

Normative contestation, procedural consensus: the dual politics of EU autonomy narratives in defence, economics and digital policy

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Since the late 2010s, the European Union has increasingly been portrayed as undergoing a ‘geopolitical’ or ‘geo-economic’ turn.¹ The sharpening of the rivalry between the United States and China, shifts in US foreign policy, Russia’s war against Ukraine and wider security instability have fuelled a reassessment of how European countries maintain their prosperity and security under conditions of strategic competition. This reassessment is reflected in the growing salience of ‘autonomy’ and ‘sovereignty’ in Brussels, concepts that capture an increasing awareness of the risks associated with economic globalization, notably the vulnerabilities arising from dependencies on foreign actors in areas ranging from security to critical economic resources.

Whether this amounts to a genuine turn, however, remains contested.² Historically, the EU has struggled to project a unified voice, prompting observers to speak of its ‘strategic cacophony’ rather than autonomy.³ Despite recent attempts to achieve more coherence, disagreements among member states remain. Another concern targets the EU’s mode of action: despite the increasingly geopolitical language, policy responses often rely on regulatory instruments rather than on large-scale, fiscally demanding capacity-building ones. This apparent gap between rhetoric and instruments has led some accounts to question the depth of the EU’s transformation and the credibility of its autonomy agenda.⁴

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¹ Anna Herranz-Surrallés, Chad Damro and Sandra Eckert, ‘The geoeconomic turn of the single European market? Conceptual challenges and empirical trends’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 919–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13591>; Sarah Bauerle Danzman and Sophie Meunier, ‘The EU’s geoeconomic turn: from policy laggard to institutional innovator’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 1097–115, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13599>.

² Herranz-Surrallés, Damro and Eckert, ‘The geoeconomic turn of the single European market?’; Gerda Falkner, Sebastian Heidebrecht, Anke Obendiek and Timo Seidl, ‘Digital sovereignty—rhetoric and reality’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 31: 8, 2024, pp. 2099–2120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2358984>.

³ Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, ‘Illusions of autonomy: why Europe cannot provide for its security if the United States pulls back’, *International Security* 45: 4, 2021, pp. 7–43, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00405.

⁴ Buket Buse Demirci, Christian Freudlsperger and Frank Schimmelfennig, ‘Geopolitical rebordering?

Academic research on the EU's geopolitical/geo-economic turn has expanded rapidly, but it remains heavily segmented by policy domain. Single-issue case studies provide fine-grained accounts of how autonomy is debated in trade or defence. Yet cross-policy comparison is harder. To assess the EU's shift to autonomy, scholarship therefore needs approaches that travel across domains⁵ and clarify the relationship between narrative claims and instrument choice.

This article develops such a perspective, building on the strategic narratives, ideas and policy change literatures⁶ which point to the relationship between strategic narratives and policy instruments. Strategic narratives matter because they organize a policy's goals and values, and also how an actor should proceed concretely. I use 'autonomy narratives'⁷ as an umbrella for labels such as strategic autonomy, open strategic autonomy and digital sovereignty, which encapsulate the EU's attempts to mitigate risks stemming from external dependencies and foreign influence across policies. This article builds on Moschella's analytical distinction between two dimensions of (autonomy) narratives.⁸ The normative dimension concerns the conceptualization of autonomy—what it means and why the EU should pursue it. The procedural dimension concerns how autonomy is operationalized in instruments and strategies, and with what implications.

Distinguishing these dimensions clarifies why policy change can happen amid normative disagreement. The two dimensions are linked but they evolve according to distinct political temporalities. Normative contestation concerns long-term ends that are hard to reconcile. Procedural alignment, by contrast, can emerge in the short term because instruments are rarely univocal: they can be interpreted as compatible with divergent strategic projects and implemented with varying degrees of ambition. The EU's institutional configuration reinforces this dynamic by making some forms of action—especially regulatory intervention—more readily available than others. In sum, political actors may converge on instruments in the short term if they see them as serving their goals, while continuing to disagree at the normative level.⁹

External boundary formation in the European Union', *Journal of European Public Policy*, publ. online 20 Aug. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2548346>; Benjamin Farrand, 'The ordoliberal internet? Continuity and change in the EU's approach to the governance of cyberspace', *European Law Open* 2: 1, 2023, pp. 106–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/elo.2023.14>; Thomas Jacobs, Niels Gheyle, Ferdi De Ville and Jan Orbie, 'The hegemonic politics of "strategic autonomy" and "resilience": COVID-19 and the dislocation of EU trade policy', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 1, 2023, pp. 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13348>.

⁵ Herranz-Surrallés, Damro and Eckert, 'The geoeconomic turn of the single European market?'; Falkner, Heidebrecht, Obendiek and Seidl, 'Digital sovereignty'.

⁶ Daniel Beland and Robert Henry Cox, eds, *Ideas and politics in social science research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism: the explanatory power of ideas and discourse', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 11, 2008, pp. 303–26, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342>.

⁷ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Forging the world: strategic narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

⁸ Manuela Moschella, *Governing risk: the IMF and global financial crises* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁹ Nicolas Jabko, *Playing the market: a political strategy for uniting Europe, 1985–2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Maya Jegen and Frédéric Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity: comparing the EU's energy and defence policies', *West European Politics* 37: 1, 2014, pp. 182–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2013.818325>.

On this basis, this article advances a central claim: the EU's current autonomy agenda rests less on normative consensus than on procedural alignment at the level of policy instruments. European actors continue to compete over the ends of autonomy—whether it should primarily achieve strategic self-sufficiency (a Sovereign Union vision) or resilient interdependence and the governance of global ties (an Interdependent Union vision). Yet despite this enduring normative competition, policy-makers have converged on procedural solutions, often centred on regulation. Not only does regulation address redistributive and institutional concerns,¹⁰ but it has been increasingly justified in strategic terms and used for capacity-building.¹¹ In that sense, regulatory measures cater to competing coalitions: those in favour of defending interdependence and embeddedness in global networks and those in favour of self-sufficiency goals.

By linking narrative contestation to instrument choice across domains, the article contributes to scholarship on the EU's geopolitical/geo-economic turn and to the literature on narratives and policy change in line with this special section of *International Affairs*. It reconciles two diagnoses often treated as contradictory: persistent cacophony over ends and policy change through new instruments.¹² It specifies how ambiguity operates not only in discourse but also through instruments, based on the distinctive normative and procedural politics.

