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# A moving target. EU actorness and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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## ABSTRACT

The war in Ukraine sends mixed signals about the capacity of the EU to be a relevant actor. Despite steps forward over defense, strategic autonomy has been seen as a ‘pipe dream’ that has encountered a ‘reality check’. Key member states are in a similar predicament. Despite talk of a *Zeitenwende*, Germany has been deemed a ‘reluctant giant’. France has allegedly seen discourse on European sovereignty vindicated, but at the same time has managed to alienate a few EU countries. We interpret this ambivalence as an effect of the fragmentation of the liberal international order, accelerated by war in Ukraine, and claim that this process is increasing the requirements for EU actorness. We then identify a range of reactions to such situation. We map them and leverage the mapping to offer a research agenda on the politics of EU foreign policy.



## KEYWORDS

CFSP; Ukraine; actorness; strategic autonomy; liberal international order

## Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has sent mixed signals (Fiott [this issue](#)) about the capacity of the EU to be a relevant actor on foreign policy. Hence, despite remarkable steps forward over defence (e.g. in the fields of procurement and the provision of military aid), strategic autonomy has been pronounced a ‘pipe dream’<sup>1</sup> that has encountered a ‘reality check’.<sup>2</sup> As soon as March 2022, the EU’s Strategic Compass was ‘brand new, already obsolete’.<sup>3</sup> Key member states have found themselves in a similar predicament. Despite talk of a *Zeitenwende*, Germany has been dined a ‘reluctant giant’ on account of its qualms about delivering heavy weaponry to Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> France has allegedly seen its discourse on European sovereignty vindicated, but at the same time has managed to alienate Central and Eastern European countries with its emphasis on a Eurocentric approach to security in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

This article interrogates this ambivalence. We interpret it as the latest and starkest installment of a longer-lasting process by which the requirements for EU actorness have been shifting, sometimes quite swiftly, into terrains that are ever more demanding for the EU. More to the point, we offer the outline of a research agenda into the ways in which the fragmentation of the liberal international order (LIO), accelerated by the war in Ukraine,

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has moved the goalposts for EU actorness, as well as the politics of the EU response to such fragmentation.

A caveat is in order here: the LIO is remarkably malleable and has existed in different versions (Buzan and Lawson 2015). This begs the question of what exactly is fragmenting. Some scholars have searched for the core features of any LIO (Ikenberry 2018, 11), an effort that runs the risk of painting a 'selective and exaggerated' picture of the LIO (Acharya 2018, 5), or contributing to the 'myth of the liberal international order' (Allison 2018). However, our claim is not that the LIO is fragmenting against any essentialized understanding of what it stands for. The argument is more specific. The end of the Cold War unleashed an expansion of the LIO, by which a geographically bounded liberal multilateralism was replaced by an aspirationally universal and postnational liberalism (Börzel and Zürn 2021). This is the version of the LIO that is now in a process of fragmentation.

We use the term fragmentation to refer to a bundle of processes affecting the LIO that range from challenges to the universality of human rights to the crisis of global governance instruments, from the bifurcation of tech to protectionist tendencies in trade policies. We see the war as accelerating some of these trends, in that it is part of 'the transformation of the global rules-based order into a new global ordering architecture characterized by diversity and plurality' (Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022, 466).

More to the point, the war is fostering three dynamics of fragmentation. First, it constitutes yet another armed claim over a sphere of influence – and a more acute one than Georgia 2008 and Ukraine 2014. Lack of (competing) spheres of influence has been identified with the post-Cold War version of the LIO, and their return has been met with widespread concern (Nitoiu and Sus 2019; Resnick 2022, 564). Secondly, it has enhanced a negative view of interdependence as vulnerability, at odds with the liberal positive understanding of interdependence. In the past few years, the geopolitical implications of the capacity to 'grant or deny access to networks' (Battaleme 2019) have led to concerns over the 'weaponization of interdependence' (Farrell and Newman 2019). The war in Ukraine has intensified fears over the European reliance on Russian energy, and it has undermined the post-Cold War consensus in the EU on *Wandel durch Handel* as a liberal foreign policy doctrine (Orenstein [this issue](#)). Finally, at a deeper level, the invasion has breached the norm against territorial conquest, which 'formed the basis of the international system: borders were, by and large, sacrosanct' (Fazal 2022, 1). Although not exclusively liberal, the norm stands at the core of the post1945 order and has shaped the evolution of the LIO.

