

((نحو استقلال استراتيجي أوروبي: قراءة في تطوير منظومة الدفاع الأوروبي))

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## Towards European Strategic Independence: A Look at the Development of the European Defense System

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### المستخلص:

يتناول البحث الأبعاد المفاهيمية/الموضوعية؛ للاستقلال الاستراتيجي الأوروبي؛ في ظلّ تحولاتٍ جيوسياسيةٍ؛ سبقتْ-بأعوام-الحرب "الروسية-الأوكرانية" فبراير 2022، ويتابع آثارها على الفكر الإستراتيجي الأوروبي، وعلى سيرورة "منظومتها الدفاعية"، لتحولات الحرب، وللموقف الأمريكي؛ بتولي "الرئيس ترامب" الإدارة الأمريكية؛ ولما سيؤول إليه النظام الدوليّ متّجها نحو التعددية القطبية.

وينطلق البحث؛ من إشكاليةٍ رئيسيةٍ؛ تتصلّ بقدرة "الاتحاد الأوروبي" بتوجيه سيرورة "المشاهد السياسية"؛ لبناء "قدرات دفاعية ذاتية فاعلة"؛ تخصّ الاتحاد ودوله، تتجاوز "اعتماد" قدرات الولايات المتحدة؛ والمراهنة عليها؛ ضمن حلف شمال الأطلسي؛ لتبلغ تأسيس مكانة أوربا الفاعلة القطب؛ في نظام دوليّ متعدّد الأقطاب.



ويستعين البحث "بالمنهج الوصفي-التحليلي؛ مدعوماً بدراسة جوانب لحالات" منتخبة كفرنسا، وألمانيا، واعتماد أدوات "المنهج المقارن" بشأن الإنفاق؛ والقدرات، وتحليل السياسات والمؤسسات؛ والإشارة "للقدرات الصناعية-التكنولوجية الدفاعية".

ويقتفي البحث آثار تغيرات "موقف الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية" عهد الرئيس ترامب-لا سيما ولايته الثانية-على مسارات وديناميكيات وفاعلية؛ تعاون دول "الاتحاد الأوروبي"؛ في تبني ملفات تقنية وأمنية لافتة، تكشف-مجتمعة-وجود "إراداتٍ سياسية"؛ ترسم خارطةً لطريق الاستقلال الدفاعي الأوروبي؛ واستدامته؛ زيادةً على موقف المملكة المتحدة؛ إزاء بناء قدراتٍ دفاعيةٍ تخصُّ أوربا، مع خروجها عن الاتحاد الأوربي-وبروز قوى أوربية كفرنسا وألمانيا-ما يعزِّزُ جدية السعي لتحقيق الاستقلال الأوربي.

### Abstract

This research addresses the conceptual and thematic dimensions of European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) in light of geopolitical transformations that preceded the Russo-Ukrainian War of February 2022 by several years. It tracks the repercussions of these shifts on European strategic thought and the evolution of its defense system in response to the exigencies of the war, the American stance, specifically under the administration of President Trump, and the trajectory of the international system toward multipolarity.

The study stems from a primary problematic concerning the European Union's (EU) ability to direct political landscapes toward constructing effective autonomous defense capabilities. Such capabilities would pertain to the Union and its member states, transcending dependence and reliance on United States capabilities within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), thereby establishing Europe's status as an active pole in a multipolar international system.

The research employs a descriptive-analytical methodology, supported by case studies of selected nations such as France and Germany. It utilizes comparative tools regarding expenditures and capabilities, analyzes policies and institutions, and references defense-industrial and technological capacities. Furthermore, the study traces the impact of shifts in the United States' position during the Trump era, particularly a potential second term, on the pathways, dynamics, and efficacy of EU cooperation. It highlights the adoption of notable technical and security files that collectively reveal the existence of political wills charting a roadmap for European defense autonomy and its sustainability. This is considered alongside the United Kingdom's position on building European defense capabilities following its exit from the EU, and the



prominence of European powers like France and Germany, which underscores the seriousness of the pursuit of European autonomy.

### **Introduction**

The European Security framework has undergone distinct transformations following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in February 2022. These events have redrawn the map of European power balances and the strategic visions associated with them, rendering the concept of European Strategic Autonomy a practical necessity imposed by the disruption of equilibria. This transcends autonomy as a mere concept restricted to the theoretical field of European studies, particularly during the third millennium and its subsequent international crises. Such crises necessitate that Europe assume an active position in international power balances as the global order moves toward multipolarity; for Strategic Autonomy qualifies Europe to be a pole among many (Al-Alwani, 2022).

The practical justification for Europe's movement toward autonomy concerns the enhancement of the capabilities of the European Union and its member states to safeguard their supreme interests and their ability to contain increasing geopolitical, economic, and military threats. By strengthening its capabilities, particularly the pivotal roles of France and Germany, the pathways and potential for achieving defense autonomy will have direct effects on Europe's international standing within the framework of a balanced partnership inside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

### **Problem Statement**

How has the Russo-Ukrainian War influenced the reimagining and restructuring of the European Defense System's efficacy to achieve the European Union's Strategic Autonomy, thereby limiting the profound dependence on United States capabilities and NATO activities regarding vital and decisive issues?

### **The Research Hypotheses**

1. The Russo-Ukrainian War accelerated integrative steps regarding the European Defense System without ending the structural dependence on United States capabilities in vital sectors, such as strategic airlift, space-based intelligence support, and early warning systems.
2. The fluctuations in American positions toward the European Union's vital issues serve as a catalyst for accelerating the construction of European defense capabilities, institutional reforms, and the adoption of supporting funding policies.
3. The European Union's ability to achieve Strategic Autonomy is significantly linked to the degree of integration, coordination, and

cooperation between France and Germany as influential powers in the defense-industrial/technological structure.

### **The Research Objectives**

1. Analyzing the most prominent shifts in European Security priorities following February 2022 and their effects on building an independent European defense system, as well as the primary armament and financing policies therein.
2. Identifying the institutional functions and initiatives of EU member states to build collective defense capabilities, shifting European Strategic Autonomy from its conceptual dimensions to its operational horizons.
3. Forecasting the developments of the European Defense System in light of European and American positions and amidst the realities and potential geopolitical influences.
4. Evaluating Franco-German cooperation in technological and vital fields and its effect on bringing European Strategic Autonomy closer to realization.

