

European Union leadership: A crisis in identity

Bruno Mascitelli

Adjunct Professor in International Studies, Swinburne University of Technology

bmascitelli@swin.edu.au

Bruce Wilson

European Union Centre of Excellence, RMIT University

bruce.wilson@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

In 2024, elections for the European Parliament were accompanied by the nomination of a new College of Commissioners, and the appointments of Presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council and a new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The outcomes of these processes indicate a more complex political environment for the European Union but also pointed to increasing instability with dramatic implications for particular Member States. This paper examines the implications of the 2024 European elections for the leadership and orientation of EU leaders and what this might mean in the emerging geopolitical landscape. Rather than being a mediator and advocate for peace, the EU has become an agent of international conflict that is apparently subordinate to US foreign policy.

Keywords: EU elections, EU leadership, EU as Global Actor, US-EU, EU-BRICS

Introduction

On 18 July 2024, Ursula von der Leyen, newly nominated for her second term as President of the European Commission, presented her 'Political Guidelines' to the European Parliament. This was at one and the same time a campaign speech to secure European Parliament endorsement of her re-appointment, and also a proclamation that the European Union (EU) was entering a new phase of its evolution.

'Everything is weaponised and contested', she observed, and in that moment, pointed to the geopolitical policy shift which announced that the European Union was no longer a peacemaker but rather, a war monger in pursuit of its 'strategic autonomy' (see von der Leyen, 2024, p. 1). Unfortunately for von der Leyen and her supporters, rather than meaning independence, 'autonomy' had come to mean a subordinate role in United States (US) foreign policy, heavy dependence on the US military-industrial complex and close identification with NATO. While often seen as referring to the EU's capacity to defend its security without reliance on others, 'strategic autonomy' has come increasingly to have a broader meaning, encompassing also reduced reliance on foreign supply chains (see European Parliament, 2022).

This paper examines the implications of the 2024 European elections for the leadership and orientation of EU leaders and what this might mean in the emerging geopolitical landscape. Rather than being a mediator and advocate for peace, the EU

has become an agent of international conflict that is apparently subordinate to US foreign policy.

Is Europe's 'strategic autonomy' now a rather hollow ambition? More significantly, is this shift in outlook now alienating Europe from other nations that it had come to see as part of its sphere of global influence? Given the uncertainty of the geopolitical environment, can the EU still position itself as a widely respected global leader of a rules-based multilateral order?

These questions have become more urgent since the election of President Trump to his second term in the White House. His apparent disregard for European leaders, let alone international rules-based processes, offers a serious challenge to European Union aspirations for global leadership. There is a serious risk that the EU will not only lose credibility within as its narrative becomes more aggressive, but also in its external credibility. Perhaps fewer countries will be keen to accede to the EU, and others will see more constructive supporters in other international groupings where the EU is irrelevant.

The 2024 European elections and emerging leadership

In 2024, elections for the European Parliament were accompanied by the nomination of a new College of Commissioners, and the appointments of Presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council and a new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (see Cracknell & Fella, 2024). In the lead up to the European elections, most speculation focused more on the implications for the Presidency of the European Commission, rather than on the Parliament itself. While there was some anticipation of an increased vote for far-right parties, the primary question was whether Ursula von der Leyen would be the *Spitzenkandidatin* for the EPP, or whether another candidate would be preferred.

Much of this debate reflected tensions within the EPP, the dominant party in the European Parliament before June 2024, and even more so following the 2024 elections. Even after the elections, there was continuing concern about whether or not the European Council firstly, and the Parliament secondly, would support her nomination for a second term. The success of the *Fratelli d'Italia*, led by Giorgia Meloni, exacerbated that uncertainty leading von der Leyen to seek a closer relationship with Meloni. As it turned out, von der Leyen was renominated as European Commission President with Meloni as an abstention in the European Council. Even though von der Leyen then gained a majority in the Parliament without needing the support of the political grouping led by Meloni (the ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists), the ECR are now seen as being very much in the von der Leyen camp and were rewarded in the allocation of positions in the European Parliament and the Commission, being liberated from the *cordon sanitaire*. The outcomes of these processes indicate a more complex political environment for the European Union but also pointed to increasing instability with dramatic implications for particular Member States.