To be sure, none of these arguments involves embracing a rosy view of the LIO before February the 24<sup>th</sup>. Fragmentation is only predicated in a relative way and does not assume any mythical or uncontested baseline for comparison. But this does not detract from its relevance for the EU. The goal of this article is precisely to suggest a research agenda on the ways in which the fragmentation of the LIO, as fostered by the war in Ukraine, is impinging upon EU actorness and to offer a framework to understand the way in which different decision-makers (in representation of member states, the Commission or specific party families) have responded.

The text proceeds as follows. Section 2 suggests specific ways in which the fragmentation of the liberal international order, accelerated by the war in Ukraine, is impacting the capacity of the EU to be an actor. Section 3 argues that these changes will be interpreted

differently by different actors, be them member states representatives, EU institutions or party families. We advance a way to understand this diversity of interpretations and the political projects associated with them, and suggest examples to illustrate our arguments. Finally, section 4 draws conclusions.

### **An international actor**

The literature about the EU as an international actor has taken external (international) variables on board. Factors that do not pertain to the internal functioning of the EU have always been part of accounts of EU actorness. To mention two seminal contributions, Bretherton and Vogler (1999) listed *opportunity*, the external environment of ideas and events, among their components of actorness – together with presence and capability. Jupille and Caporaso (1998) included *recognition* (by others), together with authority, cohesion and autonomy. However, the fact that more recently Drieskens has advocated for ‘a closer look at the outside world’ (Drieskens 2017, 1540) or that Rhinard and Sjöstedt have advised against what they call the ‘closed system trap’ (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019, 5) probably suggests that some scholarly contributions on the EU capacity to be an international actor have tended to emphasize its internal characteristics (Niemann and Bretherton 2013, 262).

Awkwardly, the argument that external factors shape actorness is both commonsensical and hard to pinpoint. On one hand, from a historical point of view different kinds of political units have risen and fallen, favoured or out-selected over the centuries whenever their resource endowment proved to be most (in)adequate for a given set of international circumstances (Tilly 1992). From this point of view, it just seems natural that the fragmentation of the LIO would influence the role of the EU in the world. At the end of the day, the EU was constructed as an integration-through-law project within the logic of that very order. On the other hand, such processes can seem too broad to get a good analytical grip on. Bretherton and Vogler (2013) have argued that ‘significant changes in the structure of the international system’, particularly the ‘very rapid ascent of China, and to a lesser extent India and Brazil’, have undermined EU’s ‘ability to defend the interests of its members’ (Bretherton and Vogler 2013, 379). From their point of view, EU’s actorness was already ‘past its peak’ in 2013 (Bretherton and Vogler 2013). Rhinard and Sjöstedt have also pointed that factors such as ‘the nature of international power constellations, the position of the US vis-à-vis Europe, or the reassertion of military power in international diplomacy [...] affect the EU’s ability to wield influence’ (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019, 14).

We propose three specific mechanisms by which international changes can shift the requirements for actorness. They have to do with preference cohesion, authority and capabilities – elements that stand at the core of traditional accounts of EU actorness (Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019, 8). We hypothesize that the fragmentation of the LIO has shifted the foreign policy agenda towards issues (a) over which there is a lower level of agreement among EU member states and institutions; (b) in which the EU has been granted less authority by member states, and in which decision-making is more cumbersome; and (c) for which the EU has less able instruments to implement its own decisions. Under any such circumstances, remaining an actor will be a challenge because levels of preference cohesion, authority or capabilities (or any combination of them) will decrease.

The war in Ukraine offers examples of such processes on the matters of defence and energy. The former has seen the agenda shift towards issues over which the EU has been granted with less capabilities and is less able to reach agreements. The latter has raised new challenges precisely in the subsector of EU energy policy in which the delegation of authority to the EU is weaker.