### **The Significance**

1. Demonstrating the effect of Russo-Ukrainian War developments in accelerating institutional/industrial measures and steps to develop the European defense system.
2. Understanding the role of Franco-German cooperation in achieving European Strategic Autonomy and safeguarding European security.
3. Justifying the correlation between evolving American positions, particularly during a second Trump administration, and the European pursuit of strategic autonomy.
4. Identifying the factors that strengthen financing, manufacturing, and institutional policies which consolidate European Strategic Autonomy without dismantling the Euro-American partnership under NATO.

### **The Research Methodology**

The present study adopts the descriptive/analytical method, case study approaches, and the comparative method.

### **Section One: Dimensions of Strategic Autonomy Prior to 2022**

Upon achieving its unity, Europe sought to attain its strategic autonomy across key sectors, most notably in defense, foreign policy, and economics. This pursuit aimed to consolidate joint collective action among all member states, particularly when confronting the most prominent challenges, threats, and crises faced by the European Union (EU). Indeed, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, several critical issues emerged: terrorism and the war on terror; the challenges of the 2009 financial crisis; subsequent migration and asylum





crises resulting from political transformations in Arab regimes and Eastern European countries; the exit of the United Kingdom from the Union (Brexit); and finally, the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Mulla, 2022). The conceptual dimensions underpinning European strategic autonomy can be discerned to serve as a guide for describing the transitional phases, or rather, the evolution, of the concept from the theoretical to the practical and applied realm. Through this conceptual transformation into prospective capabilities that the EU strives to achieve, the concept acquires the necessary efficacy. This lends strategic autonomy and its nature a character that reflects the specificity of the current stage, relative to the challenges it addresses. Consequently, its remedies provide opportunities that reinforce autonomy and render it an achievable objective for the European Union.

### **1.1: The Conceptual and Foundational Dimensions of Autonomy**

The characteristics of the period extending up to 2012 and prior can generally be characterized by European dependency. During this era, Europe was explicitly concerned with broad security cooperation with the United States of America within the framework of NATO. Cooperation was primarily concentrated within civilian and political frameworks. This period did not witness any remarkable aspirations toward building independent EU defense capabilities of NATO.

Nevertheless, the year 2013 did not represent a sudden, new, and distinct turning point toward European strategic autonomy as much as it constituted a significant year during which intellectual foundations were laid and institutional roadmaps for this autonomy were established. The year 2013 witnessed the leaks by American whistleblower Edward Snowden, which confirmed that EU countries were among the primary targets of espionage conducted by the US National Security Agency (NSA). Most notable among these targets were Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. This revelation provoked resentment among European states regarding the future of the transatlantic alliance. The espionage targeted EU offices in Brussels and EU diplomatic mission offices in Washington, as cited from the German magazine *Der Spiegel* on August 10, 2013 (<https://www.europarabct.com/>).

This was compounded by the effect of the emergence of the European Cybersecurity Strategy, which in turn accorded significant attention to informational and technological autonomy. This occurred at a time when the financial crises afflicting Europe exposed the structural vulnerabilities of economic and security institutions. This context reinforced a persistent will toward strengthening Europe's sovereignty across several fields. The



accumulation of these factors later contributed to reviving interest in the concept of strategic autonomy and the steps toward its institutionalization simultaneously, particularly between 2014 and 2022 (European parliament, 2022).

Until 2016, European strategic autonomy represented a successful mechanism for addressing European security and defense issues comprehensively, as well as for making the decisions necessary to safeguard them. This emerged as Europe expanded geographically, with the Union's membership growing from six states to over twenty, and its capabilities and jurisdiction over economic matters expanded to encompass political affairs related to the future of the Union. This was also reflected in its attempt to establish a European Defense Community at the 2009 Lisbon Conference, at a time when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) served as the framework for transatlantic defense affairs. This context reveals the desire to establish the initial seeds of European autonomy regarding those affairs (European parliament, 2022), while taking into account coordination between NATO's defense missions and the tasks of the European Defense Community on issues that do not overlap but rather complement one another in horizons that NATO does not intend to reach, out of consideration for all its members, their wills, and their interests.

Consequently, no explicit document was issued in this regard until 2013 by the European Council concerning Common Security and Defense Policies. While the term European autonomy was repeatedly mentioned in 2016, it remained confined within the framework of the concept and issues of security and defense. It was noted that EU member states did not support this proposal with the same momentum and readiness, except for the most powerful states, led by France. Concurrently, it was emphasized that the project does not serve as an alternative to NATO, nor does it aim to marginalize it, in order to reassure weaker states, particularly those proximal to Russia, due to the importance they attach to the United States and the whole of NATO in providing protection and safeguarding their security and geography (European parliament, 2022).

The events of 2016, characterized by Britain's intention to hold its referendum at the time regarding whether to remain within the European Union or exit from it, prompted the reinforcement of the EU, particularly by those who rely on it to safeguard security and achieve the welfare of Europeans. At the same time, the Yes vote for Brexit shook confidence in the Union and the utility of belonging to it. This necessitated a decisive and rapid achievement by taking clear and fruitful steps toward European





strategic autonomy, regardless of the results of the referendum in Britain at that time (Friedman, 2016).

Accordingly, dialogues concerning the strategic autonomy of the European Union focus on the capacity of EU states to shape the future of the Union and determine steps by relying on intrinsic capabilities while cooperating with international organizations. This expansion became clearly apparent following the conclusion of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty (European Parliament, 2022).

### **1.1: The Transformation of European Strategic Autonomy into a Multi-Dimensional Necessity**

Geopolitical variables forced EU countries to view strategic autonomy as an anticipated milestone in the execution of strategic plans described as global concerning European security and defense. Some of these plans were linked to the European Defense Fund. Doubts were raised regarding the capacity of EU states in terms of sovereignty and the financial costs entailed by autonomy, which are not easily allocated. Furthermore, the exit of Britain from the European Union led to a contraction of the EU, moving in the opposite direction of its continuous expansion.

