

European Union's Strategic Autonomy Between a Peace Project and Imperial Reproduction

A Critical Peace Research Perspective

Josef Mühlbauer¹

¹ The author thanks Prof. Dr. Anita Ziegerhofer, Dr. Maximilian Lakitsch and Prof. Dr. Heikki Patomäki for their comments, remarks and suggestions.

Why is Europe aiming for Strategic Autonomy? The End of Pax Americana in Times of Polycrisis

I argue that the European Union's pursuit of SA is fundamentally shaped by the contemporary polycrisis, the return of inter-state war to Europe, and the erosion of the Pax Americana. I conceptualize SA not merely as a geopolitical strategy, but also as a crisis response to the structural vulnerabilities and dependencies exposed by these transformations. At the same time, I demonstrate that the concept has a dual genealogy: while it contains emancipatory and peace-oriented dimensions, it is also embedded in historical practices and imaginaries of European colonialism and imperial power. Finally, I develop five policy recommendations for translating SA into a European peace project, thereby reorienting the concept from a predominantly geopolitical and security-centred paradigm towards one grounded in peace, multilateralism, democratic sovereignty, and global justice.

As illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine, geopolitical tensions, climate change, among other challenges, systemic risks do not remain confined to the global systems in which they originate (Liu/Renn, 2025: 526). The economic, democratic, geopolitical, and ecological crises (just to name a few) – or, in short, the polycrisis – cannot be understood, analyzed, and therefore cannot be solved in isolation (Morin/Kern, 1999). In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, crises are not independent occurrences but are deeply interrelated. They can spread swiftly across geographical and sectoral boundaries, with each crisis reinforcing and amplifying the effects of others across multiple domains (Lawrence et al., 2024; Liu/Renn, 2025: 526). The concept of polycrisis gained broader political prominence when former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker used it in a 2016 speech to characterize the multiple governance challenges confronting Europe (Juncker, 2016). Referring to the simultaneous financial, migration, and Brexit crises, he argued that these crises were not merely occurring at the same time but were also mutually reinforcing and cascading (Juncker, 2016).

Last year's Memorandum focused exactly on that matter and analyzed several challenges the EU is facing (EuroMemorandum, 2025). According to this paper, the EU has entered a prolonged period of low growth, economic stagnation, driven by declining private

investment, weak domestic demand, and an overreliance on export-led growth, especially in Germany (EuroMemorandum, 2025: 7-10). The paper also argues that the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising tensions between the United States and China, and increasing protectionism have created an unstable geopolitical environment. These developments disrupt trade, reduce investment, and intensify pressure for higher military spending and SA (EuroMemorandum, 2025: 26-29). The current strategy based on a certain conception of 'green growth' as per the European Green Deal (EGD) and related policies, even if properly implemented, is not generalizable on a global scale and therefore assumes a Eurocentric global privilege that has been asserted in the world system at least since the 16th century (EuroMemorandum, 2025: 6). In essence, this reflects an imperial mode of living, whereby affluent societies maintain their prosperity through the disproportionate consumption of global resources, environmental capacities, and human labour (Brand/Wissen, 2021; Mühlbauer/Gabriel, 2022). Against this backdrop, the polycrisis constitutes a crucial factor in understanding the EU's increasing pursuit of SA. Another factor is the decline of the Pax Americana.

Although debates about the decline of Pax Americana are not new (Layne, 2011; Acharya, 2018), recent geopolitical developments have given this discussion renewed urgency (BBC, 2026; Stubb, 2026). The combination of strategic competition between the United States and China, Russia's challenge to the post-Cold War European security architecture, growing fragmentation of globalization, and increasing political uncertainty within the United States has intensified concerns about the durability of the American-led international order (Acharya, 2018). Simultaneously, transatlantic relations have entered a period of heightened uncertainty, prompting renewed debates over European SA, burden-sharing, and the future of NATO (Pokotilo, 2026). The concept of Pax Americana generally refers to the period of relative international stability following the Second World War, during which the United States exercised unparalleled military, economic, technological, and institutional leadership (Effenberger/Löw, 2004). Unlike previous hegemonic orders, Pax Americana rested not only on American military superiority but also on a dense network of international institutions, including the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, NATO, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (later the WTO), and a (neo-)liberal economic order ("Washington Consensus" and later "Wall Street Consensus") based on open markets and the US dollar as the dominant

