), 42(7) and 44 TEU, and the 2016 EU Global Strategy to more recent milestones, including the Strategic Compass adopted in March 2022 with its Rapid Deployment Capacity objective of 5,000 troops, and the European Economic Security Strategy published in June 2023. The article distinguishes autonomy from sovereignty claims and from defensive decoupling by specifying four levels: political decision, operational military, industrial technological and normative ideational, and by showing how each level is instrumented in practice, for example, constructive abstention, scenario-based planning, EDIRPA or EDIP, and regulatory diplomacy. Applied to the Indo-Pacific policy frame endorsed by the Council and the EEAS in 2021, the framework indicates partial coherence. Legal institutional flexibility and economic security logics have advanced; industrial instruments are maturing, whereas force generation and sustained long-range readiness still lag. The Indo-Pacific, therefore, functions as a laboratory of strategic maturity in which identity, capacity and partnership must align if autonomy is to remain open and deliverable.

Keywords

European Union; Strategic Autonomy; Indo-Pacific; Policy Coherence; Actorness; Strategic Culture; Normative Power; Economic Security

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, strategic autonomy has shifted from a somewhat vague aspiration to a central reference point in debates about the European Union's (EU) global role. The term is used widely, sometimes loosely, and often in conflicting ways. It is therefore important to be precise: in this article, strategic autonomy is not understood as a synonym for sovereignty, non-alignment, or withdrawal from interdependence. Rather, it is treated as the EU's capacity to make and implement choices even when external pressures, internal divisions, or structural dependencies complicate action. This framing recognises

the Union's legal nature and institutional constraints, while leaving room for purposeful agency. (Tocci, 2021)

The Indo-Pacific provides a revealing lens through which to assess this capacity. The region brings together several factors that complicate European external action: long distances, dense maritime routes, fast-moving technological competition, supply-chain vulnerabilities and a crowded diplomatic environment. It also exposes a particular ambiguity in the EU's role. Europe is not a central military actor in the area, yet it is far from marginal. Its influence is exercised mainly through regulation, trade, diplomacy and partnership-building rather than through a permanent military footprint or large-scale force projection. As a result, the Union occupies a position that sits between relevance and constraint, recognised for its contributions in specific domains but operating without the full range of hard-power tools that other players can deploy. Precisely because of this mix of strengths and constraints, the Indo-Pacific offers an excellent setting to examine whether the various strands of the EU's strategic autonomy operate coherently. (European Commission, 2021)

The discussion developed here draws on a doctoral research project that followed the evolution of the autonomy debate from its roots in the EU's treaties to its more recent strategic codifications. Articles 21, 31(1), 42(7) and 44 of the TEU provide essential legal foundations for external action, embedding mechanisms for flexibility, solidarity and differentiated participation. These clauses are often overshadowed in political debates, yet they show that the capacity for autonomous action is not an invention of the past few years. Rather, it is a long-standing feature of the EU's constitutional design that has been progressively mobilised as the Union's external ambitions have expanded.

To frame this analysis, the article relies on a series of strategic texts that, over the last decade, have gradually broadened the understanding of what autonomy requires. The 2016 EU Global Strategy, the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the 2022 Strategic Compass and the 2023 European Economic Security Strategy collectively signal a move away from earlier depictions of the EU as primarily a civilian or soft-power actor. They instead point toward a wider understanding that includes resilience, industrial capacity, technological security and structured partnerships as integral components of European agency. (European External Action Service, 2022)

They do not always form a neat sequence, but together they show how autonomy has become a multi-layered policy ambition. (Tocci, 2021)

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article adopts a document-based analytical methodology grounded in the research strategy developed in the doctoral thesis. The empirical corpus consists of four interconnected layers of material. First, it draws on the EU's treaty foundations, notably Articles 21, 31(1), 42(7) and 44 TEU, which form the constitutional base from which political, institutional and operational autonomy derive. These provisions are examined textually to understand how flexibility, solidarity and differentiated participation became embedded in the Union's external action architecture. Second, the analysis reviews the main strategic documents that have shaped debates on autonomy since 2016, including the EU Global Strategy, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the Strategic Compass and the European Economic Security Strategy. These texts make it possible to trace how autonomy has gradually expanded from a primarily political and defence-oriented notion to a wider framework encompassing industrial resilience, technological security and regulatory influence.