When it comes to security, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has fostered a shift in emphasis from crisis management to territorial defence. This shift has wrong-footed European security policies as conceived of during the last three decades, both as regards the construction of capabilities and shared understandings. Simon Duke made the case that the capabilities initiatives undertaken by the EU ‘focus very much on expeditionary-type forces [to stabilize surrounding regions] and less on territorial defense’ (Duke 2019, 124), which led him to the conclusion that ‘the EU has still not defined the “D” in the CSDP’ (ibidem). It is still widely perceived to remain out of reach, hence EU reassurances that NATO ‘remains the foundation for the collective defence for those States which are members of it’,<sup>6</sup> or HRVP Josep Borrell’s claim in 2020 that ‘no one advocates the development of a fully autonomous European force outside NATO, which remains the only viable framework to ensure the territorial defense of Europe’.<sup>7</sup>

Territorial defence (from Russian threats) is also harder for the EU to address because of a lower level of agreement relative to the challenges the EU now needs to tackle. The war in Ukraine plays into deep-seated divides in the EU. According to Paul Silva II, the variable that shapes the stances taken by EU countries on Russia is precisely their ‘foreign policy orientation [...] as an Atlanticist or Europeanist state’. More to the point, Atlanticists ‘are more influenced by the US Cold War military and political strategy toward the USSR – namely deterrence’ and hence prefer more confrontational relationships with Russia, while ‘Europeanist states seek to externalize the policy of strengthening economic interdependence [...] to reduce the likelihood of conflict [...] depriving Europe of a need for US security guarantees’ (Silva 2022, 7). This divide has not disappeared and has moved to the top of the foreign policy agenda, thus reducing the relevance of an overall higher level of agreement over Russia. The fact that the debate about Russia is now coterminous with that over defence means that even if there is an increased supply of unity, its demand has risen too.

The Russian war in Ukraine has also led to a change in how energy is addressed in the EU, moving the agenda towards the dimension of energy policy in which EU institutions have been granted less authority. Energy became part of EU activity in a piecemeal fashion, by the juxtaposition of developments in other domains, such as environmental and competition policy (Solorio Sandoval and Morata 2012). Hence, EU competences on this matter differ widely across its main three subsectors – internal market, sustainability, and security of supply. The latter has been particularly resistant to European integration (Buchan 2009, 79), and it is the one that the war in Ukraine has put front and center. Integration differs also within each domain: ‘on the least integrated end’, argues Herranz-Surrallés, ‘we find areas closely related to the energy mix and the choice of energy suppliers’. This includes, for instance, the fact that ‘there are no common EU targets on energy dependency or on diversification’ (Herranz-Surrallés 2019, 4). These are precisely key challenges raised by the Russian war in Ukraine as regards energy. The fact that the foreign dimension of EU energy policy reproduces policy practices taken from the

governance of the internal energy market further attests to the weakness of EU energy diplomacy (Herranz-Surrallés 2016, 1386).

In sum, the war in Ukraine and more broadly the fragmentation of the LIO have changed the foreign policy agenda for the EU in ways that make EU actorness harder to achieve. Preferences are less cohesive, authority lower and capabilities scarcer. Such changes will feature in the calculations of states and other actors. When they sense that the EU struggles to retain its actorness, they might reconsider their options.

To be sure, actorness is a concept that pertains to the world of scholars, not decision-makers. We do not expect them to necessarily think about this in terms analogous to the ones we use. Our argument depends only on decision-makers thinking that the capacity of the EU to act is compromised in the face of new circumstances. This is surely how it is being perceived by at least some of them. Emmanuelle Macron defined its goal of European sovereignty as nothing less than 'our capacity to exist in the current world and to defend our values and interests'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, then president of the Commission Jean Claude Juncker called for the development of what he coined 'Weltpolitikfähigkeit', the capacity for the EU to act in foreign affairs.<sup>9</sup> For his part, HRVP Josep Borrell has claimed that the EU needs strategic autonomy which amounts to the 'ability to think for oneself and to act according to one's own values and interests'.<sup>10</sup> It is the capacity to act that they see at stake.