French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized in his speech at the Sorbonne University that the world is witnessing increasing dialogues on issues of nationalism, identity, protection, and sovereignty. Consequently, the EU's security and trade relations with a post-Brexit Britain were re-evaluated, coinciding with the rise of China's economic activities. Concurrently, European anxieties escalated regarding the reliability of the security umbrella provided by the United States, particularly as US President Donald Trump's slogan America First complicated the construction of solid and constructive relations between the EU and the USA.

With the rise of geo-economic and geopolitical dialogues, without explicit mention by the French President at the time of European strategic autonomy as an overarching slogan linked to the holistic objectives of total independence, he clearly indicated the necessity of activating independent European operational capabilities concerning European defense affairs, calling for the reinforcement of a common strategic culture across Europe. In 2018, the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) published materials regarding the conceptual dimensions inherent in the 'strategic autonomy' of the European Union. This publication confirmed the anxieties of certain states within the EU regarding France assuming a preeminent position within the Union should it attain strategic autonomy, potentially at the expense of relations with the United States of America (European Parliament, 2023).

Some individuals involved in EU policy urged Union leaders to ensure that the European Union assumes its position in a world leaning toward confrontation between the United States and China, particularly in the fields of economics, technology, defense, and security. This was framed as an indispensable requirement for achieving the strategic autonomy of the European Union, emphasizing the necessity of focusing support on limited sectors equipped with limitless capabilities (European Parliament, 2023).

The Munich Security Conference report confirms the existence of an American desire, under the administration of President Trump, to abandon its role as a guarantor of international security, in light of the dedication to a unilateral policy under US global hegemony. This policy prioritized focusing on American interests and affairs, alongside the rationalization of the US State Department's budget coupled with rising military expenditures. President Trump's relinquishment of commitments was described as a disruptive process targeting a system that the United States itself had established (Munich Security Conference, 2018).

The European Council on Foreign Relations points to the necessity of focusing on the strategic autonomy of the European Union as a concept that strengthens the bonds of the EU, enabling it to be independent and capable of competing politically. It notes the absence of absolute consensus among its states regarding their ambitions for strategic autonomy, stressing the need to agree on transcending conflicting visions in this regard and moving collectively toward reinforcing autonomy by building capabilities and providing the means to develop them to confront crises (European Parliament, 2023). According to the European vision, it is mutually agreed upon that it is impossible to rely on bilateral relations and fragmented actions, as they weaken the European Union, threaten its future, and jeopardize transatlantic relations within NATO (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the reliance of EU countries on importing vital medical products from China and other Asian nations, including medical and pharmaceutical supplies, protective vaccines, as well as electronic chips, at a time when domestic European production proved difficult even more than a year after the outbreak of the pandemic. This prompted stakeholders to call for the European Union to become more resilient and autonomous, although the focus at that time was primarily directed toward economic autonomy, defense, and information (European Parliament, 2023).

In 2020, dialogue centered around economic security and related concepts such as resilience and the enhancement of European capabilities. This





occurred amidst reviews of the pandemic's impact on global supply chains and calls to adopt a path contrary to the one previously pursued regarding offshoring industries to low-cost countries, in order to achieve economic security, particularly concerning the requirements for overcoming the pandemic and similar anticipated crises (European Parliament, 2023).

### **1.3: Identifying the Conceptual Dimensions of European Strategic Autonomy: Between Zero-Sum and Gradualism**

In February 2021, the European Council adopted a statement on the recognized conceptual dimensions of European Strategic Autonomy. A team tasked by the European Council to analyze and research the conceptual horizons of European Autonomy described its position as occupying the space between full autonomy and total dependence. This position fluctuates based on the nature of various policies, their efficacy, impacts, and outcomes (European Parliament, 2023).

European research has justified this approach by re-defining European Strategic Autonomy, a process familiar to many great and major powers. Examples include the America First and Buy American concepts promoted in the United States, China's tendency toward self-sufficiency, and the Make in India strategy. The matter pertains to taking swift, effective steps toward European Strategic Autonomy and is linked to the existence of an effective political will. In this regard, the European Council plays a leading and active role, provided it does not undermine the balance between the sovereignty of member states and the European Union's will to achieve independence (European Parliament, 2023).

To establish autonomy on institutional foundations in security and defense, Europeans must adopt governance structures to manage agreed-upon implementation priorities after overcoming skepticism regarding the European Union's ability to fulfill the aspirations of its members, particularly following the British withdrawal (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2019). Countries such as Germany believe the European Union is the preeminent framework for achieving their interests and that the desired strategic autonomy is realized, in its comprehensive form, within the framework of the Union, which possesses internal capabilities enabling it to hold such a status (Lippert et al., 2019).

The conceptual dimensions of European Strategic Autonomy in 2021 were most notably captured by two reports issued by the European Commission. The first, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) Scenarios Report in March, included an explicit reference to Strategic Autonomy. Conversely, the Strategic Foresight Report, a politically oriented

document issued in September, omitted such a reference. The JRC report on Open Strategic Autonomy 2040 built an analysis leading to the identification of four scenarios. These scenarios have become familiar due to the Ukrainian war and Europe's war-affected security and economic situation, making their realization far from unlikely. Meanwhile, the report issued on September 8 did not address the conceptual dimensions or attempt to provide a definition for EU Strategic Autonomy; rather, it addressed the Union's future capabilities and its freedom of action, identifying key proposals to bring the Union closer to autonomy (Lippert et al., 2019).

It is an established premise within Europe, regardless of the slogans promoting Western values globally, that the conceptual dimensions of European Strategic Autonomy are tied to achieving the interests of the European Union rather than merely spreading its values. This does not imply a divorce between values and strategic autonomy; the call for autonomy was founded on safeguarding these values and achieving the common interests of the European peoples who hold them (Lippert et al., 2019). Previously, the slogan of European Leadership and Participation in the world was raised within the framework of calling for the achievement of strategic autonomy (Lippert et al., 2019).