reserve currency (Ikenberry, 2001; Gabor, 2021). After the Second World War and after the Cold War big powers (or empires), especially the US, created and used international institutions in order to hold on to power, in other words, “to lock in a favorable postwar position (...), to tie other states down to fixed and predictable policy orientations and leave them institutionally unencumbered” (Ikenberry, 2001: xi). After the collapse of the Soviet Union this strategy was described as the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990) and this strategy was subsequently translated into the following policies (Layne, 2011): The George H. W. Bush administration’s draft *Defense Planning Guidance* stated that the US must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role (Tyler, 1992). Afterwards, the Clinton administration described the US as the world’s preeminent power (White House, 1995). The George W Bush administration stated that the aim of US strategy was to prevent any other power from surpassing, or equaling, the power of the US (White House, 2002). To secure its hegemony, the US has access to more than 1,000 (military) facilities over more than 140 countries around the world – no other empire and no other modern state in human history has enjoyed this sort of power preponderance (Monteiro, 2014: 1). The bigger the power the bigger the responsibility, but what about the hubris? To quote the second US president John Adams:

Power always thinks it has a great soul, and vast views, beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing god service, when it is violating all his laws (Adams, 1816).

But pride often comes before a fall, and this is what Christian Trotti describes as the Return of Great-Power Hubris (Trotti, 2026). Throughout history, great powers have repeatedly made terrible strategic blunders that have precipitated significant consequences for both their power and global stability. The Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the US illegal war against Iran are perfect examples of major strategic blunder and hubris (Trotti, 2026). Hubris was the result of the believe or dogma that the West, especially the US, could export its solutions to the rest of the world (Behr/Rösch, 2013: 111). Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb wrote in his book *The Triangle of Power* about this hubris:

What the West failed to understand in those heady days is that you must be humble in victory. In international relations this means giving agency to those who lost, or more importantly those who feel they have no say in global governance. The West did not (Stubb, 2026: 4).

Europe is also affected by this hubris, as India's Foreign Minister Jaishankar publicly stated at the GLOBSEC 2002 Conference in Bratislava in the following words:

Somewhere Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems (quoted by Jianxue, 2022).

According to Layne (2011) this Western-dominated century or “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990) will come to an end in the next two decades, because of the rise of China, the transformation of the international system towards a multipolar world order (Fectras/Kreutner, 2025; Mühlbauer, 2026) and because of the US strategic overextension resulted from its hubris. This strategic overextension leads to isolationism, nationalism and the behavior of a “predatory hegemon” (Walt, 2026) that ultimately will lead to transatlantic tensions, or even a transatlantic divorce (Westad, 2026). Transatlantic tensions began in 2003 with the illegal US invasion of Iraq. France and Germany refused to participate in that unlawful act of aggression (Kauffmann, 2025). Academics from the security sector already made plans to manage this transatlantic divorce (Mölling/Schütz, 2025). For Europe, these transformations present both risks and new opportunities. The erosion of unquestioned American hegemony exposes long-standing European dependencies in defense, critical technologies, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, energy, and critical raw materials. Simultaneously, it creates incentives for the European Union to pursue greater SA. The question for me therefore is: how could SA be reconceived and translated into a European peace project?

Strategic Autonomy and United Europe as political imagination & crisis response – Liberal and imperial roots of the concept

Through the lens of Critical Realism (Patomäki, 2002) SA is not just a neutral policy response to the above-mentioned polycrisis and transatlantic tensions. EU's current pursuit of autonomy is much more and surely not a neutral concept. Beneath the language of resilience and sovereignty lie enduring structural dynamics of capitalist

competition, hegemonic transition, and security dilemmas (Patomäki, 2026) that resemble aspects of the geopolitical rivalries preceding World War I. A closer look at the origins of the concept of SA reveals that SA could be seen as a political imagination and it could be interpreted as a pragmatic crisis response (Greiner, 2026). Although SA is often treated as a novel concept, its intellectual roots can be traced back centuries. Within European security debates, ideas resembling SA can be traced to the 1960s, particularly to Charles de Gaulle's vision of a politically independent Europe capable of acting separately from the United States. De Gaulle advocated a Europe that would preserve European sovereignty through strategic independence while avoiding excessive dependence on either superpower during the Cold War. According to a former secret CIA report from 1967, De Gaulle's vision of United Europe was to foster cooperation from the Atlantic to the Urals and a power constellation between France and Russia to keep Germany in check (CIA, 1967: 1).