In addition, decision-makers will make factual and normative sense of external circumstances impacting the place of the EU in the world through diverse worldviews that will lead them to different conclusions on policies and strategies. Since 'structures do not come with an instruction sheet' (Blyth 2003), such worldviews will mediate the impact of systemic changes upon EU decision-making, just as Walter Carlsnaes' 'dispositions' inform the way actors read the constraining conditions under which they operate (Carlsnaes 1992, 255). However, the ways in which they do so remain to be seen. The next section offers guidelines to systematically explore how the fragmentation of the LIO, greatly accelerated by the war in Ukraine, is changing the politics of EU foreign policy.

## **The EU and the fragmentation of the liberal international order**

The EU has close-up experience with the fragmentation of the liberal international order. The departure of the United Kingdom, the unsecure strength of the Atlantic alliance, and the return of armed claims over spheres of influence in Europe have all impacted fundamental aspects of the EU foreign and security policy.

EU decision-makers have registered such changes, and language has shifted accordingly. In its European Security Strategy of 2003 (European Council 2003), the EU saw the international environment as 'one of increasingly open borders', in which 'flows of trade and investment, the development of technology and the spread of democracy have brought freedom and prosperity to many people'. Even the concession that 'others have perceived globalization as a cause of frustration and injustice' brought home the point that this assessment was somebody else's. In such world, one of 'global threats, global markets and global media', the key objective was the construction of 'an effective multilateralism' (European Council 2003).

The shift towards a more fragmented LIO is apparent in the language of the Global Strategy of 2016. The times were then of 'existential crisis, within and beyond the

European Union'. To be sure, 'a rules-based global order', of which multilateralism was the 'key principle', was the best way to unlock 'the full potential of a prosperous Union', but the EU was ready to explore other routes if necessary. In addition, the EU needed to prioritize the security of the EU, since 'in this fragile world, soft power is not enough' (EUGS 2016).

The language of the Strategic Compass of 2022 is darker. It describes a world of 'conflicts, military build-ups and aggressions'. In this context, 'interdependence is increasingly conflictual', with 'increasing attempts of economic and energy coercion' (EEAS, 2022: 10). The fact that the last draft of the Compass had to be updated after the 24<sup>th</sup> of February to include by one count at least 15 references to Russia (Bell 2022) says it all about the speed at which the security environment of the EU has deteriorated. While the draft 'suggested selective engagement with Moscow', the final version considers the Russian invasion of Ukraine 'a tectonic shift in European history' (Koenig and Wernert 2021, 4).

Nonetheless, each of these documents should be seen as the result of a complicated politics in which different understandings held by decision-makers clash over the trajectory of the international order and the role the EU plays in it. This section suggests a way to open that black box and explores the diversity of positions that can be adopted by the actors that take part in EU foreign policy making.

### ***Mapping out worldviews***

We want to map the range of worldviews that can filter actors' (be them decision-makers in representation of member states, the Commission or party families) perceptions of the ways in which the international order is imposing new requirements for EU actorness. Decision-makers interpret international trends and events differently, and they defend different projects and understandings on how to insert their local reality into international politics (i.e. they have different broad geopolitical orientations). The point is that such worldviews will mediate the impact of systemic changes upon EU decision-making. To be sure, there is no need to essentialize actors' worldviews. They can change, as policymakers shape their assessments in an environment populated by other practitioners, think tanks and opinion makers that also buy into more or less comprehensive worldviews.<sup>11</sup>

We map out six such options. We start by differentiating between three broad and long-lasting approaches to EU foreign policy – nationalism, Atlanticism and Europeanism. The latter two form a key divide between different national strategic cultures in the EU (Dyson 2013), one that has a bearing on more recent debates (Tonra 2021, 11; Kunz 2018, 5). Atlanticists and Europeanists think of their countries' participation in international relations as mediated, respectively, by their belonging to the West and to Europe/the EU. This is correlated with attitudes towards Russia. Atlanticists 'tend to view Europe and the US [...] as natural allies and are suspicious of Russian motives and influence', while Europeanists prefer 'a more emancipated role for Europe' and 'tend to see Russia as an interlocutor' (Chryssogelos 2015, 227). In contradistinction, nationalists will rather think of their nation-state as an individual participant in international affairs, unencumbered by alignments, commitments and solidarities imposed by membership in broader blocks. We can think of this approach as an expression, in the foreign policy realm, of demarcationist attitudes as described by Kriesi et al. (2006), among others. Holbraad has described nationalism in the sphere of foreign policy as 'primarily concerned about sovereignty'



and as a 'champion[ing] national rights, interests and values' against forms of international or supranational integration that 'appear to threaten national independence' (Holbraad 2003, 2). Admittedly, there are ways to combine nationalism, Europeanism or Atlanticism into politically cohesive proposals, but there is leverage in keeping them analytically distinct.