This uncertainty played out in the allocation of responsibilities for new Commissioners proposed by the Commission President, and in the politics of their confirmation by the European Parliament. Portfolios with overlapping and ambiguous agendas included:

- Clean, Just and Competitive Transition
- Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy
- Preparedness, Crisis Management, Equality
- Climate, Net-Zero & Clean Growth
- Mediterranean
- Fisheries and Oceans
- International Partnerships
- Democracy, Justice and Rule of Law
- Economy & Productivity, Implementation & Simplification
- Defence and Space
- Prosperity and Industrial Strategy
- Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness (see Politico, 2024).

This is very much von der Leyen's Commission (some commentators even referring to her as 'Queen Ursula'). Notwithstanding the pre-election uncertainty about her own appointment, subsequent events and her confirmation for a second term have resulted in the very clear assertion of her singular power as she is very much in control. This has been apparent in the appointment of individual Commissioners. Von der Leyen asked each Member State to nominate a man and a woman as Commissioner so that she could ensure gender balance, but some nominated only a man. She repaid them by allocating portfolios that lessened their influence in the Commission, with the exception of Italy where Meloni's nominee was rewarded with an Executive Vice-Presidential role.

The process of confirmation in the Parliament followed a similar dynamic with early questions emerging about some nominations, and the inevitable risk of trading opposition to confirmation according to political affiliation. In the end, von der Leyen brokered a deal which saw all nominations confirmed in the Parliament as a single panel. This process demonstrated her pre-eminence but also confirmed two other aspects of the new Parliament, reflected in the allocation of Vice President roles and Committee Chairs: the EPP is very much in control; and they are prepared to negotiate where necessary with the far-right parties, particularly the ECR.

With respect to other leadership positions, the other pro-European centre parties were rewarded with key roles. Antonio Costa, a former socialist Portuguese Prime Minister, has become President of the European Council, while Kaja Kallas, former Estonian Prime Minister and representative of Renew Europe, became the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security.

The policy agenda for 2024–2029

Three key policy areas will dominate the work of the new Commission and the other EU institutions. These are:

- The Green Deal. The centrepiece of the previous von der Leyen Commission agenda continues to be important as the EU continues to focus on achieving its emissions targets and fulfilling its commitments under the Paris Agreement of 2015. The legislative program already mapped out to reduce emissions, protect biodiversity and promote a circular economy will be pursued to 2030, but now under the banner of the Clean Industrial Deal:

Our full focus will be on supporting and creating the right conditions for companies to reach our common goals. This means simplifying, investing and ensuring access to cheap, sustainable and secure energy supplies and raw materials (von der Leyen, 2024, p. 8).

- Competitiveness. This signifies the core focus now in promoting European industry and this respect, supplants the Green Deal as the Commission's key constructive policy option for the next five years. Indeed, the first priority in the Political Guidelines is to make business simpler with coherent and speedier regulation, with a more circular and resilient economy. The agenda draws on and is shaped by the Letta Report (2024) and the Draghi Report (2024). Each of these is long on analysis but relatively short on new insights into how the Union's low productivity and competitiveness, relative to the US, China and Japan, can be enhanced. Draghi's Competitiveness Report has recommended massive public and private investment, but its specific changes tend to focus on reduced regulation thus generating criticism from advocates for the climate agenda.
- Defence. Although not mentioned until page 13 of the Political Guidelines, a 'new era for European defence and security', pinned to the defence of Ukraine, is arguably the primary focus of the new Commission. While the broad responsibility of the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, Kaja Kallas, is to develop a more strategic and assertive foreign policy, the first two specific responsibilities of the new High Representative are:
 - strengthening Europe's security and defence, by helping to ensure that Europe stands with Ukraine for as long as it takes, and coordinating the work to build a true European Defence Union
 - helping to ensure the EU to react flexibly to new threats, including cyber and hybrid attacks (European Commission, 2024).

It is only the fifth element of her responsibility which focuses on 'forging a modern and joined up foreign policy'.