In practical terms, strategic autonomy has been linked to European values. In a discussion regarding the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, emphasized that the value dimension of European Strategic Autonomy is realized because autonomy serves the entire world, not just Europe, and is not confined to the interests of its member states. European values are based on the simultaneous preservation of human dignity and human rights. However, some experts, including Richard Youngs of Carnegie Europe, point to Europe's shortcomings in achieving this orientation by severing ties of dependency, which results in weakening its influence and diminishing the EU's capacity to safeguard human rights or limit the application of the democratic model in those countries (European Parliament, 2023).

Regarding strategic autonomy, there are calls to maintain an open economy. Consequently, the term Open Strategic Autonomy was coined and became an important horizon in the European Commission's trade policy reviews in 2021 (European Parliament, 2023). Dialogues on the economic resilience of the EU, the distribution of pandemic costs, and recovery culminated in the adoption of a Recovery Fund valued at €750 billion and the Next-Generation-EU measures. These aim to modernize the European economy and enhance resilience against potential future





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major crises, thereby opening a dialogue to strengthen the strategic autonomy of the European Union (European Parliament, 2023).

### Section Two

#### The Strategic Context for Activating European Autonomy After February 2022

While the conceptual dimensions of European Strategic Autonomy were being uncovered through the end of 2021, the events of 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory, instilled a certainty in the urgent need to address decisive issues and take effective measures. This was necessary to embark on a path characterized by a sense of necessity: a certain perception of the Russian threat as a violation of civilizational values. This raises questions about the possibility of respecting the International Order based on rules and values, and the resulting energy crisis, economic damage, and geostatistical challenges impacting European security. This holds true regardless of Ukraine's importance to Russia or the motives for the invasion according to the Russian strategic vision.[11] [11] For further details on the importance of Ukraine to Russia and the motives for the invasion, see: *The Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian War on the National Security of European States* (Radeef, 2025). It also necessitates a reconsideration of the cognitive and practical dimensions governing the process of European Strategic Autonomy and the energy crisis, which Europe chose as a means to punish Russia and deprive it of the financial revenues used to sustain its war on Ukraine (Munich Security Conference, 2023).

#### 2.1: Paths Toward Strategic Autonomy: Steps and Horizons

Among the first steps toward autonomy were individual or collective decisions, particularly in the energy sector, intended to reduce dependence on Russia. A series of sanctions were imposed on Russia, and funds were allocated to finance the arming of Ukraine, totaling two billion euros as an initial payment, under the European Peace Facility. Sanctions by Europe and the United States covered diverse sectors, including trade bans, flight bans, the cancellation of previously granted European facilities to Russia, restrictions on banking transactions, the freezing of financial assets, a ban on dealing with the Russian Central Bank, a ban on exporting essential materials for the oil industry, cutting communications with institutions, and the suspension of the visa facilitation agreement between Russia and the EU, among others (Al-Obaidi, ).



One of the first collective EU steps was the European Council meeting held in Versailles on March 10-11, 2022. The resulting Versailles Declaration mentioned European sovereignty once in its seventh paragraph but emphasized a decisive turning point regarding European Strategic Autonomy in its eighth paragraph. It stressed joint action in critical areas, including: increasing European spending on defense, increasing defense investment, and achieving greater energy independence. This also included gradually reducing dependence on Russian energy supplies (gas, oil, and coal) following Russia's punitive reduction of gas supplies to Bulgaria and Poland, and the call to reduce Europe's dependence on others for critical raw materials, semiconductors, digital technology, health, and food (European Parliament, 2023).

Collective steps were further consolidated during the meeting on March 24-25, 2022, which defined a roadmap for the EU through 2030. This specifically addressed defense and security by identifying potential threats from various regions of the world. These perceptions serve as a tool to stimulate investment and contributions to European defense and security, emphasizing the need for significant qualitative leaps by members collectively. It also identified gaps in the European Defense System, which EU states are convinced must be modernized. This includes updating stockpiles of weapons and ammunition, replacing Cold War-era systems with modern ones, enhancing air defenses and missile capabilities, and providing the necessary funding to achieve these goals (European Parliament, 2023).

Under this shared vision for the future, the EU's ability to achieve strategic autonomy can be evaluated through the implementation of strategic plans. The European Commission serves as the initiator of legislation and the cornerstone among major European institutions (the European Council and the European Parliament). The Commission is authorized to submit proposals, define objectives, and suggest long-term strategies, including those related to the vision for a Joint European Defense System by 2030, supported by foresight studies to determine the policies necessary to reach these goals (European Parliament, 2023).

The two primary challenges driving the EU to plan for enhanced strategic autonomy were the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine, both of which influenced the Versailles agreement. Within the framework of authorized studies, the European Parliament submitted several proposals related to strategic challenges specific to an independent EU, most notably: geopolitics, migration and demographic change, the economy, the environment, EU values, and information (European Parliament, 2023).



Enhancing the prospects for European Strategic Autonomy is the EU's ability to make decisive decisions regarding its investment budget in political fields. The EU demonstrated its capacity by allocating €750 billion to the COVID-19 Recovery Fund, signaling its ability to provide the financial requirements for its desired autonomy. Furthermore, the EU is expected to play an active role in settling the Ukrainian crisis as a manifestation of its power (Munich Security Conference, 2026).

## **2.2: Constraints and Challenges to the European Union's Strategic Autonomy**

Among the most prominent challenges to achieving European strategic autonomy are wills within the international environment or international organizations acting as influential forces. These forces confront the European Union's desire for independence due to the potential consequences and ramifications of such autonomy. Certain states perceive that their interests would be affected by granting the European Union further competencies. Alternatively, some of these states refrain from providing the means necessary for the EU to reach its desired independence, whether in the form of products or the provision of international protection, at a time when EU member states remain in need of such support while moving toward autonomy (European Parliament, 2023).

The concerns of many EU member states arise regarding the limitation of their national defense policies, which serve their specific interests and priorities, in favor of the Union. Additionally, some states fear that European autonomy might lead to an expansion of EU competencies at the expense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and that such independence may result in the obstruction of free competition and free trade (European Parliament, 2023).

In this regard, reference is made to the unanimity mechanism adopted in European Union voting. Originally intended as a means to ensure consensus among its states, it has transformed into a source of divergence, and even political conflict, within the framework of differing national interests amidst regional and international fluctuations. Consequently, the veto power has been regarded as a tool through which states exert pressure under the pretext of being harmed or preserving their national interests. Therefore, it is expected that the European Union will move toward re-adapting its voting and decision-making mechanism in the future (European Union, 2026).