Empirically, the article examines three domains in which autonomy has become especially salient (defence, economic and digital policy), chosen for their substantive importance and for their variation in integration level. For each domain, I reconstruct the evolution of autonomy narratives since the late 2010s by tracing their normative and procedural components, and I analyse EU instruments adopted since 2019 to assess whether observed change reflects normative convergence, procedural alignment or both. The analysis draws on Commission and Council documents, legislative proposals and adopted acts, and speeches, triangulated with specialized news outlets. I trace narrative claims and map them onto instrument choice. This focus is informed by the existing scholarship, which has demonstrated that political elites and institutional leaderships are the primary drivers of EU policy-making in security, economics and digital policy.¹³ These policy-makers by no means form a monolithic entity:

¹⁰ Philipp Genschel and Markus Jachtenfuchs, eds, *Beyond the regulatory polity? The European integration of core state powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Eva G. Heidbreder, 'Regulating capacity building by stealth: pattern and extent of EU involvement in public administration', in Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, *Beyond the regulatory polity?*, pp. 144–65; Fabio Bulfone, Donato Di Carlo and Timo Seidl, 'Regulatory means for interventionist ends: GBER and the transformation of the EU state aid regime', *Governance* 39: 1, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.70084>; Catherine Hoefler, 'Beyond the regulatory state? The European Defence Fund and national military capacities', *Journal of European Public Policy* 30: 7, 2023, pp. 1281–304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2174581>.

¹² Jabko, *Playing the market*.

¹³ Luuk Schmitz and Timo Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary: understanding the rise of open strategic autonomy in EU trade policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 3, 2023, pp. 834–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13428>; Ana E. Juncos and Sophie Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 955–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13597>; Pierre Haroche, 'A "geopolitical commission": supranationalism meets global power competition', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61: 4, 2023, pp. 970–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13440>.

their positions regarding autonomy narratives vary across national and policy lines. Focusing on them offers a feasible and analytically meaningful vantage point to understand how autonomy narratives compete and shape the design of new policy instruments.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on the EU's turn and develops the autonomy narratives framework. The second, third and fourth sections analyse narrative contestation and instrument choice in defence, economic and digital policy. The final section synthesizes the findings and outlines implications and avenues for further research.

Analysing the EU turn through autonomy narratives: normative disagreement, procedural alignment

Recent international developments have fuelled a geopolitical/geo-economic shift for the EU, with autonomy emerging as a central theme in policy debates.¹⁴ This section reviews existing scholarship and presents the framework articulating the varied politics and temporalities of the normative and procedural dimensions of strategic narratives.

Conceptualizing the EU's turn: autonomy narratives and their normative and procedural dimensions

Across defence, economic and digital policy, the literature provides fine-grained assessments of the EU's geopolitical/geo-economic turn.¹⁵ A recurrent diagnosis is that policy change has been more modest than the rhetoric suggests. The major factor is the enduring divergences—among member states and between them and Brussels—over what a 'strategic' EU should look like. These divergences stem from entrenched ideational differences and competing material and institutional interests. Moreover, while references to autonomy and sovereignty have multiplied, newly created instruments often remain in nature regulatory rather than clearly capacity-building (e.g. large-scale industrial policy, durable fiscal commitments),¹⁶ which can be interpreted as evidence of modest policy change and of the stickiness of the EU's liberal stance.

Much of this scholarship is organized around policy-specific case studies, which complicates cross-field comparison. This has revived interest in transversal approaches and in clearer criteria for what counts as geopolitical/geo-economic

¹⁴ Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, 'Strategic autonomy and the EU as a global actor: the evolution, debate and theory of a contested term', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 27, special issue, 2022, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.54648/EERR2022009>.

¹⁵ Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'; Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary'; Dennis Broeders, Fabio Cristiano and Monica Kaminska, 'In search of digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy: normative power Europe to the test of its geopolitical ambitions', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 5, 2023, pp. 1261–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13462>.

¹⁶ Demirci, Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig, 'Geopolitical rebordering?'; Farrand, 'The ordoliberal internet?'; Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville and Orbie, 'The hegemonic politics of "strategic autonomy" and "resilience"'.

policy change.¹⁷ Moreover, the regulatory/capacity-building heuristic as a grid to evaluate the liberal continuity versus geopolitical/geo-economic turn debate should be used with caution. Regulatory instruments are routinely weaponized in geopolitical/geo-economic competition—tariffs, sanctions and investment screening are obvious examples. Moreover, in this multilevel polity, EU-level rules can be designed to enable or induce capacity-building at the national level. What is important, therefore, is to link narratives to the choice of instruments and look at how discourses about autonomy influence the design and legitimization of instruments, and what forms of contestation they enable or displace.

To do so, this article draws on the literature on ideas and discourse in policy-making, and on strategic narratives in particular. Ideas define collective goals, but they also provide standards of legitimacy and practical strategies.¹⁸ Schmidt distinguishes between normative ideas, focusing on values and legitimacy ('what one ought to do'), and cognitive ones, focusing on understanding and practical solutions ('what to do').¹⁹ Moschella's work on capital account liberalization illustrates how a single policy idea can be analytically decomposed into a *normative* claim about goals and values and a *procedural* programme specifying the measures required for implementation.²⁰

I apply this distinction to strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are purposeful storylines that actors project to shape how audiences interpret international order, actor identity and policy choices, and to create legitimacy in face of competing narratives.²¹ This approach has been used to analyse how the EU and its institutions seek to craft coherent 'stories' (e.g. peace/security, neighbourhood) and how these stories are received and contested by key audiences.²² This line of research directs attention not only to narrative content, but also to the processes through which narratives are translated into institutional practices.

Building on these insights, I conceptualize the EU's turn through EU 'autonomy narratives', i.e. narratives that circulate across policy domains and organize debates over vulnerability, dependence and room for manoeuvre in a contested international environment. I unpack these autonomy narratives

¹⁷ Herranz-Surrallés, Damro and Eckert, 'The geoeconomic turn of the single European market?'; Falkner, Heidebrecht, Obendiek and Seidl, 'Digital sovereignty'.

¹⁸ Beland and Cox, *Ideas and politics in social science research*.

¹⁹ Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism', p. 306.

²⁰ Moschella, *Governing risk*.

²¹ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, *Forging the world*; see also the introduction to this special section: Sarah Wolff, Karolina Pomorska and Richard Whitman, 'Security provision in and beyond Europe: transformed narratives and roles in times of interregnum', *International Affairs* 102: 4, 2026, pp. 1109–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaag090>.