The challenge for the EU institutions in implementing a new focus on a Defence Union is to enable the EU to achieve that kind of strategic autonomy which Macron has been advocating while continuing to promote an inclusive multilateral, rules-based international order. This was challenging while the Ukraine conflict continued without apparent end, when Israel set out to destroy Gaza, and the EU was seen either to be in lockstep with US foreign policy or irrelevant.

This outlook generates concern amongst many nations with which the EU would otherwise choose to have constructive relationships. While it is early days in the Trump Presidency, there is little to suggest that the Defence Union will mobilise a constructive forward agenda for the EU. Even more uncertain, following the re-election of Trump, is the role of NATO vis a vis allies on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Green Deal was the von der Leyen's primary policy agenda in her first mandate as President of the Commission. In 2019, it was a direct response to the strength of the Greens in the European Parliament, and necessary to build her credibility in a context

where she had been parachuted in as candidate for President in place of the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat*.

It was heralded across many sectors as a 'game changer' and at the same time, a declaration to European industry and economies that the imperative of climate action to safeguard the earth would both provide opportunities and require sacrifices. In 2024, a backlash to the measures of the Green Deal means that von der Leyen's second mandate seems to imply a much-reduced focus on the Green Deal. Many in the EPP and groupings further to the right have made clear that the measures proposed in the Green Deal are too extreme and need more time than originally proposed. Some of the key contentious issues include the proposal to end use of combustion-engine vehicles by 2035, increased efforts to reduce emissions (because of the imperative of containing global warming to 1.5 degrees), the reduction of free carbon permits and concern about biodiversity and forest regulation.

In the light of the Chinese economy outpacing Europe, indeed all of the western world, in green technologies, there is widespread concern that Europe cannot compete. The EU's proposed tariff on Chinese electric vehicles (alongside tariffs on solar panels and batteries) undermines the attempts to address environmental concerns.

Early drafts of the European Commission work program for 2025 seem to indicate that the war in Ukraine is the principal focus. Work even on the competitiveness agenda, let alone the Green Deal will be secondary to this priority.

Global shifts and a new geo-political context

The geo-political landscape of the world is changing profoundly and the post 1991 status after the collapse of the Soviet Union is wearing thin. The challenges to US and western hegemony from Russia through the Ukraine war and the rise of China are but some manifestations of these changes. The decline of the US empire (and of Europe) that is evident in the support of Israel's annihilation of the Palestinian people has also raised questions about the loss of the western "rules-based order".

Many nations have adjudged the global growth of the past 35 years to be weighted in favour of western nations, most specifically the US. Polarisation in wealth has continued to grow steadily, notwithstanding the economic rise of China and India. This has led to stronger interest in the possible alternative of the BRICS grouping as the foundation of a new global order. BRICS serves as a focal point not only for bringing different models of global processes to the fore, but also more substantial changes to the financial and currency order.

The taken-for-granted roles of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and of course, the US dollar as the medium for currency exchange have been hallmarks of the US order since 1945. However, even before the re-election of Trump, the US can be seen increasingly to have undermined its rules-based influence through its tendency to use sanctions as a punitive instrument. The US now has sanctions on 25 per cent of the nations of the world. As the Washington Post noted recently:

Today, the United States imposes three times as many sanctions as any other country or international body, targeting a third of all nations with some kind of financial penalty on people, properties or organizations. They have become an

almost reflexive weapon in perpetual economic warfare, and their overuse is recognized at the highest levels of government. But American presidents find the tool increasingly irresistible (Stein & Cocco, 2024).

Under the new President, tariffs have become an even more important form of policy sanction – at least as far as the rhetoric goes.

While the BRICS meeting in Kazan, Russia in October 2024 received little to no press coverage in the West, its impact in a geo-political context was historic. Some 36 nations attended the summit chaired by the host Vladimir Putin laying the foundations of a different network of nations no longer trusting the existing US (or EU) “rules-based order” and establishing a network and structure using different mechanisms and, most importantly, sending the message to the West and most especially the USA that their “order” was no longer acceptable and that a new set of rules was required. In a recent blog, Jeffrey Sachs, the US academic who leads the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Solutions Network, quoted from the Kazan Declaration in which the participating countries underscored:

... the emergence of new centres of power, policy decision-making and economic growth, which can pave the way for a more equitable, just, democratic and balanced multipolar world order.” They emphasised “the need to adapt the current architecture of international relations to better reflect the contemporary realities,” while declaring their “commitment to multilateralism and upholding the international law, including the Purposes and Principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (UN) as its indispensable cornerstone.” They took particular aim at the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies, holding that “Such measures undermine the UN Charter, the multilateral trading system, the sustainable development and environmental agreements (Sachs, 2024).