It is anticipated that the European Union will continue to implement solutions that bypass the unanimity mechanism, such as enhanced cooperation and the utilization of emergency-related clauses to avoid



political deadlock. However, among the effects of such measures are disparities in the levels of internal integration and the speed at which it is achieved. A group of countries may advance in approving and strictly agreeing upon integration mechanisms, while other countries remain on the margins of integration. This causes a weakening of the European Union's image as a unified bloc capable of making decisive decisions. This occurs amidst rising calls for reform aimed at reducing the grounds for unanimous voting in favor of qualified majority voting, particularly within Foreign and Security Policy issues. Nevertheless, the dilemma in achieving this lies in the fact that the transition itself requires a collective agreement, which brings matters back to square one. This is accompanied by the acceptance of combining unanimity regarding sovereign issues with the adoption of flexible mechanisms for other strategic issues, provided that the relevant institutions can strike a balance between respecting the sovereignty requirements of member states and ensuring the effectiveness of collective decisions, especially in defining the future status of the European Union within the international system (European Union, 2026).

Regarding the relationship between the European Union and the United States, several disputes occurred during the first administration of President Trump but subsided during the era of President Biden concerning apprehensions of a negative US stance toward the EU's move for strategic autonomy. Some American statements were made by former Secretary of State Antony Blinken revealing US support and a welcome for increased European defense capabilities to contribute to maintaining Atlantic and global security. According to these statements, the development of American and European defense capabilities should be complementary within the framework of the Alliance rather than in competition. However, others argue that this support is framed strictly within NATO and does not intend for European companies to compete with American ones in the defense field, nor to influence the status of global hegemony (European Parliament, 2023).

In response to these European or American calls, or the psychological impacts on EU decision-makers resulting from the Russian war, which the Union described as devastating and unjustified, the first European Defense Industrial Strategy was issued through cooperation between the European Commission and the European Defense Agency on March 5, 2024. It stipulates the necessity of rapidly improving European defense readiness, particularly enhancing its defense industrial readiness (EPRS, 2024).





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In accordance with the Versailles Declaration, EU officials and government representatives agreed to bolster member state investments, particularly cooperative ones, within their joint projects and the defense capability development roadmap. They also agreed to take measures to strengthen the EU's defense capabilities, with notable attention given to projects described as small and medium-sized (EPRS, 2024).

### **2.3: Heading toward Collective European Defense against the Russian War on Ukraine**

Among the challenges or obstacles to the European Union reaching its strategic autonomy is the perception held by some EU states regarding their national security. They believe that maintaining security, against potential challenges from Russia, and defending their existence and interests is best achieved through NATO, especially in the foreseeable future. Concurrently, there are clearly defined shifts in the security policies of other European countries, namely Finland, Germany, and Sweden (European Parliament, 2023). This shifts the focus away from the trajectory of the European Union toward autonomy and its need for financial allocations and resources, regardless of the impacts of the Russian war on Ukraine. The war is viewed by some as a contingency upon which perceptions and precautions are drawn due to fears, mentioned earlier, of Russian challenges expanding, which may distract from the path of European Strategic Autonomy as a consistent policy (European Parliament, 2023).

A critical juncture was identified within the European Union's Strategic direction involving the deployment of 5,000 troops, constituting the core of the EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity. Any delay or obstruction in its implementation is viewed as having negative repercussions on the roadmap toward European Strategic Autonomy. Among these challenges is the obstruction of allocated resources that support the most strategically important defense spending projects (Al-Khairi, 2024). Implementation of the Strategic Compass has faced problems that can be described as a sluggishness in formulating security policies, stemming from debates among European states regarding forms of collective common European defense. The steps taken under the Strategic Compass are not considered of paramount importance regarding the shift of security leadership from the United States to Europe (Ashford, 2024).

In the field of interest for those concerned with the EU's strategic vision, the study of possibilities and outcomes of the Ukrainian crisis has been integrated into the conceptual dimensions of strategic autonomy. This includes supporting measures to strengthen the security and defense system and the diligent pursuit of strategic autonomy. However, a likely

scenario suggests the consolidation of European dependence in security and defense on the power of the United States, increasing reliance in a direction contrary to autonomy. Nevertheless, a growing awareness of the importance of security and defense pushes for the strengthening of the European defense system to safeguard Europe's security, particularly in the long term following the resolution of the Ukrainian crisis (Ashford, 2024).

There is a debate worthy of careful consideration regarding its profound impact, not only on the issue of European Strategic Autonomy or the required increase in defense allocations and budgets, but extending to the future nature of the European Union as it tackles potential crises, particularly armed conflicts. Increasing support through weaponry, military expertise, and intelligence, such as that provided by EU states to Ukraine against Russia, makes the military option dominant and the logic of power and the pursuit of subordinating wills prevalent, thereby limiting peace opportunities. In other words, narrowing the gap between the invading Russian forces and the defending Ukrainian forces, according to the European interpretation, prolongs the conflict, results in further destruction for Ukraine and more crises for the EU, and misses the opportunity to benefit from Russia as a primary energy source. Consequently, European military support for Ukraine builds psychological barriers toward Russia, with a margin of differences and conflicting interests that are difficult to resolve or maintain in the absence of sustainable peace (Ashford, 2024).

A European consensus was recorded regarding challenges facing the EU that prevent it from reaching a level of defense readiness, alongside the struggles of the European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). This is due to the EU not surpassing the level of limited cooperation and the absence of collective action, remaining confined to partial and procedural positions. The crisis is exacerbated by the almost complete dependence of many EU members on defense systems from outside the Union (EPRS, 2024).

### **Section Three: The Future of European Autonomy in Light of the Responsibility to Defend Europe**

This refers to the state of international security as one of the guarantees whose violation carries consequences for active international poles, namely, the United States, China, and Russia. The most prominent effect of international security breaches is their impact on the security of the European Union and the threats posed to Eastern European countries by one of these active states. In investigating the future of European Strategic Autonomy amidst international security challenges, an





examination of the international security landscape and its future trajectory becomes justified.