A third layer of material is composed of institutional communications, including Council Conclusions, EEAS briefings and Commission policy papers on digital governance, connectivity, hybrid threats and economic security. These sources illuminate how strategic aims are translated into practice and how they evolve through day-to-day institutional processes. Finally, the analysis draws on selected academic literature on strategic autonomy, EU actorness, normative power, geoeconomic security and the Union's emerging role in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than offering an exhaustive literature review, the approach identifies key conceptual references that clarify what autonomy includes and what it does not.

This methodology is explicitly conceptual and document-based. It does not attempt to assess the perceptions or strategic preferences of Indo-Pacific governments, nor does it evaluate operational

performance at the mission level or analyse force-posture decisions. These remain important areas for future research but fall outside the scope of the present article. The aim here is more focused: to determine whether the EU's four dimensions of autonomy, namely political decision-making, operational capability, industrial-technological capacity and normative-regulatory influence, form a coherent strategic structure when applied to a demanding external theatre. By concentrating on internal documents and institutional intent, the method enables a structured assessment of the EU's evolving strategic maturity in the Indo-Pacific. (European Commission, 2021)

CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION: FROM TREATY-BASED TO STRATEGIC CULTURE

The idea of European strategic autonomy did not suddenly emerge in the late 2010s, nor was it invented in response to shifting global power balances. Its roots lie much deeper, embedded in the EU's own constitutional architecture. The treaties have long contained tools that, when interpreted together, point toward a broader capacity for collective agency. What has changed over time is the willingness of institutions and member states to treat these tools as more than legal curiosities. (Lippert et al., 2019; Grevi, 2020)

A number of treaty articles illustrate how the groundwork for European strategic autonomy was embedded long before the concept entered current debates. Article 21 TEU sets out the general principles that guide the Union's external action—its commitment to multilateralism, international law and cooperative security. These principles are sometimes portrayed as limiting factors, yet they also anchor a recognisable European approach that many partners, including those in the Indo-Pacific, view as credible. Article 31(1) TEU adds a practical mechanism often overlooked in political discussions: constructive abstention. It allows a member state to withhold support without obstructing the adoption of a decision, offering a pragmatic way to avoid a stalemate. Articles 42(7) and 44 TEU deepen this architecture, the former through the mutual-assistance clause and the latter by authorising groups of member states to undertake tasks on behalf of the Union. (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012) (European Commission, 2021)

Viewed together, these provisions reveal that the legal foundations for autonomous external action have long been present. The persistent difficulty has not been the lack of legal instruments but the political will and operational capacity required to activate them effectively.

A shift in how these instruments were understood came with the publication of the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS). Earlier strategic texts tended to highlight the Union's civilian and normative profile. The EUGS, however, reframed autonomy in broader terms, linking it to resilience, technological strength and viable defence capabilities. It argued that, in a more competitive international environment, Europe needed to be ready to work with partners when appropriate but also to act independently when circumstances demanded it. (European External Action Service, 2016)) (Tocci, 2021)

The text did not fully settle the debate on what autonomy meant, but it did mark a shift from viewing the EU as a primarily civilian power to treating it as a more rounded strategic actor.

Following the EUGS, several strands of scholarship sharpened the conceptual edges of autonomy. (Tocci, 2021)

- Tocci emphasised that autonomy is best understood as “self-rule under law,” highlighting the continuity between European values and European capability (Tocci, 2021).
- Howorth focused on strategic maturity, arguing that the EU must align its ambitions with realistic assessments of its military means. ((Howorth, 2017).
- Biscop warned against conflating autonomy with isolationism or sovereignty rhetoric, insisting that credible autonomy requires prioritisation, coalition-building and sustained investment. (Biscop, 2019).
- Borrell, especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, framed autonomy as a matter of strategic responsibility, stressing the need to deliver on commitments rather than multiplying declarations. (Borrell, 2022). (Borrell, 2022)

These perspectives do not contradict each other; rather, they illuminate different facets of a maturing strategic conversation.