On the military side, with NATO continuing its expansion to the East of Europe, there can only be instability and the constant threat of war in Europe. With NATO powers on the border of Russia, and with the Ukraine war, the Russian invasion is without doubt the biggest military challenge to US hegemony and the balance of power in Europe and elsewhere since the end of the Cold War. Under Biden, the US was determined to curb this challenge by arming Ukraine to the end – an end which already means that there is little left of this country. Under Trump, the war will end, but from a European perspective, it is a defeat of massive human proportions.

The tipping point of transition

Von der Leyen’s renomination credentials and orientation had been shaped across the previous three years in response to two critical flashpoints: the extension of the Russian military offensive into Ukraine in February 2022; and the Israeli military offensive in Gaza in the wake of the violent Hamas attack on Israeli communities in October 2023. Rather than act to promote peace-making, the EU leadership’s response to these events in the EU Neighbourhood was to align itself with the Ukraine Government in one instance, and with Israel in the other. As untold destruction and loss of civilian life has mounted in each conflict, the EU has doubled down on previous support and continued support for the military conflict. As von der Leyen said in a subsequent speech to the European Parliament in October 2024, spiritedly responding

to a call for peace-making by Viktor Orban, the Prime Minister of Hungary, holder of the EU's rotating Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 'peace does not mean surrender'.

She did not ask: 'at what cost'? Nor did she offer leadership on the question of how a lasting peace could be achieved, nor encourage the intervention of global institutions to achieve peace. For 70 years, the process of European integration has put peace-making at its heart, a recognition of the human, economic, cultural, environmental and spiritual costs of war. As integration has broadened and come to centre on an economic and even a political foundation, the European Community as peacemaker has continued to be at the core not only of the integration process but also the legitimacy with which the European Union as a global actor. It has been part of the advanced western alliance, but distinct from the United States and as its capacity to be a 'global actor' has developed, it had sought to position itself as an 'honest broker'. For example, its Indo-Pacific Strategy reflected its interest to be an active stakeholder diminishing tensions amongst other actors in the region. With 60% of its trade in the Indo-Pacific, the EU is a significant stakeholder, and even more so when the geographic territory of one Member State, France, is considered. The EU seeks to be an active participant or observer at various Indo-Pacific tables, assisting to allay tensions (see European External Action Service, 2024).

Von der Leyen has been supported by more than the EPP. The European Council President until November 2024, Charles Michel, shared the same view of weaponising the European Union and making it ready for potential conflict even on the European mainland. Part of the Renew group, Michel called openly for the EU to begin investing in a "war economy" stating:

We must therefore be defence-ready and shift to a "war economy" mode. It is time to take responsibility for our own security. We can no longer count on others or be at the mercy of election cycles in the US or elsewhere... We must strengthen our ability— both for Ukraine and for Europe — to defend the democratic world (European Council, 2024).

In a March 2024 meeting of the European Council the meeting concluded with a call to arms: "If we want peace, we must prepare for war" (European Council, 2024).

While the costs of war in Ukraine and in the Middle East are already horrendous in terms of human life and civilisation, and economic burden, perhaps the harshest cost for the European Union will be the loss of that legitimacy to be an independent global actor, the peace-maker. Its action in seizing frozen Russian assets and using their earnings to fund support for Ukraine in particular marks a unilateral act with significant, unforeseen latent consequences. The sanctions on Russia appear to have been mostly ineffective and, worse still, as Orban's response in the EU Parliament in October 2024 has revealed, a number of countries in the EU continue to do business with Russia out of their desperate need for energy and other resources and in spite of EU directives.