### **3.1 Assessing the State of the US-European Alliance and the Impact of its Transformation**

The year 2022 witnessed attempts by the United States, under the Biden administration, to unify the ranks of NATO members across various forums against Russian threats and the war on Ukraine. This carries signals, some related to the strength of the US position and the stance of the majority of NATO members against Russia (Al-Nuaimi, 2024). It also indicates US attempts to correct the positions of alliance members who were less sensitive to the threat, primarily Germany and Turkey at the time. This includes Germany's accusations against Russia of threatening European security and pushing toward a Cold War era, as stated by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in her comments on Russia's troop deployment on the Ukrainian border, which paved the way for the subsequent Russian attack (Muhammad, 2024).

A year after the Russian attack, diplomatic efforts intensified through international meetings with wide attendance by American and European actors. Leading these efforts in 2023 was the US administration under President Biden, aimed at unifying efforts to confront the Russian war. German actors at the time considered it a war targeting human civilization led by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Despite perceived laxity in the German Chancellor's position, support for the war effort in Ukraine was present among EU states, including France and Germany (Ziyada, 2022).

Regarding the early promotion of the idea of European Strategic Autonomy, it shifted into a desired European project for several reasons, some stemming from Europe's dependence on the US, which grew during the era of President Donald Trump (2017-2021). It became a priority for prominent EU states like France, followed by Germany, especially when comparing that dependence to the era of former US President Barack Obama (2009-2017).

Prior to his second term, President Donald Trump paved the way for pressuring NATO allies, the Europeans, to reconsider their spending on European defense within the alliance to match their responsibilities under the founding treaty. The impact of this went beyond spending levels, reaching a threat to encourage Russia to attack allies, a threat President Biden denounced as appalling and deranged.

While President Joe Biden called for strengthening European defense capabilities to protect Europe, the global landscape characterized by US global hegemony has exacerbated unprecedented conflicts and wars,



given the international organization's inability to limit them, since the aftermath of WWII. This has created a sense among many citizens of European countries (described as affluent before these conflicts) that a return to prosperity may no longer be possible; this includes the German people (Muhammad, 2024).

It has been noted in realist literature that alliances are formed by fears of expected security threats and challenges that exceed the capabilities of any single state. This includes NATO, which was established to confront potential risks from the Soviet Union. It has been recorded as the fundamental pillar of US policy without preoccupation with the expected returns or the high cost of leadership. Consequently, the US has borne the greatest burden of protecting Europe for thirty years.

President Trump was clear in his stance regarding NATO, arguing it does not balance alliance commitments with the resulting costs. He emphasized the necessity of balancing political goals with costs, calling for the activation of the burden-sharing concept. This frames a new defense strategy alongside the New US National Defense Strategy 2026 issued by the Department of Defense (Pentagon), which calls for reducing American support for Europe.

This was observed at the annual NATO summit in The Hague, July 24-25, 2025, which followed Pentagon reviews of US troop status to reduce numbers and transfer the responsibility of defending Europe to European countries. Its goal is not to abdicate US commitment to the alliance but to attempt to make it a multi-polar collective structure for security. This aims to reduce reliance on the US and its forces deployed in Europe, raising defense spending to over double, reaching 5% of GDP or more by 2035. The summit was not devoid of fears regarding a potential war against Russia; circles within the alliance expected Russia to launch a war against its states within a timeframe not exceeding five years, given its growing offensive and defensive capabilities and the continuation of its war against Ukraine. The US seeks to end this war to reduce its support for Ukraine and calm what could be the start of a cold war with Russia, evidenced by the US inviting Russia back to the G7 (The Hague Summit, 2025).

The summit was described as an effort to appease President Trump following his statements that American support would not be guaranteed for any party that failed to meet its financial obligations to the alliance if threatened. This implies a delay of a sudden exit from the American umbrella, particularly concerning conventional European defense (The Hague Summit, 2025).





European-Russian relations witnessed a noticeable shift after a break characterized by the war on Ukraine and significant escalation. However, in the first quarter of 2026, positions and indicators emerged from European leaders, such as in France, Germany, and Italy, to reconsider European-Russian relations. Realistically, from a European perspective, Russia is a major power that cannot be ignored in European balances. This comes amidst increasing security and economic challenges, the rising cost of the war against Russia, a growing decline in mutual trust across the Atlantic, the sharp positions of the Trump administration, and differences over issues such as Greenland and doubts regarding the US commitment to European security via NATO.

### **3.2 Consequences of the Pursuit of European Strategic Autonomy**

The aspiration toward this project was not a matter of sheer necessity, nor was it exclusively an outcome of the transatlantic partnership. Rather, it stems from the desire to limit strategic dependence on the United States of America in defending Europe, to possess autonomous defensive capabilities, and to position Europe as one of the global geopolitical players once independence from the United States is achieved. Europe's aspirations, which include protecting its vessels and repelling potential attacks, specifically in the Red Sea, without engaging in direct clashes with attacking forces, are closely aligned with its missions in the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab Al-Mandab Strait, and the Arabian Sea under the framework of the Aspides alliance. This follows several measures taken by the European Union in 2008 through Operation Atalanta to address instability in the Horn of Africa and the Bab Al-Mandab, which was subsequently followed by nine countries, led by France, announcing the establishment of a maritime surveillance mission in the Arabian Gulf (NATO's Summit in The Hague, 2025).