But long before this vague attempt by French President Charles De Gaulle one can trace back the roots of SA. Liberal and imperial ideas could be found in the Locarno treaties, Aristide Briand's Proposal and of the elitist Paneuropa Movement. Liberal Europe emerged at the intersection of crisis, reform, and political pragmatism (Greiner, 2026: 1). Yet the intellectual history of European unity is far older and considerably more contested than the post-war integration narrative often suggests (Mazower, 1998). As Patrick Pasture (2015) argues, the aspiration to unite Europe has been "an age-old dream", pursued by conquerors, philosophers, religious thinkers, federalists, and statesmen alike. European unity has never been driven by a single idea or political project but rather by competing imaginations concerning Europe's identity, purpose, and place in the world (Mazower, 1998). Throughout history, several distinct narratives have shaped European integration. The first conceives Europe as a peace project. From the medieval peace plans of Pierre Dubois and the Abbé de Saint-Pierre to Kant's Perpetual Peace, European federation was imagined as a mechanism for overcoming interstate rivalry through institutions, arbitration, law, and economic interdependence (Pasture, 2015; Greiner, 2026). Following the devastation of the Second World War, this narrative became dominant. European integration came to be understood as a civilizational project intended to replace military conflict with negotiation, shared institutions, and economic cooperation. The Nobel

Peace Prize awarded to the European Union in 2012 epitomizes this interpretation (Pasture, 2015).

A second narrative understands Europe as a community of shared civilization and values. Enlightenment ideals of liberty, rationality, constitutionalism, and human rights increasingly became incorporated into the European self-image. Europe was imagined not merely as a geographical entity but as a normative community founded upon democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedom. This discourse later evolved into what scholars describe as the EU's identity as a "normative power," promoting universal values through diplomacy, enlargement, and international law (Pasture, 2015).

Florian Greiner (2026) situates the origins of European integration well before the establishment of the European Communities after 1945. Rather than presenting European unity as a direct response to the Second World War, he demonstrates that the idea of a united Europe emerged during the interwar period as an attempt to overcome a profound crisis of European civilization. The First World War had shattered Europe's political, economic, and moral foundations. Liberal internationalism, nationalism, imperial decline, economic instability, and fears of another major conflict created an intellectual climate in which European unity increasingly appeared as a viable political alternative. As Greiner (2026) argues, "Liberal Europe" emerged at the intersection of crisis, reform, and political pragmatism, combining hopes for peace with efforts to preserve Europe's global relevance in an increasingly changing international order.

The interwar debate on Europe was therefore characterized by several interconnected objectives (Ziegerhofer, 1998). European cooperation was expected to prevent another devastating war through institutionalized political dialogue and economic interdependence. At the same time, it sought to stabilize liberal democracy against the rise of fascism and communism, restore economic prosperity after years of crisis, and maintain Europe's position in world politics as its relative power declined vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union. Consequently, the concept of Europe represented not only a peace project but also a geopolitical and civilizational project designed to preserve European influence in an era of accelerating global transformation.

One of the earliest diplomatic manifestations of this new European thinking was the Locarno Treaties of 1925. Although primarily remembered as a series of security

agreements between Germany, France, Belgium, Britain, and Italy, Locarno represented far more than a traditional diplomatic settlement (Glasgow, 1926). The treaties symbolized the possibility that former enemies could replace power politics with negotiated security arrangements based on mutual guarantees and international law. The so-called "Spirit of Locarno" fostered optimism that European reconciliation could gradually replace nationalist antagonisms (Glasgow, 1926). Germany's admission to the League of Nations in 1926 further strengthened the belief that peace could be institutionalized through multilateral cooperation rather than military deterrence. While Locarno ultimately failed to prevent renewed conflict, it profoundly influenced subsequent federalist visions by demonstrating that reconciliation between European states was politically conceivable (Ziegerhofer, 1998).

Building upon this atmosphere of cautious optimism, French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand presented his famous proposal for a European Federal Union before the League of Nations Assembly in September 1929 (Ziegerhofer, 1998). Briand envisioned a permanent framework for political cooperation among European states while explicitly preserving national sovereignty. Rather than advocating a supranational federation comparable to the United States, Briand proposed a flexible union based on regular political consultation, economic integration, and peaceful conflict resolution. His subsequent Memorandum on the Organization of a Regime of European Federal Union (Briand, 1930) outlined mechanisms for coordinating foreign policy, promoting economic cooperation, and strengthening collective stability.