Moreover, the economic costs of the war against Russia are not just in military supplies, loans and grants to Ukraine. There is also the cost to the European economies not least because of their prior (and continuing) dependence on Russian energy supplies. Germany had benefited significantly from cheap Russian gas before the Russian invasion in 2022 but has had to seek alternative expensive gas supplies

(especially since the gas pipeline Nord Stream Two was blown up). The recent announcement of VW closures and layoffs is one confirmation of an economy in trouble. While referring to the former powerhouse of the global automotive industry in Germany, *The Economist* noted in August 2024:

The next worry concerns a single country: Germany. It has barely grown since 2019. More recently, its exports fell by 4.4% in June on a nominal basis, compared with a year earlier, and surveys indicate that worse is to come. Industrial companies that have failed to modernise now face a bigger challenge from China, as low-cost electric vehicles (EVs) pour out of its factories. Germany's long-term prospects are also concerning: other than Lithuania, no country in the OECD is set to lose more workers to retirement, relative to new entrants into the labour force. The country is big enough that its economic woes will also drag on Europe's growth (*The Economist*, 2024).

This adds an additional burden and considerable urgency to the new Commission's Competitiveness agenda. The Draghi Report noted that since the end of the global financial crisis, Europe has fallen behind the US (not to mention China) in three key departments:

1. An innovation gap in comparison to the US and Chinese levels
2. In linking competitiveness to reduced carbon emissions, and
3. Making the EU less vulnerable to foreign influence (Draghi, 2024).

Clearly, China was the principal concern. This was demonstrated by the recent decision to lift EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles to 35%. When even its trade policies become linked with international conflict, its legitimacy becomes even more fragile. As expected, China was quick to retaliate against these imposed tariffs calling on its car companies to halt investment and expansion in European countries and especially the investment related to vehicle production. In addition, China has brought its own tariff regime to a range of European industries including the elite beverages from France, high fashion houses in Italy and a range of other non-strategic industries. This has brought some level of shock to the EU which had not expected this intensity and level of retaliation.

EU double standards: Gaza versus Ukraine?

Outgoing High Representative Josep Borrell recently acknowledged that there were contradictions in the EU position when comparing its stance on Ukraine with that on Gaza. The EU had denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine immediately in 2022 but when Israel commenced its mass murder of Palestinians after 7 October 2023 there was silence from Brussels initially (Norton, 2024). At the end of his mandate, Borrell admitted:

If we call something a 'war crime' in one place, we need to call it by the same name when it happens anywhere else...One horror cannot justify another...many in the 'Global South' accuse us of 'double standards' (Borrell, 2024).

The contradictions in EU positions have not been limited to foreign policy. They have applied also to accession discussions with nations within their neighbourhood which

had expressed a desire to join the European Union. The case of the Ukraine in comparison with Balkan nations' submissions is a significant example. When it comes to Serbia, Albania and other states of the Western Balkans, the accession negotiations are long, tedious and require major reforms in the legal systems of the accession nations, addressing corruption and making significant changes to the economies. As observed by one expert on the EU-Balkans accession discussions:

Although the EU has consistently stressed its commitment to supporting the Western Balkans on their path towards European integration, as demonstrated by the regular EU-Western Balkan Summits convened since 2018, there appears to be a lack of sufficient political will from both Europe and the candidate countries to overcome certain obstacles. Additionally, the prolonged journey towards EU accession is leading to increasing doubts among citizens of countries that have not yet joined the 27-member bloc, as to whether they will ever become part of the Union (Dordevic, 2024).

A completely different scenario is occurring with Ukraine. In February 2022 only days after Ukraine was invaded by Russia, it applied for membership of the European Union requesting immediate admission under a "new special procedure". Some member states added to the request that Ukraine's admission to the EU be an accelerated accession process. With the destruction of the Ukraine economy as a result of the war, it will test the principles of the EU and its will to pursue Ukraine's candidature through to final membership. As one scholar noted:

Ukraine's accession to the European Union (EU) is necessary and inevitable, but it may prove very costly for the current European member states. The process has huge political, financial, and institutional implications that no one can fully gauge today — particularly because the initiative is likely to open a new wave of enlargement to other countries — and which will immediately put pressure on EU member states' commitment and thereby on EU cohesion (Bastasin, 2023).