This conceptual evolution became more operational with the 2022 Strategic Compass, which translated broad principles into concrete targets. The Compass called for improved readiness, stronger intelligence and cyber capabilities, and a Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops. Its realism lies not in its ambition—which remains substantial—but in its acknowledgement that Europe’s credibility requires a firmer link between planning, resources and implementation. The document also underscored the importance of scenario-based exercises, partly because European militaries have uneven levels of preparedness and often rely on partners for essential enablers. (European External Action Service, 2022)

Another key development is the European Economic Security Strategy (2023), which broadened the scope of autonomy beyond defence. The strategy responds to growing concerns about technological dependencies, supply-chain vulnerabilities and the potential weaponisation of economic interdependence. The European Economic Security Strategy identifies a set of vulnerabilities stemming from the concentration of critical technologies, exposure to foreign investment patterns, the risk of intellectual property leakage, and the possibility of economic coercion. Its intention is not to promote protectionism or encourage a withdrawal from global markets. Instead, it supports diversification, closer scrutiny of sensitive sectors and stronger partnerships with trustworthy actors. This orientation is particularly relevant in the Indo-Pacific, where many of the world’s most important supply chains begin. (European Commission, 2023). Commission (2023) (European Commission, 2021)

Taken together, these developments do not result in a single, unified doctrine. They resemble a structure that has been assembled gradually over time, with different aspects of autonomy taking shape at different moments. The treaties provided the initial legal foundations. The 2016 Global Strategy reframed autonomy as a strategic necessity. The Strategic Compass attempted to connect political ambition with military planning. The Economic Security Strategy extended the discussion into the geoeconomic realm. As a group, these documents supply the conceptual basis for the four-level analytical framework introduced in the next section. (Fiott, 2023)

Operationalisation through the Strategic Compass

The 2022 Strategic Compass represents the EU’s most serious attempt to convert broad strategic aspirations into a concrete operational plan. Rather than simply restating objectives, it sets out capability targets, timelines and procedures intended to strengthen Europe’s ability to act as a credible security provider. Its four strands, titled act, secure, invest and partner, are designed to reinforce one another and to create a more consistent link between political commitments and their implementation. One of its key proposals is the creation of a Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops, a measure intended to allow the Union to react more quickly and more coherently to crises outside its immediate neighbourhood.

The Compass also places considerable emphasis on scenario-based exercises, expanded intelligence sharing and enhanced resilience against cyber and hybrid threats. It identifies regular joint training as essential for turning written commitments into repeatable operational practice.

At the same time, the document highlights structural weaknesses that continue to limit Europe’s ability to act. Strategic lift and long-distance logistical support remain insufficient. Medical evacuation and related support functions are uneven across member states. Command-and-control arrangements do not always operate smoothly, and intelligence fusion remains fragmented. These shortcomings have consequences in all theatres, but they are especially visible in the Indo-Pacific, where distance magnifies logistical and operational strain. (European Commission, 2021)

The shift toward economic security, formalised in the 2023 European Economic Security Strategy, broadened the meaning of autonomy beyond defence and crisis management.

The publication of the European Economic Security Strategy in 2023 placed geoeconomic pressures at the centre of the debate on autonomy. It identifies three main sources of vulnerability: overreliance on external suppliers for critical inputs, the risk of losing or exposing sensitive technologies, and the concentration of key supply chains in a limited number of locations. The Strategy responds with a combination of diversification measures, stricter investment screening, selective export controls, reinforced research-security frameworks and closer cooperation with reliable partners.

It highlights technologies that are essential for both competitiveness and security policy, including semiconductors, quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, advanced materials and next-generation batteries. The objective is to bring industrial policy and strategic planning closer together. The guiding principle is not autarky or disengagement, but an approach to openness that is structured and safeguarded. This logic is especially relevant in the Indo-Pacific, where many of the world's most significant technological hubs and logistical corridors are located, and where supply-chain disruptions can quickly create strategic vulnerabilities.