²² Natalia Chaban, Alistair Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'The EU's peace and security narrative: views from EU strategic partners in Asia', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55: 6, 2017, pp. 1273–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12569>; David Howarth and Lucia Quaglia, 'From Capital Markets Union to Savings and Investments Union: the shifting policy narratives on European financial market integration', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, publ. online 14 Jan. 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.70081>; Catherine E. De Vries, 'How foundational narratives shape European Union politics', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 4, 2023, pp. 867–81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13441>.

along two dimensions that correspond to two narrative functions (see table 1): *normative*, i.e. what counts as an appropriate goal, and *procedural*, i.e. how that goal should be pursued through instruments.

The normative component of autonomy narratives differs in what autonomy means for the EU. I identify two broad visions. The Interdependent Union vision starts from the premise that openness and interdependence remain desirable, but insists that interdependence must be governed on more favourable terms for the EU.²³ Autonomy is framed as maintaining decision-making freedom within dense networks of exchange: diversifying dependencies, reducing exposure to coercion and strengthening the EU's ability to set rules and standards. The Sovereign Union vision,²⁴ by contrast, conceives autonomy as self-sufficiency and control over critical resources and infrastructures. This is associated with greater EU-level capacity-building and echoes concerns over vulnerability and coercion. The two visions can overlap in practice but differ in fundamental goals.

The procedural dimension differs in the strategies and instruments through which autonomy should be operationalized. Again, I identify two broad approaches. The first, interdependence management, relies on regulatory interventions and external arrangements designed to reduce vulnerabilities and to 'un-weaponize' interdependence. This may include foreign direct investment (FDI) screening or partnerships with third countries for market access. The second, domestic capacity-building, relies on measures aimed at developing internal resources: industrial policy, public procurement and, crucially, fiscal commitments to support European firms.

Table 1: EU autonomy narratives and their normative and procedural dimensions

<i>Autonomy narrative</i>	<i>Interdependent Union</i>	<i>Sovereign Union</i>
Normative dimension: The definition of autonomy	Autonomy as governing and benefitting from global interdependences	Autonomy as greater self-sufficiency
Procedural dimension: The strategies and policy instruments to achieve autonomy	Interdependence manage- ment: regulatory instru- ments to 'un-weaponize' interdependence and limit external vulnerabilities	Domestic capacity- building: indus- trial policy, public procurement and fiscal commitments

This framework allows me to integrate policy-specific developments into a single analytical lens, enabling cross-policy comparison. The normative/

²³ Wade Jacoby and Sophie Meunier, 'Europe and the management of globalization', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 17, 2010, pp. 299–317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501761003662107>.

²⁴ Salih I. Bora, "'A sovereign Europe'?: Strategic use of discourse at the service of French economic interests in EU politics (2017–2022)", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 5, 2023, pp. 1281–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13463>.

procedural distinction also allows a nuanced understanding of policy change, shedding light on how shared procedural commitments can emerge even amid persistent normative disagreements.

Analysing the EU's turn, or why normative disagreements do not prevent it

Having conceptualized the EU's geopolitical/geo-economic turn through strategic narratives' dual components, I now examine why shared procedural commitments towards greater EU autonomy can emerge despite persistent normative disagreements. I claim that change based on procedural alignment is possible because policy instruments can accommodate varying visions and interests, enabling support by otherwise opposed coalitions. Alignment on a certain type of instruments—here, predominantly regulatory ones—therefore does not signal continuity in the EU's liberal stance at the normative level. Rather, it reflects a viable procedural compromise that lets the EU act while deeper questions remain contested. I unpack more specifically below how procedural policy change can occur in the absence of normative convergence and why certain types of policy instruments—specifically regulatory ones—emerge as the dominant outcome of this EU turn so far.

Distinct struggles, distinct temporalities

Explaining policy change through procedural alignment rather than normative convergence requires examining the political struggles inherent to policy-making. The literature on policy ideas highlights that external pressures do not translate mechanically into policy change. Actors interpret disruptions through values, norms and causal beliefs. These normative dimensions are not homogeneous among policy-makers: they are continuously communicated and, crucially, contested,²⁵ and their policy implications challenged.²⁶ This contestation is particularly relevant to this analysis. What autonomy should mean and how it should be pursued are objects of political struggle, but they are shaped by different types of conflict, which follow different temporalities.

A substantial body of work highlights how such normative disagreements structure autonomy debates across policy fields and how institutional configurations condition the degree of change. Europeanists and Atlanticists diverging over the political economy of security and defence policy;²⁷ coalitions drawing on neo-mercantilist, socially oriented and neo-liberal repertoires in

²⁵ Schmidt, 'Discursive institutionalism'.

²⁶ Martin B. Carstensen and Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in ideas: conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism', *Journal of European Public Policy* 23: 3, 2016, pp. 318–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1115534>.

²⁷ Scott Lavery, Sean McDaniel and Davide Schmid, 'European strategic autonomy: new agenda, old constraints', in Milan Babić, Adam D. Dixon and Imogen T. Liu, eds, *The political economy of geoeconomics: Europe in a changing world* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Professional, 2022), pp. 57–80; Catherine Hoefler, 'Arming Fortress Europe? Spaces and instruments of economic patriotism in EU armament policy', *Politics and Governance* 11: 4, 2023, pp. 154–64, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i4.7231>.

trade policy;²⁸ and opposing market-correctors and market-directors in digital policy²⁹ have been competing to frame, on a normative level, what autonomy the EU should seek. For instance, Schmitz and Seidl analyse how the rise of technological sovereignty in EU industrial policy reflects structural shifts and political contestation alike.³⁰ Juncos and Vanhoonacker highlight the role of institutional competences, arguing that their distribution shapes the strength of the autonomy turn, e.g. making it strong in trade and investment but weak in security and defence.³¹

Normative convergence is not a prerequisite for the extension of EU competences.³² Jabko's analysis of the deepening of the European Single Market shows how the malleable idea of 'the market' created procedural common ground for actors: while having divergent long-term visions, neo-liberals and proponents of a more social economy all supported the liberalization of markets in the short term because they saw it as serving their respective long-term objectives. As Jabko puts it, 'Actors do not need to agree on everything to accomplish things together. In fact, it is perfectly possible to agree on a strategy without sharing the same long-term goals.'³³ More recently, the ambiguity of the 'open strategic autonomy' narrative helped gather support from various coalitions, thus opening the door to policy change.³⁴

I build on these insights and add a more explicit theorization of the politics of the normative and procedural dimensions of autonomy narratives,³⁵ namely that the two dimensions are shaped by distinct types of political struggle, which follow different temporal logics. Normative struggles are primarily about identity, legitimacy and the EU's desired position in the international order. They are oriented towards long-term objectives, and change is mostly slow and conflictual. Notably, the same term can serve opposite purposes: 'EU sovereignty' has been invoked both to demand deeper integration and to resist it, illustrating how normative concepts are themselves stakes of political struggle rather than fixed reference points.