The European Defence Union: Pursuing NATO/US foreign policy directions

It is now evident under von der Leyen that US foreign policy in effect has shaped the direction of the EU both in terms of the Commission as well as the political narrative of both the Parliament and the Council (see Fenko & Bazerkoska, 2024). This is likely to continue with the election of President Trump, notwithstanding apparent tension and differences in view (see Karnitschnig, 2025).

It would be incorrect to place the blame of this entirely on the von der Leyen leadership in the Commission, but she has provided a resounding confirmation of this trend. This was revealed in part by Victor Orban during Hungary's presidency of the Council of Ministers. In a speech to the European Parliament and a subsequent TV interview, he exposed the German machinations inside the European People's Party (EPP) in tandem with the EU Commission's President's second mandate. The debate between von der Leyen and Orban in the Parliament pointed both to Russophobia within the EU and to total disinterest in seeking out any solution in Ukraine other than a military one. Orban, freelancing with visits to Ukraine's President Zelensky, Russia's President Putin, and finally Donald Trump in his bid to find a solution to the war, was considered

by the Commission President as a betrayal and a gesture of grovelling to the Putin dictatorship. Von der Leyen's angry statement against Orban in the Parliament said:

The world has witnessed the atrocities of Russia's war. And yet, there are still some who blame this war not on the invader but on the invaded. Not on Putin's lust for power but on Ukraine's thirst for freedom. So I want to ask them: Would they ever blame the Hungarians for the Soviet invasion of 1956? Would they ever blame the Czechs and Slovaks for the Soviet repression of 1968? Would they ever blame the Lithuanians for the Soviet crackdown of 1991? We Europeans may have different histories and different languages, but there is no European language in which peace is synonymous with surrender. And sovereignty is synonymous with occupation. The people of Ukraine are freedom fighters, just like the heroes that freed Central and Eastern Europe from Soviet rule ... There is only one path to achieve a just peace for Ukraine and for Europe. We must continue to empower Ukraine's resistance with political, financial and military support (von der Leyen, 2024).

These are fighting words and hardly a gesture of balance or proportion. The EU leadership has not sought a peaceful resolution of this conflict and seems to have no "off ramp" on Ukraine. The Russophobia within the EPP and especially within the German CDU/CSU party is profound, and in some respects, even more profound than during the Cold War. Germany's centre-right policies were always a standout of anti-Soviet and after 1991 anti-Russian sentiment. With Germany occupied by NATO on its west and by the USSR and East German communism on its eastern flank many of these political prejudices were always bubbling just below the surface. Within the EU, von der Leyen and Manfred Weber, the leader of the EPP in the EU Parliament, are but the most evident voices.

Why are the EU and much of the European Member States so subservient to the US/NATO directives?

Over the decades the US has considered the EU to be a positive development in that it was a complement to US supremacy and was generally in alignment with global western interests. Moreover, NATO, as an entity, was the US instrument to ensure containment of the USSR before it imploded in 1991. A similar approach has been in place even after 1991 with the US/NATO pursuing unilateral control and containment.

However, as China has emerged as an economic rival to the US, and Russia has not declined as much as was anticipated, the projection of unilateralism by the US has not developed as expected. It was no accident that at the NATO summit in July 2024 in Washington, NATO's final public deliberation stated that China was "a decisive enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine" (Hawkins, 2024) – a gesture which represented the views of the White House, the US Congress, and the State Department. This took the Europeans by surprise. Contrary to previous decades, in which Russia and China had been positioned as enemies of each other, the NATO summit managed to bring them together like never before.

In part the relationship of Europe with the US can be understood as reflecting the US's decline. In that context, the US is calling on allies to ensure that they remain loyal to US objectives. One does not need to resort to the Varoufakis assertion that "von der

Leyen is in the pocket of Washington” and she is “... there on instructions from the United States” as he indicated in a recent interview (Varoufakis, 2024). Nonetheless the destruction of the Nord Stream Pipeline provided an important indication of the sacrifices that the Europeans were prepared to accept in order to support the US economy. Purchasing LPG gas from the United States is now a necessity yet more expensive than the previous cheap Russian gas (which is no longer available). The failing German economy is now coming to grips with this dilemma at its expense. One can only assume that much of the impetus of the 35% tariff on Chinese electric vehicles is coming from US circles also.