Autonomy as a Multi-Level Policy Structure

Taken together, the treaty base, strategic documents and intellectual debates show that strategic autonomy has evolved into a four-level policy structure: (Tocci, 2021)

- Political autonomy: flexible decision rules and institutional mechanisms.
- Operational autonomy: readiness, deployment capacity and military enablers.
- Industrial-technological autonomy: resilient supply chains, critical technologies and defence-industrial integration.
- Normative-regulatory autonomy: rule-setting and governance influence.

This multi-level evolution provides the conceptual foundation for the framework applied in the following section.

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: FOUR LEVELS OF AUTONOMY

To assess how the European Union actually performs as a strategic actor, it is useful to break down the notion of “strategic autonomy” into components that can be observed and evaluated. The term is often used as if it described a single capability, but in practice, the EU's agency is distributed across different institutions, policy communities and instruments. The framework used here identifies four levels that structure European external action: political decision-making autonomy, operational military autonomy, industrial–technological autonomy, and normative–regulatory autonomy. Each level represents a distinct kind of capacity, and each has its own constraints. What matters analytically is not only how they function individually, but how they reinforce (or fail to reinforce) one another when applied to a demanding context such as the Indo-Pacific.

The advantage of this four-level framework is that it avoids the conceptual inflation surrounding strategic autonomy while still capturing the breadth of EU action. It also offers a way to evaluate coherence, since the Union's performance depends on alignment across these domains rather than progress in only one. (Tocci, 2021)

Political Decision-Making Autonomy

Political autonomy refers to the EU's ability to make collective choices even when member states do not fully agree. Unlike the conceptual evolution traced in Section 2, the focus here is on how decision-making works in practice. In the field of foreign and security policy, disagreements are inevitable; what matters is whether institutional arrangements allow the Union to move forward despite them.

Several features are crucial:

- Flexible decision formats. The EU can proceed without unanimous enthusiasm, using mechanisms that allow dissent without paralysis. This flexibility is often overlooked in public debates, but it significantly expands the situations in which the EU can act.
- Differentiated responsibility. Not all member states engage equally in every external action. Differentiated participation enables progress when preferences diverge, provided that the overall institutional coherence is preserved.
- Coordination efficiency. Political autonomy lowers the transaction costs of action. When coordination mechanisms work well, the EU can respond more quickly to emerging crises or strategic opportunities.

Political autonomy does not guarantee action, but it reduces the likelihood of gridlock — a feature that becomes particularly important in theatres where responsiveness and consistency matter, such as the Indo-Pacific. (European Commission, 2021)

Operational Military Autonomy

Operational autonomy is the most tangible, and perhaps the most demanding, dimension of EU strategic autonomy. It concerns the Union's ability to translate political decisions into credible and sustained action on the ground—or, more specifically in the Indo-Pacific, at sea. (Tocci, 2021)

Rather than revisiting the doctrinal developments already analysed, this section focuses on the practical requirements of operational autonomy (Tocci, 2021):

- forces that are deployable and sufficiently ready;
- the capacity to operate at long distances, including strategic airlift and logistical sustainment;
- intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets that are interoperable;
- command-and-control structures that function across multinational settings;
- predictable rotation cycles and reliable access to support infrastructure.

These requirements become exponentially more demanding in the Indo-Pacific, where the tyranny of distance adds logistical complexity that European militaries, for the most part, are not fully equipped to absorb. Member states can and do deploy ships, aircraft or personnel to the region, but these deployments tend to be episodic. Sustained presence — the kind that signals strategic reliability — requires enablers that remain in short supply.

In this sense, operational autonomy is where the gap between ambition and capability is most visible. The EU can take decisions and express intentions, but converting those intentions into repeatable, long-range deployments remains a challenge. (Tocci, 2021)

Industrial–Technological Autonomy

Industrial-technological autonomy encompasses the economic, technological and industrial foundations that support European strategic autonomy more broadly. It includes defence-industrial capacity, critical technologies, supply-chain resilience and mechanisms that safeguard sensitive knowledge or infrastructure.

The core question at this level is whether Europe has the industrial depth and technological base needed to support its strategic ambitions.