Briand's proposal (1930) reflected several important intellectual developments. First, peace could no longer be guaranteed solely through the traditional balance of power but required permanent institutional cooperation. Second, economic interdependence was increasingly regarded as a prerequisite for political stability. Third, Europe itself was imagined as a distinct political actor capable of addressing common challenges collectively (Briand, 1930). However, Briand's proposal also revealed the limitations of interwar Europeanism. National governments remained reluctant to transfer meaningful political authority, while the onset of the Great Depression redirected political attention toward protectionism, domestic economic recovery, and renewed nationalism. Consequently, Briand's federal vision remained largely unrealized, yet it established many

institutional ideas that would later reappear after 1945 within the Council of Europe and the European Communities.

Alongside official diplomacy, the most influential transnational movement advocating European unity was the Paneurope Movement, founded in 1923 by the Austrian-Japanese aristocrat Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi (Ziegerhofer, 2004). His manifesto *Panuropa* became one of the foundational texts of twentieth-century European federalism. Coudenhove-Kalergi argued that Europe's political fragmentation had become incompatible with the realities of modern industrial society and global geopolitics. According to him, the European nation-state system had produced repeated wars, economic inefficiency, and political decline. Only political unification could preserve peace while enabling Europe to remain a significant actor within an international system increasingly dominated by continental powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union (Ziegerhofer, 2004). Using a Homeric metaphor, Coudenhove-Kalergi observed that Europe was being threatened by “the Scylla of the Russian military dictatorship and the Charybdis of the American financial dictatorship.” (Ziegerhofer, 2004: 89). The only peaceful way out is a united Europe.

The Paneurope Movement therefore combined several intellectual traditions. It drew upon liberal constitutionalism by advocating democracy, the rule of law, and peaceful conflict resolution. It incorporated elements of economic liberalism through its support for a common European market and the removal of trade barriers (Ziegerhofer, 2004). Simultaneously, it contained a pronounced geopolitical dimension. Coudenhove-Kalergi argued that Europe needed to unite not only to prevent internal wars but also to defend its economic and political position against external competitors (mainly Russia). European unity was therefore conceived both as a peace project and as a strategy for maintaining Europe's international influence. Like Oskar Spengler, Coudenhove-Kalergi also developed a narrative of decadence centered on the decline and downfall of Europe. He interpreted peace as a struggle against Bolshevism. In this context, he even sympathized with Mussolini's fascism and sought to win him over to the Pan-European movement (Ziegerhofer, 2004: 371-387). Coudenhove-Kalergi coined in his article from 1929 the term “Eurafrica”, a concept that tries to open up colonialism to those European states that lacked their own colonies (Thorpe, 2018). Partly, this meant appealing to German colonialists resentful at the stripping of Germany's colonies at Versailles (Thorpe,

2018). Crucially, however, it also meant appealing to the broader 'historical injustices' that meant that Central European countries did not have access to colonies, and promising a future in which these intra-European 'injustices' could be transcended and Central Europeans could thus become equal partners in Europe's *mission civilisatrice* in Africa (Thorpe, 2018; Hansen/Jonsson, 2014)). In sum, his conception of United Europa was essentialist, civilizational, and closely connected to European imperial powers.

This duality of peace on the one hand and imperial ways (Hansen/Jonsson, 2014) of thinking illustrates one of the central contradictions within early Paneuropean thought. Although Paneurope promoted reconciliation among European nations, it remained deeply embedded in contemporary assumptions regarding European civilizational superiority. Coudenhove-Kalergi largely conceived Europe as a cultural and political community distinct from, and frequently superior to, the non-European world (Thorpe, 2018). Colonial empires were not fundamentally questioned; rather, European unity was often expected to strengthen Europe's global position and safeguard access to overseas resources and markets (Thorpe, 2018). Consequently, early federalist thought combined liberal ideals of peace, democracy, and international cooperation with assumptions that reflected the imperial structures of the interwar period.

Greiner (2026) emphasizes that these competing ideas constituted the intellectual foundations upon which post-war European integration would later be built. Liberal Europe emerged neither as a purely idealistic peace project nor as a straightforward geopolitical strategy for imperialism. Instead, it represented an evolving political imagination seeking simultaneously to reconcile nationalism with international cooperation, preserve liberal democracy amid systemic crisis, and maintain Europe's role as an (imperial) power within a changing international order.