The commitment to allocate a 5% ratio of GDP specifically by European member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was deemed a remarkable achievement and a prerequisite for enabling the Alliance to contain Russia's increased defense production and offensive capabilities. This allocation is designated for spending on defensive core assets, including funds dedicated to supporting defense infrastructure (NATO's Summit in The Hague, 2025). However, this step may face complications regarding the details of its implementation. Raising the Alliance's defense spending ratio forces countries within, and outside, the European Union to reduce their spending on essential social services, thereby prompting populist parties, known for their advocacy of establishing peace with Russia, to seize the opportunity to attain power or influence decision-making. This, in turn, limits the will of the Alliance,

the United States, and their supporters. Responses regarding the increase of this ratio have recorded calls from some countries to downscale it, or expressions of the impossibility of achieving it due to the domestic specificities of certain states. This includes a request submitted by the Prime Minister of Spain to cap their participation in the Alliance's defense policies at an amount not exceeding 2.1%. Similarly, the Prime Minister of Slovakia emphasized the extreme difficulty of securing the 5% ratio for his country, as did Belgium. This occurs despite the view held by some Alliance members, particularly Eastern European states due to their geographical proximity to Russia, that this increase constitutes vital support for their existence and interests. This is further complicated by the absence of instruments and mechanisms to compel members to comply with such decisions, which justifies President Trump's recourse to threatening withdrawal from the Alliance, and the withdrawal of American forces from their missions in Europe. Though gradual, this exhibits a logically acceptable balance between threats, the reassertion of the United States' status in leading the Alliance, and its commitment to the safety of its allies, beginning with confronting Russian challenges, passing through the challenges of terrorism backed by American intelligence support, and addressing illegal immigration within converging right-wing agendas.

Among the consequences of the absence of compliance mechanisms for NATO member states, coupled with the variance in security apprehensions among them according to the highest threats confronting each state, is the emergence of divisions regarding the prioritization of the Alliance's defense policies.

In light of these differences, divergent interests, and multiple visions regarding how the European Union can overcome its challenges, a New Strategic Compass was established. This was achieved by adopting a shared definition of the European Union's strategic space, diagnosing the most prominent threats, and prescribing the means to guarantee overcoming them by supporting the desired European Strategic Autonomy. This includes setting a timeframe within which the European-approved components of the Compass are to be realized. The Compass serves as a defense strategy aimed at forging a future strategic culture supported by all members, even if the levels of collective support vary, thereby guaranteeing future support for European defense industrial production and developing the capabilities, readiness, and rapid deployment of European forces when necessary.

Consequently, this necessitates supporting and facilitating European defense industries, jointly coordinating industrial protocols, encouraging





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technological innovation, establishing a unified European defense market, stockpiling equipment, and cooperating in joint operations to develop the economy, achieve development, and increase defense spending. This vision is to be supported through democratic mechanisms, the activation of the European Parliament, and civil society institutions, alongside supporting initiatives launched by the European Union within its institutions to enhance armament projects, training programs, increased spending, and bolstering reliance on European arms manufacturing companies (Al-Hashimi, 2025).

The European Strategic Compass examined issues of cooperation between the European Union and other neighboring countries, most notably those capable of supporting the European defense effort, such as the United Kingdom and Turkey. Both possess military capabilities that could be invested in the European defense project. Replacing the security guarantee of the United States of America in defending Europe has raised questions regarding their inclusion, meaning the United Kingdom and Turkey, in funding strategies for future defense projects and raising defense funding budgets, as Germany has done, while working to facilitate the prerequisites for the legitimacy of defense funding and elevating its levels across the European Union in general.

European Union countries have realized their need for intensive security cooperation; there is no security achieved solely by relying on the individual efforts of its states or by sufficing with their unilateral security measures. This has underscored the necessity of pursuing partnerships, particularly security ones, specifically with European countries that are not members of the European Union, such as the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Norway. Turkey possesses an army that ranks second within NATO, after the United States of America, and boasts a renowned combat readiness and extensive experience in managing combat operations, particularly beyond its borders.

Regarding the European Union's vision for the future of the International Order, known as the White Paper, it is built upon the objectives of preserving the interests of its states and maintaining peace in a changing world witnessing significant threats. In the presence of powers seeking to harm the European Union, the Union stands in dire need of deterring them. The means of deterrence can be provided by harnessing capabilities through available resources, industrial strength, and technological power. However, European defense readiness suffers from weak achievements due to low investment in supporting infrastructure. This can be overcome within the framework of the supremacy of shared human values to confront challenges that mobilize powers to further expand their



capabilities, which collectively undermines European stability and peace as a result of the disruption of the balance of power.

Future challenges and threats do not exclude China's aspirations to dominate the European economy, according to the European future vision, at a time when Europe's allies are focusing on regions and issues that transcend European interests, the confrontation of its challenges, and that which threatens it. This is particularly concerning given that global developments in this regard are unfolding at a pace that may outrun European forward-looking assessments of their trajectory, a matter that deeply concerns Europe.

Enhancing defense readiness and high-level armament serves as a guarantee to confront any ongoing aggression and deter prospective ones, thereby securing a safe future for Europe. The primary building blocks for both consist of increasing European spending, which aggregates accumulated elements of strength through joint action and transcends uncoordinated efforts. It is imperative to enhance the building of competitive industrial bases, their development programs, the rapid procurement of necessary equipment, and cooperation with Europe's partners on shared goals to respond to future challenges under global competition aimed at containing any potential widespread conflict. Europe realizes the necessity of accelerating the achievement of European defense readiness to generate an effective and sustainable defense system. This requires an opportune window that may only present itself once in many years, to be fully realized by the year 2030.

### **3.3 The Future of the European Union in the Future International Order**

The international order has been undergoing profound transformations since the end of the Second World War, causing deep challenges for Europe that have generated major geopolitical challenges. For this reason, an international order that respects international rules remains a state desired by Europe, aligning with its values and the preservation of its interests. This comes at a time when a new international order is expected to take shape within a few years from now (Munich Security Conference, 2026), a matter that obliges Europe to plan for dealing with a multipolar system and managing relations with rising states, should powers like China, Russia, and India ascend. Europe must contribute to reshaping this order (Munich Security Conference, 2026); otherwise, according to its perspective, it will remain in a state of reaction within that system rather than holding a position of efficacy and influence amidst intense international competition. One of the products of this competition could be the eruption of a comprehensive war. Therefore, according to the





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European vision, it is necessary to respond to these future developments by enhancing Europe's status throughout the entire world in light of the renewal of global alliances. This will reinforce the European response, enabling it to be effective in the future incoming international order, assuming it is founded upon multipolarity and the acceptance of competition to achieve it (Munich Security Conference, 2026). The world is heading toward multipolarity. It is not believed that it will devolve into a mere bipolarity between China and the United States. Thus, the European Union requires a repositioning, economically, politically, and frictionally regarding security, to influence the tipping point of conflicts and their trajectory, particularly those directly impacting Europe's internal security (Munich Security Conference, 2026).