Procedural struggles are more immediate and instrumental. They revolve around the distribution of material costs (distributive conflicts) and the allocation of institutional competence.³⁶ Because procedural choices concern the short to medium term, actors can align on them while reserving judgement on deeper normative questions. If a coalition believes that a given instrument will,

²⁸ Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary'.

²⁹ Catherine Hoeffler and Frédéric Mérand, 'Digital sovereignty, economic ideas, and the struggle over the Digital Markets Act: a political-cultural approach', *Journal of European Public Policy* 31: 8, 2024, pp. 2121–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2294144>.

³⁰ Timo Seidl and Luuk Schmitz, 'Moving on to not fall behind? Technological sovereignty and the "geo-dirigiste" turn in EU industrial policy', *Journal of European Public Policy* 31: 8, 2024, pp. 2147–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2248204>.

³¹ Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'.

³² Jegen and Mérand, 'Constructive ambiguity'.

³³ Jabko, *Playing the market*, p. 28.

³⁴ Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary'.

³⁵ Moschella, *Governing risk*.

³⁶ Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, *Beyond the regulatory polity?*.

over time, advance its preferred vision, it will support that instrument today, even if rival coalitions support it for opposite reasons. This temporal distinction helps explain why actors may converge on procedural choices while having fundamental disagreements over normative goals.

Why regulatory instruments predominate

While previous work highlights strategic ambiguity about autonomy as facilitating coalition-building, I focus on how it shapes procedural alignment on specific instruments: in this case, regulatory rather than capacity-building ones. Two factors are decisive. First, the dichotomy of regulatory and capacity-building instruments, while often heuristic,³⁷ obscures variations in instruments' goals. In this multilevel polity, EU-level regulation can act as capacity-building at the national level³⁸ by reshaping state incentives, steering investment and protecting domestic producers. Because such instruments can be framed as resilience-enhancing and as sovereignty-supporting, they can attract support from coalitions on different sides of the normative divide. The geopolitical turn has accelerated this blurring: regulation is increasingly framed and designed for strategic ends, not merely for market correction.³⁹

Second, regulatory tools are often more politically viable than capacity-building ones. Capacity-building typically entails visible redistribution, industrial selection and durable fiscal commitments, thereby creating redistributive conflicts. Regulatory instruments, by contrast, do not involve transfers of resources and/or competences to the EU, and thus avoid such redistributive conflicts. The EU's institutional configuration reinforces this pattern:⁴⁰ supranational actors can more readily act through regulation within established competences, while member states can more easily accept regulatory coordination than cross-national fiscal commitments. Consequently, regulatory instruments offer more room for interpretation and political compromises.

In short, my framework contributes to understanding policy change as procedural alignment amid normative dissensus. Regulatory convergence emerges not from normative consensus but from strategic alignment on procedural grounds: instruments that can plausibly be read as serving rival normative visions attract broad support, while their lower political and fiscal costs make them the path of least resistance. It shows that the EU can advance its geopolitical/geo-economic turn through procedural alignment even as deeper questions about its strategic identity and goals remain unresolved. The following sections illustrate this argument in defence, economic and digital policy.

³⁷ Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, *Beyond the regulatory polity?*

³⁸ Heidbreder, 'Regulating capacity building by stealth'; Hoeffler, 'Beyond the regulatory state?'.

³⁹ Bulfone, Di Carlo and Seidl, 'Regulatory means for interventionist ends'.

⁴⁰ Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, *Beyond the regulatory polity?*; Juncos and Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies'.

The EU's strategic autonomy in security and defence: normative dissensus, procedural agreement on regulation for capacity-building

This section presents how a strongly rooted normative dissensus in security and defence has translated into regulatory instruments, albeit for purposes of capacity-building.

An enduring normative dissensus

In EU security and defence policy, the competition between the Sovereign Union and Interdependent Union autonomy narratives has historically manifested itself through an opposition between Atlanticists and Europeanists.⁴¹ Atlanticist countries, like Poland and the Netherlands, and before Brexit the United Kingdom, have prioritized NATO and the transatlantic alliance, while Europeanists, exemplified by France, have advocated EU-led defence cooperation.

This opposition has crystalized through the concept of strategic autonomy, which stems from the defence industrial sector and the debate around European military capabilities in the 1990s. In the 1995 Saint-Malo Declaration, France and the UK promoted the idea that European countries should have autonomous means of action, albeit with different understandings of the EU's role. The strategic autonomy concept gained renewed salience in the 2010s due to international security tensions and the European Commission's profiling strategy in this policy domain. However, the way it developed reflected the tension between an Atlanticist consensus and challenging Europeanist views. The European Council made some early reference to it in 2013 and the Foreign Affairs Council in 2015. The EU Council defined strategic autonomy as the 'capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible'.⁴² The EU's 2016 Global Strategy called for an 'appropriate level of strategic autonomy', but with a reference to NATO as the bedrock of European security.⁴³

With the increase in geopolitical tensions in recent years, the competition between the two autonomy narratives has gained salience, with the Sovereign Union narrative gaining traction against the until then dominant Interdependent Union one. The first Trump administration in the United States (2017–2021) and Brexit (2020) boosted the Sovereign Union position. Concerning the normative level, Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, stated in 2017: 'It is no longer such that the United States simply protects us, but Europe must

⁴¹ Stephanie C. Hofmann, *European security in NATO's shadow: party ideologies and institution building* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴² Council of the European Union, 'Council conclusions on implementing the EU global strategy in the area of security and defence', 14 Nov. 2016, p. 2.