We also differentiate between two reactions to a fragmenting LIO. Actors can either embrace or resist fragmentation. Those who embrace it can do so because of a normative preference (because they see it as a promising development), and/or out of the conviction that it is an irreversible trend that one needs to adapt to. On the contrary, others would rather resist the fragmentation of the LIO. This may happen because of principled or strategic reasons, or simply because of an inability to change course. In general, they will tend to see agency as less constrained by structural processes than those who do not see any other option but to go along with the full implications of a fragmenting LIO. We explicitly raise a caveat here. There are normative reasons to endorse or oppose fragmentation as a matter of principle. While some will see fragmentation as a harbinger of conflict and norm erosion, others will see it as fostering an order that is more 'culturally and politically diverse' (Acharya 2018, 8), in which universal norms are strongly localized (Zimmermann 2017). We remain agnostic on the normative convenience of any of such options. We also do not advocate for an adaptive actorness in which, as it may, the EU chases the moving target of the article title. However, we do expect actors endowed with different worldviews to take different positions in this regard. Some will see fragmentation as a vindication of their preference for a more or a less influential EU, a more emancipated Europe, or a more cohesive West. Others will find adjustment to new circumstances an opportunity to push for old preferences or a threat for fragile consensuses. There is an abundance of options that we want to explore.

We associate each of the six worldviews described by this categorization with different versions of discourses about strategic autonomy, which has been the response adopted by many to the state of affairs described above. In order to do so, we unpack strategic autonomy into a number of different projects. To begin with, the literature has seen strategic autonomy as composed of three different dimensions: political, operational, and industrial (Kunz, 2018). They refer respectively to the capacity to take autonomous decisions, the ability to own and deploy the capabilities that will enable implementing them, and the possession of an industrial base that will produce such capabilities.

Different combinations of these three components of autonomy (political, operational and industrial) will lead to different kinds of strategic autonomy. Along these lines, Fiott (2018) has advanced a three-fold distinction between as many distinct political projects behind the talk of strategic autonomy: as responsibility, as hedging, and as emancipation. They appeal to actors holding different views about the role the EU should play internationally. Autonomy as responsibility 'links directly to the notion that European states should take up a greater share of the burden' (Fiott 2018, 2), which mainly demands operational autonomy. The logic of hedging stems from 'the uncertainties surrounding the transatlantic relationship' and the need to 'ensure that EU defence structures and policies are autonomous and effective enough should the US gradually withdraw from Europe' (Fiott 2018, 4). On top of operational autonomy, hence, it includes an industrial dimension. Finally, emancipation would imply allowing the EU 'to reach its full potential as a global power', combining the operational, industrial and political dimensions of



**Table 1.** Reactions to the fragmentation of the liberal international order.

		Atlanticists		
	Nationalists	If US admin Atlanticist	If US admin not Atlanticist	Europeanists
Acceptance	-Fragmented order of sovereign nations -Euroscepticism -Transactional re-alignment with other great powers	-The West vs the Rest -Actorness requires greater operational StA. -EU as a responsible partner in a struggling West	-The Rest vs a divided West -Actorness demands greater operational and industrial StA. -Hope of getting the US back. No deterrent. When hope vanishes, move to next column	-Competing regional blocks -Actorness requires operational, industrial and decisional StA. -Independent EU, including deterrent
Rejection	-Global order of sovereign nations -Only available to big players -“Global Britain”	-Continuity under more difficult conditions -No remarkably higher requirements for actorness. Confidence in US capacities -EU-US bilateralism as leverage to reform/ defend the LIO	<i>When hope of getting the US back vanishes, move to next column</i>	-Cooperative regional orders -Actorness requires operational, industrial and decisional autonomy. But deterrent not critical bc order is perceived as less conflictual. -EU as mender of the LIO through multiple coalitions.