Other equally plausible reasons are advanced by Shapiro and Puglierin (2023) in their critique published in the European Council on Foreign Relations –a source not usually critical of the European Union. Nonetheless, they suggest that since the global financial crisis of 2008, the US has become:

more powerful relative to its European allies. The transatlantic relationship has not become more balanced, but more dominated by the US. European’s lack of agency in the Russia-Ukraine crisis stems from this growing power imbalance in the Western alliance. Under the Biden administration, the US has become ever more willing to exercise this growing influence (Shapiro & Puglierin, 2023).

They comment that “American leadership remains necessary in Europe because Europeans remain incapable of leading themselves” (Shapiro & Puglierin, 2023). This is a damning evaluation of European leadership that has permitted this imbalanced relationship to develop. This may change under a Trump administration, but it will take time.

Growing right wing representation in the EU no longer a threat?

The European Parliamentary elections and the subsequent leadership nominations featured two key trends. One was the political fragility of two of the founding member states, France and Germany, while the second was an increasing far right representation in a growing number of Member States. The poor showing of President Macron’s party and the victory of the Le Pen’s National Rally showed a considerable decline in support for Macron such that his authority in France was weakened considerably. In Germany the political leadership is in tatters with the three-party coalition in crisis after the sacking of the Finance Minister by the unpopular SPD Chancellor Scholz thereby seeing Germany return to the polls in early 2025.

Far right representation has increased not only in the European Parliament but in several other Member States’ parliaments. The latest to emerge in Europe is Austria with the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, FPO) receiving 29% of the vote with the conservative Austrian People’s Party (OVP) in second place with 26.3 percent votes. The centre-left Social Democrats (SPO) won 21.1 percent of the vote in national elections in 2024.

While the EU parliament has heavy representation of far-right parties – from Italy, France, The Netherlands and Hungary to mention a few - the inclination of these forces to head for “exit” from the EU, as they had advocated in the past, has been subdued and avoided. Indeed, talk of exit from the EU is almost non-existent. Possibly the British exit, finally in 2020, was so contested that some of the disgruntled Member

States think twice about this option. More likely the reason is that the far right, rather than oppose the EU as a project, now seeks to embrace the project by making it their own. Were this to succeed, it would simply mean that the far right would seek greater emphasis on national sovereignty, pursuing policies more amenable to the right, less federal initiatives and less ambitious Europe objectives.

Closing remarks

The EU has over the last decades found itself more and more influenced by right-wing representation and policies. At the geo-political level this has meant working in conjunction with NATO, being its economic voice. Moreover, the EU has decided to confront the previous political status quo over the former Soviet Union and its new embodiment, Russia as well as the new rising economic power in China. The EU, as noted by the von der Leyen speech to the Parliament makes no distinction between the Soviet Union and its end in 1991 and its replacement by Russia. For the EU, they are one and the same.

Von der Leyen's second mandate will depend much on the outcome of the US elections, the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the manner in which BRICS becomes a genuine rival force. There are already signs of it undermining the European Union and even some Member States as well as accession countries showing more than a cursory interest in BRICS. Within BRICS, Russia and China both play a central role. While Russia has been seen as an enemy for years now, the EU has made clear that they have begun to confront the competitive force which China now represents. This will mean more trade wars, rivalry and possibly even military clashes. What it means for the European Union and its citizens in the Member States is more sacrifice, higher cost of living and possibly the ravages of war.

As a project borne of peace-making, where to now? So much of EU legitimacy both in Europe and more recently as a global actor has depended on bringing peace to Europe. What is to be done? How can the EU distinguish itself from US foreign policy, and reestablish its own identity? This is the challenge for the new President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, and the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, Kaja Kallas. The current direction of the EU under the leadership of the European Commission seems set particularly on the path of the European Defence Union and alignment with US foreign policy.

One possible initiative would be for the EU to explore how it could contribute to a new rules-based global order in dialogue with other regional groupings. ASEAN, for example, has adopted a stance to Indo-Pacific issues which distinguishes itself from other groupings. It has committed to an inclusive approach to dialogue with all relevant nations, including China. As BRICS has already taken steps to reframe the rules and means for global interaction, the central challenge for the EU is to find a way to engage constructively with BRICS on its alternative multilateral framework for managing international affairs.