⁴³ Pol Bargaúes, Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'The transformation of EU and NATO security narratives: towards resilience and total defence?', *International Affairs* 102: 4, 2026, pp. 1119–37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaago50>.

take its destiny in its own hands'.⁴⁴ Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made defence one of his priorities: 'Europe needs to enhance its strategic autonomy. This requires the development of key technologies in critical areas and strategic capabilities to ensure technological leadership'.⁴⁵

The war in Ukraine and the second Trump administration have further boosted the Sovereign Union narrative and unsettled the dominance of the Interdependent Union one. The war has revived debates about reliance on US military capacities. The EU's 2022 *Strategic Compass* reflects the French-led emphasis on strategic autonomy.⁴⁶ However, at that point, the strengthening of the Sovereign Union position did not amount to a consensus over the EU's role. Germany is a case in point. Despite the *Zeitenwende* he had announced in 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in 2025 that Germany would not 'support a solution that leads to the decoupling of European and American security'.⁴⁷ A strong supporter of greater EU cooperation in defence, Scholz's successor Friedrich Merz has nonetheless reaffirmed his trust in the transatlantic relationship as the bedrock for European security.⁴⁸ However, procedural disagreements remain when it comes to the means of such new autonomy for the EU in security and defence.

Procedural solutions: EU autonomy through regulation, but for national capacity-building

The competition between the two EU autonomy narratives in defence did not prevent the adoption of new policy instruments. These instruments, while regulatory in nature, do not signify the continuity of a liberal approach to defence by the EU. Instead, they testify to a compromise struck between the proponents of both narratives around regulatory means, albeit with an increasing capacity-building purpose at the national and, more surprisingly, EU levels.

The EU has historically played a regulatory role in armament production.⁴⁹ This was explained by the Commission's liberal stance on market-making, and also by the fact that de facto defence remained largely in the hands of member states, even at its industrial level. However, as early as 2013 the Commis-

⁴⁴ "'Don't wait, act now' for Europe, Macron tells Merkel", France 24, 11 May 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180511-dont-wait-act-now-europe-macron-tells-merkel-european-union-charlemagne-prize-trump>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 2 April 2026.)

⁴⁵ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Launching the European Defence Fund*, COM/2017/0295, 7 June 2017.

⁴⁶ Monika Sus, 'Exploring the dynamics of policy change in EU security and defence: policy entrepreneurs behind the Strategic Compass', *West European Politics* 47: 4, 2024, pp. 942–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.2232704>.

⁴⁷ Olaf Scholz, 'This must be Europe's hour', speech at the Munich Security Conference, 15 Feb. 2025.

⁴⁸ Andrew Gray and Thomas Escritt, 'Germany's Merz does not rule out EU defence borrowing', Reuters, 9 May 2025.

⁴⁹ Michael Blauberger and Moritz Weiss, "'If you can't beat me, join me!'" How the Commission pushed and pulled member states into legislating defence procurement', *Journal of European Public Policy* 20: 8, 2013, pp. 1120–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.781783>.

sion promoted EU military capacity-building (EU ownership of dual-use equipment, such as helicopters), only to be ignored by member states, which preferred national-level coordination.⁵⁰

From the late 2010s, the EU has adopted policy instruments that cater to Europeanists and Atlanticists: while regulatory in nature, these aim to support national capacity-building and have strengthened EU financial capacities. The European Defence Fund illustrates this trend.⁵¹ It incentivizes member states to cooperate in research and development by allocating funds from the EU budget. This is more than open regulation, as the EU budget supports projects, but less than the Commission's proposal to finance EU assets. Moreover, while it does not exclude partner countries' firms, it introduces eligibility criteria that can be read as regulatory protectionism departing from the historical EU openness. The European Defence Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production aim to steer, respectively, member states' procurement and firms' production strategies through targeted, but limited, EU funding. By contrast, the 2025 Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument offers up to €150 billion in low-cost, long-maturity loans for defence investment, financed through EU bond issuance. SAFE prioritizes EU and partner-country suppliers (the European Free Trade Association–European Economic Area states and Ukraine) and caps foreign content at 35 per cent, marking a further step towards EU-financed defence capacity-building and a more protectionist industrial orientation.

In short, despite persistent normative divisions between Atlanticist and Europeanist visions, EU actors have managed to converge on a procedural ground, through regulatory instruments to advance defence autonomy at national levels.

Autonomy in EU trade and investment policy

This section discusses how the EU developed instruments to respond to geopolitical pressures in this policy domain despite enduring normative disagreements over autonomy. While primarily regulatory, these instruments have been supported by proponents of a more sovereign EU as they seek to protect European firms and incentivize national capacity-building.

Competing narratives at the core of the EU's geo-economic turn

The concept of autonomy has also made its way into EU economic policies, shaped by the two competing narratives. The Sovereign Union vision, championed notably by France, frames economic autonomy as the EU's capacity to develop and assert greater control over its strategic economic assets. The Interdependent Union narrative, supported by northern member states and by insti-

⁵⁰ Hoeffler, 'Beyond the regulatory state?'.

⁵¹ Hoeffler, 'Beyond the regulatory state?'.

tutions like the Commission's Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security (DG Trade), continues to see autonomy as compatible with and dependent on open markets and global economic integration.

The Sovereign Union narrative gained traction in economic policy through the discourse of French President Emmanuel Macron on European sovereignty, as articulated in his 2017 Sorbonne speech. Here, economic autonomy is framed not just as resilience but also as a prerequisite for the EU's capacity to act geopolitically, i.e. its ability to defend its interests and values in an increasingly unpredictable world.⁵² This view tends to treat autonomy as a matter of reasserting political control over economic levers by using the EU's 'industrial and monetary economic power'.⁵³ This narrative has also taken root at the EU level, as reflected notably in Juncker's 2017 State of the Union address: 'Let me say once and for all: we are not naive free traders. Europe must always defend its strategic interests.'⁵⁴

In contrast, the more liberal-institutionalist view, rooted in the EU's longstanding commitment to open markets, holds that interdependence is not a weakness but instead a source of strength. Northern member states and DG Trade have remained cautious about more interventionist tendencies, viewing economic openness as essential for prosperity, innovation and a rule-based global order. For instance, in 2020, at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, Commissioner for Trade Phil Hogan stressed the importance for the EU economy of 'a suitable international environment, which limits protectionism and encourages openness'.⁵⁵ He also clearly articulated a distinct view of what strategic autonomy is:

Strategic autonomy does not mean that we should aim for self-sufficiency. Given the complexity of supply chains, this would be an unattainable goal. We need an evidence-based discussion on what it means to be strategically autonomous. For example, we need to look at how to build resilient supply chains, based on diversification, acknowledging the simple fact that we will not be able to manufacture everything locally.⁵⁶

From this perspective, the concept of *open* strategic autonomy reconciled divergent views through the commitment to remain 'as open as possible' while becoming 'as autonomous as necessary'.⁵⁷ Importantly, the concept's vagueness has made it a 'coalition magnet', capable of bringing together divergent policy coalitions around a shared but contested discursive space.⁵⁸

This ambiguity has been interpreted as indicative of unresolved ideological tensions. According to several studies, for instance, the post-2020 international environment has created a moment of discursive dislocation in EU external

⁵² Bora, '“A sovereign Europe”?'.