Several issues are especially relevant:

- Capability gaps and fragmentation. Defence-industrial production remains uneven across Europe, limiting the speed at which capabilities can be replenished or scaled.
- Dependence on external supply chains. Many of the technologies central to modern security — semiconductors, batteries, advanced materials — rely heavily on Indo-Pacific production networks.
- Joint procurement and investment. Instruments aimed at encouraging cooperation (such as joint procurement frameworks) matter only if they are fully used and adequately funded.
- Technology safeguards. Research protection, export controls and investment screening have become part of Europe's strategic toolkit, particularly for critical technologies.

Industrial-technological autonomy is not merely a matter of internal reform. It is deeply shaped by Europe's relationship with the Indo-Pacific, where many of the world's critical value chains are located. As a result, autonomy depends as much on external partnership management as on internal integration.

Normative–Regulatory Autonomy

Normative autonomy captures the EU's ability to shape the rules, standards and governance practices that structure international cooperation. This is perhaps the EU's most distinctive contribution to global governance, and it is widely recognised by Indo-Pacific partners. (European Commission, 2021)

This level includes influence over:

- digital governance and data protection regimes;

- connectivity standards and cyber norms;
- environmental rules, climate frameworks and sustainability regulations;
- maritime governance, including IUU fishing frameworks and biodiversity protection;
- human-centric approaches to technology, artificial intelligence and digital trade.

Normative-regulatory autonomy functions differently from military or industrial power. It does not rely on physical presence or hard coercive capabilities. Instead, it reflects the credibility of the EU's regulatory model and its ability to anchor cooperation in predictable frameworks. In the Indo-Pacific, where many states seek order without alignment, this kind of influence is particularly valuable.

Interdependence and Coherence

The four levels are analytically distinct, but in practice they are deeply interconnected:

- Political autonomy enables the EU to act collectively.
- Operational autonomy demonstrates credibility and backs political commitments.
- Industrial-technological autonomy equips both operational and political ambitions.
- Normative autonomy amplifies the EU's presence and builds durable partnerships.

Coherence emerges when progress in one domain reinforces progress in the others. Conversely, deficits at one level can undermine the entire architecture. The Indo-Pacific, as shown in the next section, magnifies these interdependencies and reveals where the EU's autonomy is robust and where it remains aspirational.

THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A COHERENCE TEST

The Indo-Pacific has become a useful space for gauging how far the EU's strategic autonomy actually stretches in practice. It is not an area where Europe has historical military dominance or a dense network of forward bases, yet it is a region where European interests — maritime security, technological resilience, economic stability and regulatory partnerships — converge in increasingly visible ways. Because the Indo-Pacific is geographically distant and strategically crowded, it exposes weaknesses that might remain hidden in Europe's neighbourhood. At the same time, it highlights the tools the EU uses most effectively, particularly in the political and normative domains.

To illustrate these dynamics, this section presents three short vignettes — one each for operational, industrial–technological and normative autonomy. These do not attempt to offer comprehensive case studies; instead, they show how the four-level framework interacts with real-world conditions in the Indo-Pacific.

Vignette 1 — Operational Autonomy: Maritime Presence and its Constraints

European naval activity in the Indo-Pacific has increased in recent years, driven partly by concerns about maritime security and partly by an interest in signalling support for a rules-based regional order. Member states such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy have sent vessels to the region, sometimes independently and sometimes in coordination with partners like Japan, India or Australia. These deployments contribute to maritime domain awareness, joint exercises and efforts to counter illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. They show that Europe is capable of projecting a presence far from its own region and of taking part in regional security arrangements in a constructive manner.

At the same time, these missions highlight the limits of operational autonomy. Europe does not yet possess the strategic lift, replenishment assets, interoperable ISR platforms or long-range logistical support needed to sustain operations over extended periods. The absence of a permanent EU maritime facility in the region means that most activities depend on host-nation access agreements. This dependence is not necessarily problematic on its own, but it illustrates that operational autonomy in the Indo-Pacific is conditional rather than self-sustaining. The deployments are valuable, yet they remain occasional in nature and rest largely on national rather than fully integrated European capabilities.