However, these liberal narratives coexist with another, often neglected, historical tradition, namely Europe as a project of geopolitical power. Pasture (2015) demonstrates that the search for European unity was repeatedly motivated not only by peace but also by concerns over Europe's position within the international balance of power (especially between Moscow and Washington). European integration frequently emerged from fears of geopolitical decline, economic competition, and the erosion of European dominance. Already in the nineteenth century, intellectuals and political leaders regarded European

cooperation as a means to preserve Europe's global influence against rising competitors such as the United States and, more recently, emerging powers in Asia (Pasture, 2015). Thus, alongside the ideal of peace existed a persistent ambition to maintain Europe's position as a great power. This geopolitical imagination reveals one of the central contradictions in the history of European integration. While European institutions increasingly portray themselves as embodiments of peace, universal values, and international cooperation, their historical development cannot be separated from colonialism and imperialism. Pasture (2015) argues that European integration and decolonization unfolded simultaneously and were deeply interconnected, despite the tendency of integration scholarship to treat them as separate historical processes. During the interwar period and especially during the 1950s, European integration was partially conceived as a mechanism for preserving European influence over overseas territories (Hansen/Jonsson, 2014: 147-156). The association of African colonies with the European Communities under the Treaty of Rome was not merely an economic arrangement but formed part of a broader neo-colonial vision in which Europe would secure access to strategic resources while simultaneously creating export markets for European industry under the discourse of development (Del Sarto, 2021; Hansen/Jonsson, 2014: 156). This colonial dimension has largely disappeared from mainstream European narratives that instead emphasize reconciliation, democracy, and peace (Langan, 2020).

Alternative to the 'war economy mode' - European Strategic Autonomy as a Peace Strategy

Militarisation is directly linked to the recent debate on EU' SA (EuroMemo, 2026: 5). The discourse surrounding SA is based on reducing EU's dependency on the US, Russia, and China, by increasing its control over energy sources, 'critical raw' materials, cutting-edge technologies, and by enhancing the capacity of a European-based defence industry (EuroMemo, 2026). In order to comply with the 'war economy mode' the EU Commission (2025) introduced a militarization agenda, which implicates austerity measures, economic growth with a low multiplier effect, contrary to human well-being and in stark contrast to the socio-environmental transition (EuroMemo, 2026: 5-16). I would propose five policies for an alternative to the current "war economy mode." First, the EU must recognise the end of the Pax Americana and adapt to a changing global order, while confronting its colonial legacy, imperial mode of living, and persistent global power

asymmetries. Second, it should pursue strategic balance rather than spheres of influence, in line with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the principle of indivisible security. Third, as Stubb (2026) argues, the EU should reaffirm its commitment to multilateralism. Fourth, it should act as a normative power by advancing global arms control and disarmament. Finally, it must take peace research seriously as a foundation for a genuinely alternative security policy.

1. Decolonial and inclusive civil peace infrastructure

From the perspective of critical peace studies (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch, 2024), one can easily observe the geopolitical tensions, current militarization and big power rivalry. Less attention has been paid so far to risk assessment, possible solutions and transformative potential (Kühn, 2026). The current European security strategy is dominated by terms like “military deterrence”, “Zeitenwende”, “Sky Shield”, “readiness” and “rearmament”, but less attention is paid to the underlying security dilemma (Kühn, 2026). Understanding the underlying mechanisms means that Europe should acknowledge that the “unipolar moment” and Western/US-led hegemony is coming to an end. If the US and NATO try to contain China and the rising multipolar world order, it could end in a (nuclear & AI) arms race and therefore risk a global catastrophe. Therefore, SA should be a proper response to the changing global order and the end of Pax Americana. Learning from decolonial perspectives, Europe must acknowledge structural power imbalances in global and European institutions (post-WWII order) and revisiting security through an anti-racist, decolonial lens (Roithner et al. 2026: 13). My second point is that Europe should critically reflect on its imperial roots and rely more on its normative power. As a normative powerhouse, Europe could initiate a civil peace infrastructure and offer an alternative to national security strategies which often marginalize human-centered security approaches and peaceful alternatives (Roithner et al. 2026: 14). Municipalities and civil society actors such as NGOs, churches, trade unions, universities and think-tanks, or social movements should be included in formal security dialogues, diplomacy and peace processes. The tools for implementing this European civil peace infrastructure could include civilian conflict prevention, mediation, reconciliation, post-conflict recovery to long-term peacebuilding projects, and many more. In line with the UNSCR 1325 Europe's security must center human security and therefore include care, justice, valuing unpaid work, full inclusion of women in negotiations and peace settlements.