⁵³ Emmanuel Macron, 'Speech on new initiative for Europe', 26 Sept. 2017.

⁵⁴ Jean-Claude Juncker, 'State of the Union address', Brussels, 13 Sept. 2017.

⁵⁵ Phil Hogan, 'Introductory statement by Commissioner Phil Hogan at informal meeting of EU trade ministers', Brussels, 16 April 2020.

⁵⁶ Hogan, 'Introductory statement'.

⁵⁷ Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary'.

⁵⁸ Schmitz and Seidl, 'As open as possible, as autonomous as necessary'.

economic policy, in which emerging narratives around resilience and reshoring challenged the dominant neo-liberal paradigm but did not fully displace it.⁵⁹ Rather than prompting a definitive ideological rupture, the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to a more layered discourse combining new concerns about security and economic vulnerability with enduring commitments to market openness. A similar dynamic is observed in EU internal economic policy, specifically in competition policy, where the neo-liberal core has remained remarkably resilient despite successive economic and political crises.⁶⁰

In short, thus far, neither the Sovereign Union nor the Interdependent Union vision has achieved full dominance. While the French-led narrative of Sovereign Union⁶¹ has gained visibility, particularly in crisis moments like the pandemic or the war in Ukraine, it has been counterbalanced by institutional commitments to market liberalism and global economic integration. This balancing act is clearly reflected in the first European economic security strategy, issued in June 2023. On the one hand, the strategy repeatedly emphasizes the need to ‘reduce vulnerabilities’, ‘de-risk’ and ‘address economic coercion’, particularly in the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine, overdependence on single countries and hostile foreign actions. On the other hand, it reaffirms the commitment to openness, stating that European ‘economies thrive on open and rules-based trade and investment’ and explicitly insists on the need to preserve global economic links.⁶² The strategy articulates a hybrid vision of economic autonomy that draws from the sovereignty and interdependence perspectives. This coexistence of competing visions continues to shape the discourse. Much like in the security field, the debate reflects deeper tensions about the EU’s place in the global order and the terms on which it engages with it.

Advancing economic security

Despite continuous divergences at the normative level, recent years have witnessed remarkable procedural changes aimed at enacting the geo-economic turn across the internal and external dimensions of EU economic policy. The resulting instruments are primarily regulatory but indirectly aim for national and EU capacity-building, which makes them amenable to promoters of the more interventionist Sovereign Union narrative.

With respect to the internal dimension of economic policy, industrial policy has emerged as a central mechanism through which the EU seeks to bolster

⁵⁹ Jacobs, Gheyle, De Ville and Orbie, ‘The hegemonic politics of “strategic autonomy” and “resilience”’.

⁶⁰ Fabio Bulfone, ‘Industrial policy and comparative political economy: a literature review and research agenda’, *Competition & Change* 27: 1, 2023, pp. 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10245294221076225>; Angela Wigger and Hubert Buch-Hansen, ‘Explaining (missing) regulatory paradigm shifts: EU competition regulation in times of economic crisis’, *New Political Economy* 19: 1, 2014, pp. 113–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.768612>.

⁶¹ Bora, “‘A sovereign Europe’?”.

⁶² European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on “European Economic Security Strategy”’, JOIN(2023) 20 final, Brussels, 20 June 2023, p. 2.

its economic autonomy in a shifting international context, as evidenced in the revised European Commission Industrial Strategy.⁶³ These documents explicitly link industrial renewal to the EU's need for greater resilience and sovereignty. However, although industrial policy can encompass capacity-building measures and regulatory instruments,⁶⁴ the EU has thus far prioritized regulatory tools over direct intervention. There are numerous examples of this regulatory yet capacity-building-oriented toolkit developed under the banner of the EU geo-economic turn. Rather than allocating new EU-level funding, the Net Zero Industry Act advances strategic objectives—such as boosting clean technology production and reducing dependency on foreign technologies—by establishing binding regulatory benchmarks, simplifying procedures and mandating national authorities to fast-track project deployment.⁶⁵ Similarly, the Smart Specialisation Strategy and the Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI) framework exemplify how regulatory instruments are used to implement industrial policy. Launched in 2011 as part of the EU Cohesion Policy, the Smart Specialisation Strategy is a hybrid form of industrial and regional policy, empowering innovation-driven regional clusters through coordinated rule-making.⁶⁶ The IPCEI framework allows the Commission to relax state aid rules under strict conditions, enabling member states to co-fund transnational projects in strategic sectors such as microelectronics, batteries and hydrogen. Rather than providing direct EU-level subsidies, the Commission adopts a facilitative regulatory role, coordinating national capacity-building efforts while maintaining compliance with internal market rules.⁶⁷

In the external dimension of EU economic policy, instruments such as the FDI screening regulation, export control frameworks and the Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) have been introduced to protect the internal market from external predation or coercion and enhance the EU's capacity to act in a fragmented geopolitical environment.⁶⁸ These are above all defensive regulatory tools: they mostly rely on setting standards for limiting access or leveraging the size of the internal market rather than on mobilizing resources to build economic capacity. For instance, the ACI satisfied both competing narratives on economic autonomy.⁶⁹ On the one hand, it has been seen as testimony

⁶³ European Commission, 'Updating the 2020 new industrial strategy: towards a stronger single market for Europe's recovery', 5 May 2021.

⁶⁴ Bulfone, 'Industrial policy and comparative political economy'.

⁶⁵ Donato Di Carlo, Lorenzo Moretti and Manuela Moschella, 'What's in a polity? Political institutions and varieties of economic interventionism in the United States and the European Union', *Governance* 38: 4, 2025, p. e70066, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.70066>.

⁶⁶ Angela Wigger, 'The new EU industrial policy and deepening structural asymmetries: smart specialisation not so smart', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 1, 2023, pp. 20–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13366>.