In practical terms, the Indo-Pacific demonstrates that the EU is able to act, but not in a consistent manner, not at the scale required, and not in a way that fully corresponds to the ambitions set out in its

strategic documents. Operational autonomy, therefore, remains the least developed pillar of the EU's autonomy profile. (Tocci, 2021)

Vignette 2 — Industrial–Technological Autonomy: Supply Chains, Critical Minerals and Economic Security

Europe's economic-security challenges are tightly linked to the Indo-Pacific, where a significant portion of the world's strategic supply chains are concentrated. Semiconductors from Taiwan and South Korea, battery components from Japan, rare-earth minerals from Australia (and processing in China), and hundreds of undersea cables running across the Indian and Pacific Oceans all form the backbone of Europe's technological and industrial resilience. These dependencies are not marginal; they reach into sectors as varied as telecommunications, automotive production, defence manufacturing and digital infrastructure.

The EU's Economic Security Strategy identifies diversification and risk reduction as central objectives. Much of this agenda, including investment screening, export controls, critical-technology safeguards and research-security frameworks, addresses vulnerabilities that have their roots in the Indo-Pacific. Europe cannot achieve its digital transition or its green transformation without reliable access to materials and technologies that originate in the region. (European Commission, 2021)

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific also creates openings for more substantial industrial partnerships. Connectivity initiatives with Japan and India, cooperation with ASEAN on digital standards and discussions with Australia on critical minerals illustrate that industrial autonomy is not only about decreasing dependence. It also involves reshaping patterns of interdependence so that they become more balanced, more secure and more predictable. (Tocci, 2021)

Still, the reality is that Europe's industrial-technological autonomy remains a work in progress. Implementation cycles are slow, some member states hesitate to prioritise industrial integration, and many diversification pathways are constrained by global competition for the same resources. The Indo-Pacific thus functions as both a source of vulnerability and a necessary site of engagement.

Vignette 3 — Normative–Regulatory Autonomy: The EU's Most Consistent Source of Influence

If operational autonomy exposes Europe's limitations, the Indo-Pacific also illustrates where the EU's strengths are most visible. Normative and regulatory influence is arguably the EU's most coherent and least contested dimension of autonomy in the region.

The EU has proven to be a valued partner in areas such as:

- digital governance, where GDPR-like data protection rules have been adopted or adapted by several Indo-Pacific states;
- cyber cooperation, where the EU's approach to trusted connectivity, platform accountability and secure data flows resonates with partners seeking alternatives to both US and Chinese models
- environmental and sustainability regulation, which informs maritime governance, biodiversity protection and climate action;
- trade and supply-chain standards, which shape labour norms, transparency requirements and market access conditions.

These regulatory tools do not depend on geographical proximity or hard-power projection. Instead, they reflect the credibility of the EU's institutional model and its ability to anchor cooperation in predictable frameworks. In a region where states often balance between major powers, the EU's regulatory diplomacy offers a distinct and non-threatening form of engagement.

Normative autonomy thus stands out as the area where Europe most consistently delivers. It builds long-term influence, lowers political transaction costs, and provides a platform for deeper partnerships — even when operational capabilities remain modest.

Coherence Across the Four Levels: A Mixed Picture

When considered together, the vignettes reveal a pattern of partial but meaningful coherence across the EU's autonomy dimensions.

- Political autonomy is solid and provides the flexibility for Europe to engage despite internal differences.
- Normative autonomy functions as the EU's most coherent and reliable instrument, sustaining presence even when operational capacity is thin.
- Industrial–technological autonomy is improving, but the Indo-Pacific highlights just how dependent Europe still is on external supply chains.
- Operational autonomy remains the weakest pillar, constrained by capability gaps that distance and geography make harder to hide.

The Indo-Pacific therefore acts as an analytical pressure point.