2. SA as strategic bargain rather than sphere of influence

The balance of power in Europe was guided during the Cold War period by the main idea written in the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Harmel Report (1967): security through deterrence and stability through negotiated rules. Furthermore, no state gets to dominate Europe, but every state, of course including Russia, has a legitimate security interest that must be managed within common rules. While the Harmel Report intended that NATO should simultaneously maintain credible defence and pursue a more stable relationship with its adversary (the Soviet Union at that time). The Helsinki Final Act added a pan-European normative framework based on sovereign equality, non-use of force, territorial integrity, peaceful dispute settlement, human rights, and multilateral cooperation (Stubb, 2026). From this period, we learned a crucial principle, namely that security is indivisible. The Helsinki Final Act explicitly described European security as interconnected and established ten principles governing relations between states. Every state has the right to choose its political, economic and security orientation, but no state has the right to make its neighbours insecure (by force) and everyone has obligations concerning the military consequences of its choices. That is much more demanding than the realist concept of “spheres of influence”.

3. Multilateralism, reciprocity and a new security architecture

The European security architecture that emerged from the Cold War depended upon a network of mutually reinforcing arrangements governing nuclear weapons, intermediate-range missiles, conventional forces, military transparency and confidence-building (Helsinki Final Act, 1975). That security architecture has progressively eroded.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) ended in 2019; the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2002; the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) has effectively collapsed; the United States and Russia withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies in 2020 and 2021 respectively; and New START expired on 5 February 2026. Aegis Ashore is part of NATO's ballistic-missile-defence architecture, with sites in Romania and Poland. NATO describes its ballistic missile defence as strictly defensive (against Iran). Russia may regard NATO missile defence as potentially undermining its nuclear deterrent, while NATO regards Russian offensive missile forces as a threat requiring defensive capabilities. The strategic problem here is

perception! Therefore, the EU must lead an initiative for more transparency, predictability and a security mechanism that is verifiable and mutually constrained. This initiative must be based on multilateralism (Stubb, 2026). A new balance of power and a new security architecture should be aimed at several international platforms such as the UN. In coordination with states from the Global South, Europe could play a mediating role and hosting Track 1 till Track 3 diplomacy meetings.

4. Arms control and disarmament

New START expired on 5 February 2026 and had imposed limits of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads for each of the United States and Russia. A multilateral negotiation should include all the relevant nuclear powers such as France, Great Britain, China, Russia and the US and it should include discussions of hypersonic systems, dual-capable missile systems, emerging autonomous systems, and space-based strategic weapons. The ultimate goal is to reduce the danger of accidental launch or miscalculation (Bläsius, 2023). The Open Skies Treaty from 1992 should be renegotiated and combine satellite imagery, unarmed observations, radar data, on-site inspections and further confidence-building measures. This is not new, the Vienna Document first adopted in 1990 provided the foundation and could establish military-information exchanges, notifications, inspections, observation of exercises and military contacts and therefore contains a set of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). The OSCE (2026) itself describes it as one of the key pillars of European security architecture. Especially in this time, where the big powers modernize their nuclear triad, where military expenditure worldwide is on a record level, all these mentioned pillars of arms control and CSBMs should be renegotiated.

5. European Peace Strategy

The European Peace Strategy (Roithner et al. 2026) presents a comprehensive alternative to the current security policies and discourse surrounding military deterrence and rearmament. At the heart of the strategy is the concept of human security. Rather than defining security primarily through territorial defence or military superiority, the strategy places the protection and dignity of people at its centre, including physical safety, healthcare, economic livelihoods, political participation, social cohesion and ecological integrity. Military force should therefore not be the default response to insecurity.