Source: own elaboration.

strategic autonomy. Ultimately, it would also imply the need for an autonomous deterrent and therefore it is ‘the most politically sensitive and the most radical vision of strategic autonomy’ (Fiott, 2018: 8).

The following Table 1 lays out the six worldviews produced by our 2 × 3 categorization. For each of the cells, we outline a) the most general description of both their view of the international order; b) the requirements imposed upon actorness; and c) a hint about the basic strategic outlook behind each of these six possible approaches.

We organize the text by columns and look at nationalists, Atlanticists, and Europeanists in turn. Some of the options resonate with decisions and debates associated with the war in Ukraine; others reflect broader aspects of the fragmentation of the liberal international order.

**Nationalists**

Nationalists who embrace the fragmentation of the liberal international order will choose to be part of this process as sovereign nation-states, not as members of a Union. They will read a more localized order as a vindication of their communitarist, anti-universalist worldview (Zürn and de Wilde 2016), and will leverage it in favour of their preference for less European integration. Given their Euroscepticism, they will also see a more fragmented and competitive order as yet another reason to give their national foreign policy a more independent orientation, out of traditional EU alignments, and closer to other great powers that are better aligned with their preferences for a less cosmopolitan international society. The stance taken by Orbán’s Hungary regarding the war in Ukraine

exemplifies this option: half-hearted support for EU's sanctions on Russia, refusal to allow the transit of Western military support for Ukraine, and avoidance of rhetoric that could be seen as delegitimizing Russian actions and design in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> That the parliamentary election of 3 April 2022 was constructed in terms of 'alignment or isolation', and as a verdict on the 'Eastern opening' policy points precisely in this direction.

On the contrary, it is rather complicated to reject fragmentation from a nationalist standpoint, given the trade-off between universalist and demarcationist claims (Grande and Kriesi 2015). If you are advocating the fragmentation of the EU, your first instinct might not be to reject that of the LIO. Be it as it may, only big players can (try to) square the circle, as it implies a capacity for that nation-state to actively contribute on its own to the production of an integrated liberal international order. The slogan 'Global Britain' hints precisely in that direction – in a moment in which the United Kingdom was leaving the EU, it pledged to remain outwardly looking and committed to liberal internationalism. From this point of view, not being constrained by the slow-moving wheels of EU decision-making can be presented as an advantage: an independent state will be nimbler in contributing to (and reaping the benefits of) the LIO.

In any case, nationalists will see a fragmenting LIO, whether they reject or accept such fragmentation, as further reason to follow their own national paths, without the shackles of an EU Common Foreign and Security Policy.

### **Atlanticists**

For European Atlanticists, the fragmentation of the LIO will have different implications depending on the degree of attachment of the US administration to the Atlantic alliance. Since this has varied markedly in the last few administrations, concerns over the future orientation of US presidents will also feature in the assessment.

If the US administration has an Atlanticist inclination, then European Atlanticists who accept the fragmentation of the liberal international order will tend to think of the EU as part of a Western block under siege. According to this view, the alliance with the US will be in need of reinforcement, and at the same time it will appear as the most suitable strategy to face the rivals of the West in an ever more conflictual international order. From this point of view, the EU needs to develop autonomous capabilities to make a greater contribution to the Western alliance. This is a relatively attainable goal: remaining an actor will *only* require greater operational autonomy. The US is not likely to raise objections to this understanding of autonomy as responsibility.<sup>13</sup> Actually, it can even be seen as a binding strategy, i.e. a way to appear before the US as a reliable partner, and assuage its concerns over burden sharing (Alcaro 2020, 153). The new NATO Strategic Concept, adopted shortly after the beginning of the war, points in this direction when it states that 'NATO recognises the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes positive to transatlantic and global security and is complementary to, and interoperable with NATO'.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, if the US administration is not Atlanticist, or if concerns over the possibility that this might happen in the future feature in the calculations of actors, then the requirements for actorness will be more demanding. A disunited West will have less of a good hand in an ever more competitive international system. In addition, the leverage provided by the alliance with the US will not be taken for granted. In May 2017, then

Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the ‘times in which we could completely rely on others have somewhat passed’ and urged Europeans to take their fate into their own hands. The election of Biden did not completely reverse her stance, as she ‘noted that interests will continue to diverge’ (Koenig and Wernert 2021, 8). Hence, in order to remain a relevant actor the EU will have to develop strategic autonomy as hedging, including both the operational and industrial dimensions of autonomy. However, industrial autonomy has proved all but easy. In the context of the war in Ukraine, EU member states have taken procurement decisions ‘in favour of immediately available US high-end weapons systems’, side-lining European industry. This has been the case of Finland’s, Germany’s and Spain’s orders (Bell 2022, 4) of the fifth-generation F-35s. Finally, in as much as there is hope to re-establish the transatlantic alliance, these Atlanticists will prefer not to escalate the search for autonomy, and will avoid developing a deterrent independent from American security guarantees. If the hope vanishes, then there will be a tendency to move to the Europeanist column.

The rejection of fragmentation by European Atlanticists will also lead to different situations depending on the orientation of the US administration. An equally Atlanticist administration will allow for a strategy to defend the LIO based on the Western alliance. This situation would impose a relatively mild set of new requirements for EU actorness, if any. It would allow the EU to restrict itself to shore up US power and remain hopeful about the endurance of the status quo (Massie and Paquin 2020, 7). Bilateral EU-US deals, e.g. on sanctions, will be seen as leveraging the combined power of the US and the EU in favour of international norms. Although the rejection of the fragmentation of the LIO has become harder to sustain with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, sometimes this position can present itself as an act of political realism. Awareness of the difficulties implied in moving EU security and defence cooperation significantly beyond the status quo can be back-engineered and fed into an interpretation of the international context as fundamentally manageable within the parameters of the usual division of labour between the EU and NATO/US. Benjamin Tallis has argued that such division of labour is ‘possibly the most effective “good cop, bad cop” double act in geopolitical history’. Hence, the call by this author to avoid threat assessments that would force the EU out of that role, particularly given the lack of internal consensus to follow up on that assessment.<sup>15</sup>

On the contrary, a non-Atlanticist White House will leave European Atlanticists without much of an available strategy to sustain a universalist version of the LIO. This might lead them to move to other columns in the table, possibly with more Europeanist positions.

### **Europeanists**

Europeanists who accept or welcome the reality of a more fragmented order will read fragmentation in terms of the creation of a world of competing regional blocks. They will accordingly push for the full development of strategic autonomy, understood in this case as emancipation. The ultimate hope will be to get rid of ever riskier dependencies vis-à-vis other poles. This will imply political, operational and industrial autonomy, and in its most accomplished form the development of an EU deterrent as well, which would seriously sever the Atlantic alliance. This of course involves major steps forward in terrains that have proved arduous, including the provision of article-V-type security guarantees. In early March 2022, just days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden seemed to

briefly hint in a direction compatible with this one when they stressed the role of the EU as a security provider under article 42.7 of the Treaty of the European Union. Given the 'changed security policy', both traditionally neutral countries underlined that 'EU leaders must be very united and clear about the fact that the EU is also a security community for its Member States'.<sup>16</sup> During the Trump mandate French President Emmanuel Macron pointed in this direction rather clearly. First, in an interview with the Economist, he warned that NATO was experiencing its 'brain death' and that Europe stood on 'the edge of a precipice', given doubts about 'the commitment of the US' with its defence.<sup>17</sup> This led him to propose a 'strategic dialogue with our European partners' on the 'role of the French nuclear deterrent in our collective security'.<sup>18</sup> Former Atlanticists who think that in the future EU and US security interests will diverge can also tilt towards a Europeanist stance and move to this cell, although hopes of getting the US back into Europe will pull them towards the Atlanticist column, perhaps with a lukewarm hedging strategy. However, the fact that Sweden and Finland finally applied for NATO membership illustrates to what an extent this is perceived by states as a far-fetched, uncertain option the time horizons of which do not fit the current urgencies of European security.