It highlights where the EU has matured strategically and where it must still confront the gap between ambition and capacity. Autonomy in Europe's immediate neighbourhood may depend on political vision and institutional agility, but autonomy in the Indo-Pacific requires a more demanding combination: credible enablers, resilient supply chains and sustained partnerships. (European Commission, 2021)

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

Bringing together the four levels of strategic autonomy allows for a more nuanced engagement with the broader strategic literature. Many of the themes highlighted in previous sections resonate with long-standing debates in European security studies, but the Indo-Pacific context helps refine these contributions. (Tocci, 2021)

Tocci's view of autonomy as "self-rule under law and values" fits naturally with the political and normative layers, where the EU shows coherence grounded in its legal framework and regulatory strengths. Howorth's focus on strategic maturity speaks directly to the operational and industrial dimensions, where capability gaps and uneven readiness continue to limit Europe's ambitions. Biscop's argument for prioritisation and practical planning is reflected clearly in the Indo-Pacific, where the need to match objectives with available resources becomes especially visible. Borrell's idea of "strategic responsibility" also resonates strongly in this context, expressed in the requirement to deliver on commitments, a requirement that becomes particularly demanding when acting far from the Union's immediate neighbourhood. (European Commission, 2021)

These perspectives align most clearly when examining how the four levels of autonomy interact. The Indo-Pacific demonstrates that political autonomy makes collective action possible, yet it is operational capacity that determines whether action can be maintained. Industrial-technological autonomy supports both, although its impact appears gradually and remains uneven across member states. Normative autonomy, by contrast, offers a form of influence that is less constrained by geography and depends more on institutional credibility and regulatory attractiveness.

Taken together, the Indo-Pacific case indicates that the EU has made meaningful progress toward a more integrated understanding of autonomy, although the pace of advancement varies across the four levels. (European Commission, 2021)

Strategic autonomy has evolved from a broad aspiration into a more structured concept that spans political decision-making, defence readiness, industrial-technological resilience and normative-regulatory influence. While the EU's capacity to work across these dimensions has improved, the Indo-Pacific demonstrates that the full alignment of these pillars is not yet within reach.

Political and normative autonomy are clearly the EU's strongest assets in the region. They allow Europe to articulate its interests, build partnerships and shape governance frameworks without resorting to hard-power competition. Industrial-technological autonomy is evolving, pushed forward by the logic of economic security, but it remains constrained by global dependencies. Operational autonomy is the most challenging, as distance magnifies logistical demands that Europe can only partially meet.

The Indo-Pacific, therefore, functions as both a testing ground and a revealing mirror. It showcases the EU's ability to act as a strategic actor while also exposing the limits of its current capabilities. Autonomy in this region is not about self-sufficiency; it is about ensuring that Europe has enough capacity, credibility and

coherence to defend its interests without relying excessively on any single partner. (European Commission, 2021)

Although this article provides a structured assessment of the EU's strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific, several limitations should be noted. (European Commission, 2021)

First, the analysis focuses primarily on EU documents and internal institutional perspectives. It does not incorporate the perceptions or strategic priorities of Indo-Pacific actors themselves. Their views could reinforce, challenge or complicate the assumptions underlying EU strategies. Future work should explore how Indo-Pacific states interpret Europe's presence, including whether they view the EU as a reliable partner, a regulatory actor, or simply one more external participant in an already crowded strategic landscape.

Second, although the discussion of industrial and technological autonomy clarifies the logic behind Europe's turn toward economic security, it does not assess the concrete impact of these measures in specific Indo-Pacific settings. Additional empirical research is needed to understand how diversification initiatives, connectivity projects or technology safeguards translate into measurable changes on the ground, particularly in areas such as semiconductor supply, critical minerals and cyber cooperation.

Third, while the article underlines the EU's strong normative and regulatory influence, it does not systematically address the ways in which this influence is contested. The Indo-Pacific includes a wide range of governance models, and competition over digital, environmental and trade rules is becoming more intense. Examining how EU norms adapt to or confront competing standards would deepen our understanding of the durability of normative autonomy.

Finally, the operational dimension calls for further study regarding the structural gaps that constrain sustained European presence in the region. Future research could consider the feasibility of more regular European deployments, the strategic role of French territories, arrangements for shared access, or the development of joint enabling capabilities required for long-distance operations.

Taken together, these avenues point toward a wider research agenda that examines not only how the EU defines autonomy, but also how its actions are interpreted, facilitated or limited by regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

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Ethical Approval

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Informed Consent

Not applicable.

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Use of Generative AI

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