More worrying in the immediate approach to militarisation in the EU is the absence of any discussion about how peace-making can be approached in regional conflicts such as that between Russia and Ukraine. Is it possible for the EU to balance 'preparation for war' with a new commitment to mediated conflict resolution?

There are other initiatives which can be used in order to demonstrate that the EU can be a constructive partner for Middle East and Global South nations. It has already a track record of generosity and leadership with respect to climate action, and humanitarian aid. It could also lead in developing a genuinely global research and innovation system and in reforming the WTO so that it can be a framework which offers 'Sustainable' prosperity for all. Connectivity, perhaps through the Global Gateway and in cooperation with China's Belt and Road initiative, is another means for contributing to a constructive partnership.

Can this reorientation be achieved? Success or otherwise will determine whether the EU can continue to be a respected global actor.

References

- Bastasin, C. (2023, July 21). *Want Ukraine in the EU? You'll have to reform the EU, too*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/want-ukraine-in-the-eu-youll-have-to-reform-the-eu-too>
- Borrell J. (2024), United Kingdom: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at Oxford University about the world confronted by wars. 3 May 2024, The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, European Commission. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/united-kingdom-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-oxford-university-about-world_en
- Cracknell, R., & Fella, S. (2024, October 10). *EU elections 2024: Results and the new European Parliament*. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10068/>
- Dordevic, T. (2024, May 10). *Benefits and drawbacks of EU accession for the Western Balkans*. Aspenia Online. <https://aspeniaonline.it/benefits-and-drawbacks-of-eu-accession-for-the-western-balkans>
- Draghi, M. (2024), *EU competitiveness: Looking ahead*. European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en
- European Commission (2024). Kaja Kallas. https://commission.europa.eu/about/organisation/college-commissioners/kaja-kallas_en
- European Council (2024, March 19). "If we want peace, we must prepare for war". [Press release]. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/03/19/if-we-want-peace-we-must-prepare-for-war/>
- European External Action Service (2024). *EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forums*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forums_en
- European Parliament (2022, July 8). EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023: From concept to capacity. EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733589](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589)

- Europe's economic growth is extremely fragile (2024, August 15). *The Economist*.
<https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2024/08/15/europes-economic-growth-is-extremely-fragile>
- Fenko, A. B., & Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, J. (2024). The EU as a Global Actor: The Significance of Changes in the World Order From 2004 to 2024 as Regards EU Actorness. *Studia Europejskie-Studies in European Affairs*, 28(2), 7–26.
<https://doi.org/10.33067/se.2.2024.1>
- Hawkins, A. (2024, July 11). China a 'decisive enabler' of Russia's war in Ukraine, says Nato. *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/11/nato-summit-russia-ukraine-war-china-enabler>
- Karnitschnig, M. (2025, February 13). The Brief – Europe's humiliation. *EURACTIV*.
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-brief-europes-humiliation/>
- Norton, B. (2024, July 18). EU admits it has hypocritical 'double standards' on Israel, Ukraine, Iraq, climate change. *Geopolitical Economy Report*.
<https://geopoliticeconomy.com/-2024/07/18/eu-borrell-hypocrisy-double-standards-israel-ukraine-iraq/>
- Politico (2024, September 17). Meet the Commissioners: Class of 2024.
<https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-european-commissioner-class-2024-ursula-von-der-leyen/>
- Sachs, J. D. (2024, November 2). The BRICS Summit should mark the end of neocon delusions. *Common Dreams*. <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/brics-summit-2024>
- Shapiro, J. & Puglierin, J. (2023, April 4). *The art of vassalisation: How Russia's war on Ukraine has transformed transatlantic relations*. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-art-of-vassalisation-how-russias-war-on-ukraine-has-transformed-transatlantic-relations>
- Stein, J., & Cocco, F. (2024, July 25). How four U.S. presidents unleashed economic warfare across the globe. *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2024/us-sanction-countries-work/>
- Von der Leyen, U. (2024, October 9). Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the presentation of the programme of activities of the Hungarian Presidency.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_5201
- Wave Media. (2024, October 20). Europe is Sacrificing Itself on Command From Washington. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcSCwNe2HbQ>