Europe recognizes that it has benefited in supporting its security, stability, and prosperity from its accession to NATO and the European Union, conditional upon joint action and rapid, effective responses to challenges and threats. However, the adequacy of these two frameworks will not suffice to overcome the future challenges imposed by the incoming international order. This necessitates that Europe enhance its deterrent capabilities to guarantee its security and efficacy within it, provided that Europe activates constructive solidarity and bolsters its investments in reinforcing defense capabilities. Among Europe's apprehensions regarding these endeavors and its goals in enhancing its defense capabilities is what Europe has witnessed in Ukraine, destruction on the borders of the European Union that has claimed hundreds of thousands of victims and caused waves of mass displacement. This is compounded by the exorbitant costs borne by Ukraine and the destruction of vital energy systems and cultural heritage assets. Europe believes that the end of the war and its repercussions will reflect upon the future of Europe and its collective future as a whole. Europe has conducted an exercise in collective security and intelligence work by moving toward achieving integration across internal European borders in light of the threats of organized crime and hybrid threats. This qualifies it to build permanent, shared future security foundations that provide continuous, rapid, and mutual information sharing, alongside building a highly equipped rapid intervention force characterized by swift response and readiness (Europol Exercise Allies, 2026).

The challenges facing Europe are not limited to its borders; rather, according to the extended vision for forecasting the anticipated new international order, they expand to include strategic competition across the horizons of European interests worldwide. These extend from the Arctic to the Baltic Sea, North Africa, and the Middle East, in addition to



the challenges of the technological race, migration challenges, and climate change impacting the European Union politically and economically (Europol Exercise Allies, 2026).

As for nuclear capabilities, the French President announced on March 2, 2026, France's intention to deploy its nuclear arsenal within the framework of dedicating cooperation with its partners inside the European Union. This aims to generate a nuclear deterrent against any potential attack, guaranteeing the protection of the interests of France and European Union states. These steps are derived from the Charles de Gaulle strategic principle, which emphasizes the necessity of the independence of nuclear decision-making for France and the European Union, thereby allowing Europe to control its future and the destiny of its peoples within the framework of advanced deterrence. This is intended to confront the Russian challenge primarily, to counter growing anticipated Chinese challenges secondarily, and to face a potential escalation from the Middle East tertiarily (Morcos, 2026). President Macron described nuclear deterrence as transcending geographical threats to encompass preemptive strikes to prevent potential threats to France and its European allies, or to counter attempts by any hostile party to alter the stability of the balance of power in any region that impacts the core interests of France and the European Union as a whole. This confirms Europe's shift toward decisive strategic deterrence and its refusal to compromise on its interests or influence. However, this undoubtedly has its prerequisites and requirements (Morcos, 2026).

According to French Macron's vision, Europe stands on the threshold of a stage that transcends protection to attain deterrence as a policy that protects French and European interests and influence, particularly in the presence of powers seeking to extend their influence in a manner that encroaches upon European influence. Thus, deterrence serves as a confirmation of France's capabilities to inflict damage on any nuclear power that jeopardizes France, without France suffering, in return, damages whose effects cannot be overcome, which constitutes the essence of deterrence (Morcos, 2026).

The attempt to rebuild the nuclear strategy in light of challenges, most prominent of which are the Russian threat to the European Union and its Ukrainian borders, the growth of international threats from rising powers, and American strategic shifts in its commitments to protect Europe conventionally and nuclearly, demands military ambitions whose prerequisites include (Morcos, 2026):





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1. Dedicating European Strategic Autonomy to grant it freedom of movement to protect its interests and influence, and developing a shared European strategic culture.
2. Rearranging transatlantic cooperation with greater European influence in maintaining security and stability, at the expense of dependence on the capabilities of the United States of America.
3. Contributing to the renewal of the nuclear arms race at the international level.

Regarding France's pursuit, supported by European partners, Germany was clear in its determination to share France's conventional and nuclear defense endeavors to attain the level of European nuclear deterrence to maintain European security. This runs parallel to what the forces of the United States of America achieve in confronting potential threats, whether from Russia, China, or the Middle East. French-German cooperation focuses on the possibility of establishing joint strategic measures between them in missile defense capabilities, nuclear deterrence capabilities, and long-range hypersonic missile capabilities to support European defense and deterrence readiness within a few years (Morcos, 2026).

Among the factors elevating the readiness of the European strategic response is the expansion of France's capabilities in nuclear submarines, its fighter jets carrying nuclear bombs, and its hypersonic missiles, thereby increasing the speed of response to impactful geopolitical variables. The dedication to collective defense is proceeding at full speed due to the willingness of European parties to cooperate among themselves, namely Britain, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, and Germany's close cooperation, in a manner that does not exceed the requirements of the alliance within NATO and does not necessitate a further renewal of the nuclear arms race (Morcos, 2026).

### Conclusions

The present study demonstrates that European Strategic Autonomy is a concept that has evolved according to the nature of the international order and the geopolitical dimensions of Europe, and in accordance with its objectives in both. Its future is built upon the capabilities of the European Union to achieve an effective balance between political aspirations and capabilities, as the international environment, characterized by turmoil, imposes the necessity of possessing independent defensive capabilities. Independence has never been an easy goal, nor will it be so in the face of internal and external challenges that render it a complex and intertwined objective.



The transition from a state of security dependence to a state of active shared defensive sovereignty dictates a comprehensive rebuilding of the European defense system, founded upon institutional integration, technological development, and a unified, effective political will.

The success of the European Union in this achievement will render it capable of consolidating its status as an independent geopolitical actor in an international order leaning toward multipolarity within a world characterized by ambiguity and fierce competition.

European Strategic Autonomy does not signify the end of alliances; rather, it restructures their foundations according to newly emerged objectives and redefines them to be balanced, guaranteeing Europe efficacy and influence in shaping the future of the international order. Upon reaching the level of conventional and nuclear deterrence, Europe envisions the threshold of a stage that transcends protection to attain deterrence as a policy that protects European interests and preserves influence, particularly in the presence of powers seeking to extend their influence in a manner that encroaches upon European influence.

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