Diplomatic engagement, mediation, civilian protection, nonviolent resistance, sanctions consistent with international law and inclusive dialogue should be pursued first, with military measures treated only as an ultima ratio under the UN Charter. The strategy translates this principle into seven interconnected areas of action. First, it calls for stronger civilian peace infrastructure, including European pools of mediation and conflict-transformation experts, Civil Peace Services, peace education and greater support for local civil society. Second, it advocates comprehensive disarmament and demilitarisation, including stronger arms-export controls, nuclear disarmament, a ban on autonomous weapons systems and international restrictions on offensive cyber capabilities. Third, the strategy approaches migration and asylum as questions of human rights and peace, calling for compliance with refugee and human-rights law, safe and legal migration pathways, fair responsibility-sharing and policies addressing the conflicts, inequality and climate pressures that contribute to displacement. Fourth, it links climate justice and peacebuilding, arguing that environmental degradation can intensify conflict while cooperation over shared resources can instead create channels for dialogue and trust. A fifth pillar addresses the emerging security challenges of the digital age. The strategy calls for democratic oversight of AI and cyber capabilities, binding international limits on the use of AI, protection against manipulation and disinformation, and public-interest digital infrastructure. Technology should be governed in ways that protect human rights and strengthen rather than undermine democratic participation. The sixth pillar argues that economic justice is inseparable from peace. The strategy proposes redirecting resources from arms towards social and ecological priorities, reforming international trade and financial institutions, increasing supply-chain transparency and addressing colonial legacies and structural inequalities. Finally, it emphasizes participation, transparency and civilian oversight. Peace and security decisions should be subject to parliamentary scrutiny, independent oversight, civil-society participation, peace-impact assessments, anti-corruption mechanisms and a free and independent media.

If the EU can overcome the current security dilemma, it has an opportunity not merely to contain the polycrisis, but to transform it into a catalyst for a more autonomous, peaceful, multilateral and social-ecological just European order.

References

Acharya, A. (2018). The End of American World Order (2nd ed.). Polity Press

Adams, J. (1816). John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, with Postscript by Abigail Adams, 2 February 1816. National Archives.
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0285>

BBC (2026). US walks out of UN Security Council meeting during France's remarks.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c87nj3w9gxjo>

Behr, H. & Rösch, F. (2013). The Ethics of Anti-Hubris in The Political Philosophy of International Relations: Hans J. Morgenthau. In: Troy, J. (2013). Religion and the Realist Tradition. Routledge

Bläsius, K.-H. (2023). Atomkrieg aus Versehen.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYz8ww8E04Y>

Brand, U., & Wissen, M. (2021). The imperial mode of living: Everyday life and the ecological crisis of capitalism. Verso Books

Briand, A. (1930). Memorandum on the Organization of a System of Federal European Union. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667897>

CIA (1967). De Gaulle's Concept of A United Europe. Weekly Summary, Special Report. 13 January 1967. No. 0272/67B. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A005600040003-6.pdf>

Del Sarto, R. (2021). Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East. Oxford University Press

Effenberger, W. & Löw, K. (2004). Pax Americana. Die Geschichte einer Weltmacht von ihren angelsächsischen Wurzeln bis heute. Herbig Verlag

European Commission (2025b, March). White Paper for European Defence. Readiness 2030. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en

EuroMemorandum (2025). Europe and the World Beyond the Polycrisis: Possible Futures.
<https://euromemo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/EuroMemorandum-2025.pdf>

EuroMemorandum (2026). Aspects and implications of EU militarizing. Alternatives for a Progressive Agenda. <https://euromemo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/EuroMemorandum-2026-1.pdf>

Fetcas, C. & Kreutner, M. (2025). The Multipolar Turn: Global Strategies and Power Projections. New School of Multilateralism Series, ed. Ursula Werther-Pietsch, Vol. 2, Nomos

Gabor, D. (2021). The Wall Street Consensus. Development and Change 52(3). Pp. 429-459. DOI: 10.1111/dech.12645

Glasgow, G. (1926). From Dawes to Locarno. Being a Critical Record of an Important Achievement in European Diplomacy 1924-1925. Harper & Brothers Publisher

Greiner, F. (2026). Introduction: The Quest for a Liberal Europe – Intellectuals, Activists and Politicians during the Interwar Years. History of European Ideas. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2026.2697366>

Hansen, P. & Jonsson, S. (2014). Euafrica. The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism. Bloomsbury Press.

Ikenberry, J. (2001). After Victory. Institutions, Strategic Restraint, And the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars. Princeton University Press

Jianxue, L. (2022). Jaishankar's remarks reflect India's objections to European centralism. China Institute for International Studies. https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202206/t20220606_8578.html

Juncker, J.C. (2016). Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the annual general meeting of the Hellenic Federation of enterprises (SEV). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_16_2293

Kauffmann, S. (2025). How the US divided Europe to invade Iraq at any cost in 2003. Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/history/article/2025/06/16/how-the-us-split-europe-to-invade-iraq-at-any-cost-in-2003_6742380_157.html

Krauthammer, C. (1990). The Unipolar Moment. Foreign Affairs – America And The World. 1990 (70). pp. 25 -33