⁶⁷ Donato Di Carlo and Luuk Schmitz, 'Europe first? The rise of EU industrial policy promoting and protecting the single market', *Journal of European Public Policy* 30: 10, 2023, pp. 2063–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2202684>.

⁶⁸ Bauerle Danzman and Meunier, 'The EU's geoeconomic turn'.

⁶⁹ Christian Freudlsperger and Sophie Meunier, 'When foreign policy becomes trade policy: the EU's anti-coercion instrument', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 1063–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13593>; Andrea Christou and Chad Damro, 'Frames and issue linkage: EU trade policy in the geoeconomic turn', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 1080–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13593>.

to the EU's commitment to a liberal economic multilateral order: it is purely defensive and acts as a corrective in cases of clear foreign coercion. This line is visible in the Council and Parliament Joint Declaration as well as in the wording used by Czechia and Sweden, whose presidencies shaped the negotiations, that 'the use of the instrument must remain an exceptional and last resort solution'.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the ACI is a first success for the member states, like France—and in that case Lithuania and Germany—that argued for a clear linkage between trade and foreign policies, and thus a further securitization of trade that could be invoked later on.

In short, the EU has managed to navigate ideational divisions at the procedural level through regulatory tools. Rather than resolving the ideological tension between the Sovereign Union and the Interdependent Union visions, the EU has settled on a regulatory middle ground. These instruments exemplify how the Commission translates distinct strategic narratives on economic autonomy into instruments compatible with the EU's political and institutional constraints, even in the absence of normative convergence.

EU autonomy in digital policy

This section discusses how the EU has developed instruments to respond to geopolitical pressures in the digital domain despite enduring normative disagreements. While primarily regulatory, these instruments have also catered to promoters of EU capacity-building measures, as they seek to make room for EU firms in a market overwhelmingly dominated by foreign firms.

EU autonomy narratives in the digital domain: normative power or industrial powerhouse?

The concept of autonomy has also made its way in EU digital policy, culminating in the slogan of 'technological sovereignty',⁷¹ which Commission President Ursula von der Leyen defined as 'the capability that Europe must have to make its own choices, based on its own values, respecting its own rules'.⁷² While the EU has tried to project outwards a united 'European' way of governing the digital sphere, the technological sovereignty narrative reflects the internal tensions between the Sovereign Union and Interdependent Union conceptions of its autonomy. Historically, the EU's role regarding technology has been illustrative of its strength as a global regulator. The General Data Protection Regulation is an example of the Interdependent Union perspective: primarily

org/10.1111/jcms.13598.

⁷⁰ Marcin Szczepeński, *EU anti-coercion instrument* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024).

⁷¹ André Barrinha and G. Christou, 'Speaking sovereignty: the EU in the cyber domain', *European Security* 31: 3, 2022, pp. 356–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2102895>; Broeders, Cristiano and Kaminska, 'In search of digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy'.

⁷² Ursula von der Leyen, 'Shaping Europe's digital future: op-ed by Ursula von der Leyen', European Commission, 19 Feb. 2020.

prompted by concerns over privacy and fundamental rights, the EU managed to pursue its values and objectives through market rules that shaped private and state behaviour. Its success is at the heart of the ‘Brussels effect’ concept.⁷³

Recent developments of the autonomy narrative in digital policy show competing visions of the EU’s role, however. Since the beginning of the recent geopolitical turmoil in the late 2010s, two broad coalitions of EU policy-makers have competed over the Interdependent Union and Sovereign Union visions in this domain.⁷⁴ The first, embodied by Commissioner for Competition Margrethe Vestager at the EU level and Merkel at the national level, has viewed the EU’s role primarily as one of enforcing—if need be against the United States and China—the principles and rules of liberal multilateral institutions in technology. While current challenges require the EU to be able to defend itself from or to coerce adversaries, the goal is still the promotion and protection of free trade and of a ‘free internet’. The second one, embodied by Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton or Macron, has defended a Sovereign Union understanding of autonomy, in which the EU should govern the digital market and reduce dependence upon foreign firms. The goal is not so much to correct market failures as it is to strengthen European actors *vis-à-vis* their foreign counterparts, preferably by ensuring the development of strong and competitive domestic business and expertise. This difference is illustrated, for instance, in the ways Vestager and Breton commented on the launch of new EU digital infrastructures initiatives in February 2024.⁷⁵ While Vestager put the emphasis on the economic costs of divergent national regulations and the benefits of better connectivity, Breton framed the issue as one of the EU’s resilience and security.

Digital policy: EU rules-based digital sovereignty

Despite disagreements over how much autonomy it should seek in the digital sphere, the EU adopted various instruments in that domain in the name of technological sovereignty. These include the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Digital Services Act, the European Chips Act and the AI Act. The EU has also supported initiatives such as Gaia-X.

In the digital sphere too, the EU has adopted regulatory instruments, relying on internal market rules or external standards to shield it against excessive dependence on foreign actors. However, some of these instruments aim to make more room for EU industrial capacities, thus aligning with the Sovereign Union geopolitical vision of autonomy.⁷⁶ The DMA, adopted in 2022, is a good

⁷³ Anu Bradford, *The Brussels effect: how the European Union rules the world* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷⁴ Falkner, Heidebrecht, Obendiek and Seidl, ‘Digital sovereignty’; Hoeffler and Mérand, ‘Digital sovereignty, economic ideas, and the struggle over the Digital Markets Act’.

⁷⁵ European Commission, ‘Commission presents new initiatives for digital infrastructures of tomorrow’, 21 Feb. 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_941.

⁷⁶ Broeders, Cristiano and Kaminska, ‘In search of digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy’.

illustration of this blurring of regulatory and capacity-building instruments.⁷⁷ On the one hand, the Commission's Directorate-General for Competition and liberal actors such as Vestager have defended it as being primarily market-correcting, i.e. updating EU competition law to the digital sphere and its giant 'gatekeepers'. On the other, promoters of capacity-building measures such as Breton justified the instrument in the name of making space for European firms and shielding them from unwarranted foreign monopoly. The controversy the DMA triggered illustrates well the dual reading of this instrument: the United States framed it as being protectionist, while the EU adamantly stated that it did not target US firms.