Finally, Europeanists who resist fragmentation will see the world as one composed of cooperative regional orders. They will tend to see in the formation of coalitions with multiple, possibly issue-specific groups of like-minded states the best way to enhance multilateral institutions, with the EU acting as a mender of the LIO. In this case, the US does not need to feature as the privileged partner. Rather, coalitions will vary on a case-by-case basis depending on the issue at hand, under the interpretation that while there might be factors driving the fragmentation of the LIO and little in the way of broad coalitions opposing this trend, it might be still possible to articulate specific coalitions to defend specific international institutions. The Commission seems to point in this direction in its reflections about multilateral institutions: 'Non-traditional coalitions and formats should be explored, building on lessons from processes such as the EU, China and Canada co-convened Ministerial Meeting on Climate Action, the Paris Peace Forum and Finance in Common summit' (European Commission 2021, 14). However, votes casted in the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council over the Russian invasion of Ukraine shed a sobering light upon the prospects for such coalitions.<sup>19</sup> Also in this case, sustaining EU actorness will imply the development of greater autonomy in operational, industrial and decisional terms. However, this version of strategic autonomy as emancipation will stop short of proposing the construction of an independent deterrent. Actors in this cell will not perceive the international context as conflictual enough to justify taking this critical step.

## Conclusion

The steps taken by the EU since the war started in February 2022 are 'ambitious',<sup>20</sup> even 'game changers' for European security and defence cooperation (Koenig, 2022: 6). The pledge to 'resolutely invest more and better in defence capabilities and innovative technologies', as announced at the European Council Summit in Versailles on 10–11 - March<sup>21</sup>; the announcements by several member states, and singularly Germany, to increase their defence budgets; the readiness to use the European Peace Facility to deliver military aid to crisis areas; the adoption of the Strategic Compass with the goal of having

a fully operational, 5000-strong EU Rapid Deployment Capacity able to operate in a ‘non-permissive environment’ by 2025 (EEAS 2022); or the Commission proposal to channel 500 million through a short-term instrument for joint procurement projects (European Commission 2022) are all major steps. However, this EU response has not significantly improved the perception that the Union is badly equipped to deal on its own with the security environment in which it must live: ‘what in peaceful times would have been valiant efforts to take the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) forward inevitably comes up short now’.<sup>22</sup>

This article has explored the ambivalence of this assessment. We claim that this is not just a case of the proverbial capability-expectations gap (Hill, 1993). If anything, the opposite has happened; the EU has effectively taken decisions in the field of defence capabilities that have defied expectations. Neither is it a conventional instance of failing forward, by which suboptimal intergovernmental agreements are followed by neofunctionalist dynamics of integration that are crisis-prone and lead to policy failure, followed by new suboptimal intergovernmental agreements (Bergmann and Müller 2021). In our case suboptimality is not (only) determined by the need to accommodate disparate preferences in a cumbersome decision-making procedure, but by the fact that the goalposts themselves of what is required for the EU to retain its actorness are moving. We could think about this situation as a particularly intense, internationally embedded version of failing forward, in which advances in European integration are incomplete because they must catch up with international conditions that are becoming more hostile for the EU.

We propose three specific mechanisms to explain the impact that changing international circumstances can have on EU actorness, by reducing preference cohesiveness, EU authority and capabilities – classical variables of internally focused conceptions of what it takes for the EU to be an actor. We also call attention upon the politics of diminishing actorness and suggest a way to map out the worldviews through which EU-internal actors will read the effects of a fragmenting LIO upon the EU. Nationalists, Atlanticists and Europeanists will differ in their interpretation of the opportunities, risks, and suitable responses to the fragmentation of the LIO, whether they choose to accept or reject it. They will understand a changing international context as privileging different kinds of actors, endowed with different kinds of autonomy. The debate over the EU as an international actor will reflect this diversity of options. Importantly, the ebbs and flows of Atlanticism in the US will also play a role in the positions available to EU actors.

Beyond the reaction to the war in Ukraine (and to the information it reveals about security threats in Europe), we think that our categorization can help understand other instances in which EU foreign policy is faced with a fragmenting LIO and hence with the need to develop new policies, capabilities or policy-making procedures. Identifying patterns across issue areas or over time and signposting the evolution of key actors can help understand the ways in which the fragmentation of the LIO and its challenge to EU actorness are changing the politics of EU foreign policy more broadly.

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