Kühn, U. (2026): Vorlesung für alle – Krieg und Aufrüstung: Kommen wir da je wieder raus? Universität Hamburg. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BFnps2xK24

Lagan, M. (2020). A New Scramble for Eurafrica? Challenges for European Development Finance and Trade Policy after Brexit. *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16 (2): 218-233. <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v16i2.1074>

Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockstöm, J., Renn, O., & Donges, J.F. (2024). Global polycrisis: The causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability* 7: Article e6

Layne, C. (2011). The unipolar exit: beyond the Pax Americana. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 24:2, 149-164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2011.558491>

Liu, H., Renn, O. (2025). Polycrisis and Systemic Risk: Assessment, Governance, and Communication. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* (2025) 16:526–549 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13753-025-00636-3>

Mazower, M. (1998). *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. Penguin Books.

Mölling, C. & Schütz, T. (2025). Managing the Transatlantic Divorce: A roadmap towards a European way of war. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Managing-the-Transatlantic-Divorce-A-roadmap-towards-a-European-way-o-62bd58>

Monteiro, N. (2014). *Theory of Unipolar Politics*. Yale University Press

Morin, E., Kern, B. (1999). *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*. Hampton Press

Mühlbauer, J., Gabriel, X. (2022). *Zur imperialen Lebensweise*. Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag

Mühlbauer, J., Lakitsch, M. (2024). *Kritische Friedensforschung. Konzepte, Analysen, Diagnosen*. Mandelbaum Verlag

Mühlbauer, J. (2026). The Multipolar Turn in Geopolitics and Its Implications for Peace Studies. NSM Blog, University of Graz. https://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/_files/_project_sites/_new-school-of-multilateralism/NSMBlog/peace_and_security/Muehlbauer_Peace_Studies.pdf

Mühlbauer, J., Moegling, K. (2026). Wege zum Frieden. Perspektiven der kritischen Friedensforschung. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag

OSCE (2026). Ensuring military transparency – the Vienna Document. <https://www.osce.org/fsc/74528>

Pastore, P. (2015). Imagining European Unity since 1000 AD. Palgrave Macmillan

Patomäki, H. (2002). After International Relations. Critical Realism and the (Re)Construction of World Politics. Routledge

Patomäki, H. (2026). Sicherheitsdilemma und emanzipatorische Friedensforschung: Ein kritisch-realistischer Ansatz. In: Mühlbauer, J., Moegling, K. (2026). Wege zum Frieden. Perspektiven der kritischen Friedensforschung. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag. pp. 62-90

Pokotilo, O. (2026). The Transatlantic Relationship in a Time of Strategic Recalibration: From Structural Allies to Conditional Partnership? In: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik. <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/the-transatlantic-relationship-in-a-time-of-strategic-recalibration-from-structural-allies-to-conditional-partnership/>

Roithner, T., Hämmerle, F. & Seyer, M. (2026): European Peace Strategy. For A Shared, Human-Centered Future. <https://europeanpeacestrategy.eu/>

Stubb, A. (2026). The Triangle of Power. Rebalancing the New World Order. Columbia Global Reports

Thorpe, B. (2018). “Eurafrica: A Pan-European Vehicle for Central European Colonialism (1923–1939),” European Review 26, Issue 3, pp. 503-513. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798718000200>

Trotti, C. (2026). Pride Before The Fall: The Return of Great-Power Hubris. Georgetown Security Studies Review. <https://gssr.georgetown.edu/the-forum/topics/defense/pride-before-the-fall-the-return-of-great-power-hubris/>

Tyler, P. (1992). U.S. strategy plan calls for insuring no rivals develop. New York Times, 8 March 1992. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html>

Walt, S. (2026). The Predatory Hegemon. How Trump Wields American Power. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/predatory-hegemon-walt>

Westad, A. (2026). Greenland, America and the End of Atlanticism. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/5657be61-33f0-424d-b11e-431b3f74d5ce>

White House (1995). A national security strategy of engagement and enlargement (Washington, DC: The White House). <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1995.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121226-437>

White House (2002). The national security strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: The White House). <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>

Ziegerhofer, A. (1998). Austria and Aristide Birand's 1930 Memorandum. In: Austrian History Yearbook. Vol. 29 (1). Cambridge University Press. pp. 139-160

Ziegerhofer-Prettenthaler, A. (2004). Botschafter Europas. Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergie und die Paneuropa-Bewegung in den zwanziger- und dreißiger Jahren. Böhrer Verlag