Alongside these regulatory instruments, the EU has introduced a few capacity-building ones, albeit with more difficulty. AI offers a good example of the distinct politics of regulatory and capacity-building instruments. The EU adopted the AI Act in 2024, in the first attempt to offer a comprehensive, risk-based set of rules for AI. In parallel, it has tried to initiate capacity-building measures: the Commission seeks to develop AI factories and tangible EU capacities under the 2024 AI Innovation Package and the 2025 AI Continent Action Plan. However, it is unclear whether the planned investment will be enough to catch up with the United States and China.

Another example is the EU's governance around semiconductors, which is 'caught between digital sovereignty and global interdependence'.⁷⁸ The 2023 European Chips Act illustrates the EU's difficulty in finding a consensus among its member states regarding capacity-building competences. According to von der Leyen, it was necessary for technological sovereignty and for capacity-building:

So this is not just a matter of our competitiveness. This is also a matter of tech sovereignty ... The aim is to jointly create a state-of-the-art European chip ecosystem, including production. That ensures our security of supply and will develop new markets for ground-breaking European tech.⁷⁹

Breton underlined the necessity for Europeans to develop homegrown capacities on EU territory.⁸⁰ However, the European Chips Act is weak due to national disagreements. It is underfinanced compared to US and Chinese initiatives, with a €43 billion budget consisting mostly of funds reallocated from existing EU programmes (Horizon Europe, Digital Europe) or national ones. It therefore seems 'unlikely to be sufficient to reach the overly ambitious Digital Decade target'.⁸¹ The current inability of the EU to pass an ambitious capacity-

⁷⁷ Hoeffler and Mérand, 'Digital sovereignty, economic ideas, and the struggle over the Digital Markets Act'.

⁷⁸ Linda Monsees, 'The paradox of semiconductors—EU governance between sovereignty and interdependence', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 38: 1, 2025, pp. 3–21 at p. 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2024.2405915>.

⁷⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, 'Strengthening the soul of our union', 2021 State of the Union address by President von der Leyen, 15 Sept. 2021.

⁸⁰ Thierry Breton, via LinkedIn, 'How a European Chips Act will put Europe back in the tech race', 15 Sept. 2021.

⁸¹ European Court of Auditors, *Special report 12/2025: the EU's strategy for microchips* (Luxembourg, 2025).

building instrument is illustrated by the call by members of the European Parliament and industry representatives in early 2025 for strengthening the act ‘to protect [Europe’s] champions’.⁸²

In short, the EU has adopted regulatory instruments despite ongoing disagreements over the meaning and goals of technological sovereignty. These instruments reflect procedural convergence around regulation as a politically viable strategy, while more ambitious capacity-building efforts remain fragmented and under-funded. This confirms the claim that regulatory alignment can advance the autonomy agenda without resolving deeper normative conflicts. Moreover, the alignment on regulatory instruments by no means indicates the continuity or victory of a liberal, managing interdependence stance. The EU tried to develop capacity-building too, and its regulatory instruments have been framed in geopolitical terms as well.

Conclusions

This article has examined the EU’s geopolitical/geo-economic turn through the lens of autonomy narratives and their translation into policy instruments. By distinguishing between what EU autonomy is or should be (the normative dimension) and how it is to be achieved (the procedural dimension), the framework presented provides a systematic approach for studying autonomy narratives across policy domains and understanding their operationalization.

The analysis reveals two main findings. First, ideational conflicts shape competing visions of the EU’s strategic orientation and place in the global order. For proponents of the Interdependent Union one, autonomy means governing global interdependences; for those of the Sovereign Union one, it entails achieving strategic self-sufficiency. These normative visions remain contested across defence, economics and digital policies. Second, material and institutional conflicts influence the procedural dimension, determining whether regulatory or capacity-building instruments are prioritized. Across the three policy areas, I find that European actors have converged on regulatory instruments—which are less financially and politically costly than capacity-building measures—to advance autonomy, despite persistent normative disagreements. Regulatory convergence, in other words, is driven by procedural compromise rather than normative consensus.

The article contributes to three debates. First, regarding the scholarship on strategic narratives and policy ideas, it demonstrates the analytical value of connecting narratives to their operationalization in policy instruments and theorizes the distinct temporalities of logics of political contestation in normative and procedural dimensions: battles over core values and identity shape the normative level, while distributional and institutional conflicts influence more directly procedural choices in the shorter term. Second, regarding research on

⁸² Toby Sterling and Nathan Vifflin, ‘European lawmakers urge Commission to move quickly on Chips Act 2.0’, Reuters, 24 March 2025.

the EU's turn, the article explains why lack of normative convergence does not hamper the EU's geopolitical turn. Much like in the Single Market's construction, political actors can align on specific policies not because they share a common understanding of autonomy, but because they see short-term strategies as serving their respective long-term goals. The article clarifies why regulation is the EU's dominant mode of action while showing how regulation can be repurposed for strategic ends, thereby nuancing diagnoses of mere liberal regulatory continuity. This sheds light on the EU as a geopolitical actor—one that advances primarily through regulatory initiatives, yet increasingly imbues them with strategic capacity-building purposes. Finally, it refines debates on EU coherence by separating the question of normative convergence from the ability to coordinate procedurally.

Beyond advancing our understanding of EU autonomy narratives, this article opens new avenues for research. First, the interaction between normative and procedural dimensions deserves further exploration. Procedural agreement without normative agreement does not mean that the normative dimension is irrelevant. It matters in at least two ways. The broad spectrum of conceptions of autonomy allows policy-makers to accommodate divergent goals within common procedural frameworks—precisely because regulatory instruments can be interpreted differently by competing coalitions. Normative diversity brings significant complexity and richness to EU policy instruments. Thus, while procedural alignment can proceed without normative agreement, normative diversity is not irrelevant—it shapes how instruments are designed, justified and deployed. Moreover, while 'strategic cacophony' may undermine the EU's external credibility, normative plurality may also serve strategic purposes by credibly signalling moderation in this global geopolitical turn, thus enhancing the EU's legitimacy and negotiation power. This requires specifying when normative pluralism is likely to be harmful as opposed to strategically useful.

Second, the current strategic context suggests that the normative dissensus may be evolving. More attention on the impact of historical events on narratives is warranted. Renewed US unilateralism and an increasingly transactional transatlantic relationship are likely reshaping the EU's normative landscape. The weakening of the Atlanticist position—long dominant in security and defence—may herald a shift towards normative convergence on the Sovereign Union narrative and its emphasis on the need for greater EU self-reliance, at least in some policy areas. Whether exogenous shocks will trigger deeper normative realignment, and what consequences this might have for procedural choices, remains a critical question for future research.