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# *EUROPE'S SOVEREIGNTY PARADOX IN THE NEW AGE OF EMPIRES*

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the international system is entering a neo-imperial phase marked by eroding legal constraints the return of spheres of influence and systematic military economic and political coercion. We begin by proposing a novel definition of empire, applying it to the United States, Russia and China. We then argue that the European Union faces a sovereignty paradox, since fragmented authority and national vetoes expose Europe to external pressures while preventing the creation of joint capabilities. Nonetheless, we suggest that the European Commission has been able to negotiate, within the narrow legal spaces it has been afforded, a series of foundational steps upon which a novel European geopolitical architecture could be built. We conclude assessing short- and medium-term reforms which could be enacted in the years to come to prepare the European Union for a more dangerous and more competitive global environment.

*Don't quote laws to us, we carry swords*

***Life of Pompey*, by Plutarch**

# Introduction

While the fragility of the international system has been in full display since February 2022, recent developments suggest that the international system has entered a new phase of neo-imperial evolution. Unbounded by international laws, the new 'empires' of the 21st century are on the move. For much of the post-war period, "empire" functioned either as a historical category or as a polemical accusation. Even though power asymmetries persisted and coercion never disappeared, the semantic-political category of *Empire* was increasingly out of place in analytical terms. This may be changing today.

The fracture of the international order in full display today has deep roots: in the early 2000s, the Western wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had weakened global trust in the constraining role that international norms could pose on superpowers; since then, successive waves of populist parties, strongmen, and virulent nationalist rhetoric have emerged in nearly every country in the world. In sequence, the United Nations fell into paralysis and near irrelevance, the World Trade Organization became victim of neomercantilist policies, and the European Union itself – the most advanced form of crossnational cooperation and managed globalization – is increasingly brought to a standstill by national vetoes and lack of joint capabilities in its own incomplete transition towards collective, postnational sovereignty.

All the while, multiple geotechnological transitions are taking place, fuelling an unconstrained competition for accessing critical resources, energy sources, and novel technologies. Against this context of unprecedented vulnerability and instability, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ascent of Donald Trump at the White House are sealing the deal: nuclear superpowers feel no longer bound by international laws, and they are starting to act accordingly. To understand the implications of this shift for European affairs, we need first to revisit the classical definitions of empire, and then analyse the position of the European Union in this new context.

# Redefining Empire

In the broader discussion, the term *empire* is often used imprecisely, either as a historical label or as a moral accusation. Political scientists have developed three more specific definitions of *empire*. In Karl Schmitt's formulation (see Zolo, 2007a), empire refers to a political order that does not recognise any authority external to itself. In other words, an empire might have de facto boundaries – temporary by definitions – but no real borders.

It differs from *sovereignty*, which is associated with a specific geographical area (therefore necessitating formal borders) and which is therefore inherently relational, resting on the reciprocal recognition among equals over the respective control on certain territories. Imperial authority instead may tolerate others' factual control over land, but ultimately claims and aims to be absolute precisely because, *de facto*, it denies the existence of peers in what it defines as its sphere of influence. A second tradition approaches empire functionally. In the definition proposed by Charles Kindleberger imperial hegemony (see Mehrling, 2022) is legitimized and sustained by the provision of system-level goods, such as monetary stability and military security. Finally, historical and materialist traditions (Zolo 2007b) insist on a third element: empire entails structured core–periphery relations characterised by systematic extraction of resources from the periphery to the centre.

This happens via multiple channels, including unequal exchange deals, coerced policy alignment or even direct appropriation. Taken separately, these approaches are not satisfactory. A purely Schmittian definition risks collapsing empire into an abstract claim of sovereignty, while functional definitions struggle to distinguish leadership from domination. Extractive definitions, finally, cannot discriminate between empire and asymmetric but rule-bound market relations. Taken jointly, however, these perspectives converge on a coherent concept of empire.


Empire arises when a political centre combines:

- the effective rejection of peer external sovereignty;
- discretionary control over the provision of system-level goods; and
- durable extractive relations vis-à-vis subordinate units.

In this perspective, 21st century *imperi in fieri* are gearing up to perform well in each of these parameters. Take the US under Donald Trump: its aggressive trade policy, in complete disregard of whatsoever pre-existing agreement, is clearly guided by an extractive logic of unequal exchange, yet the dollar represents a global public good and the US global security agreements – from Japan to NATO to Taiwan – cannot realistically be replaced by the subordinate partners. Finally, the US under Trump has advanced plans to coerce local governments so to extract local natural resources (for example Venezuelan oil reserves as well as Greenland's and Ukraine's rare mineral deposits). Russia, and to a less visible extent, China follow similar paths, as shown in the table 1 below.

**Table 1**

| | *Rejection of external authorities in a sphere of influence* | *Provision of system-level goods in a sphere of influence* | *Extraction of resources and market access from a sphere of influence* |
|---|---|---|---|
| US under Donald Trump | Yes (Monroe Doctrine, Vance Munich Doctrine, invasion of Venezuela, attack on Iran) | Yes (dollar, security agreements) | Yes (Venezuelan oil plan, Greenland & Ukraine rare minerals plan, the Vance Munich doctrine) |
| Russia under Vladimir Putin | Yes (invasions of Ukraine and Georgia, Panslavic doctrine) | Partially (gas & oil) | Yes (African precious minerals, manpower from provinces and partner countries, Moscow-based centralization) |
| China under Xi | Partially (claims over entire South China Sea, Taiwan) | Partially (world's global provider of rare minerals, and world's "workshop" through uniquely efficient scale economies in manufacturing) | Yes (African neocolonial ventures) |

Moreover, these "empires" might eventually acknowledge each other's special status in parts of the planet. Partitioning the world in spheres of influence is not equal to recognizing others' sovereignty beyond their formal borders, but rather acknowledging a special status to actions and operations in said sphere. Notably, this stands in tension with the global ambitions historically associated with empires, but can be seen as a practical, temporary arrangement that creates opportunities for consolidating imperial authority in the respective spheres.

Across very different political systems, the United States, Russia and China are converging — perhaps even without coordination — towards such global partition. Even though the language differs and the justifications vary, the outcome is strikingly similar: spheres of influence are asserted and allies become subordinates; sovereignty is respected only insofar it remains a largely empty notion that does not endanger the centre's economic and political interests.

Very much like Plutarch's Pompey, contemporary *imperi in fieri* have shown a strong appetite for military adventurism. However, it would be a mistake to limit the imperial modus operandi to military intervention. Imperial power today does not operate through a single mode of action, but along a continuum of tools, calibrated according to resistance and opportunity. At one end lies covert political interference: in democratic contexts such as the European one, this has taken the form the financing of populist and nationalist parties, the cultivation of corruptible veto players like Hungary or Slovakia, and especially the pervasive, continuous manipulation of media ecosystems (via direct ownership, like in the case of traditional media or even social media like Twitter, but also via influence campaigns, like the infamous Cambridge Analytica scandal and the 'armies' of Russian "trolls and goblins" that infest all sorts of social media).

In this perspective, any actor capable of weakening collective decision-making, paralysing institutions, or hollowing out democratic authority becomes an asset. This form of interference has been systematically employed by Russia across Europe through its support for nationalist parties (*e.g.* Northen League, AfD, Front National) and disinformation networks; it has been mirrored by American actors through open backing of Eurosceptic forces (see, for instance, the special relationship between Trump and Niegel Farage, and the financing links between the Heritage Foundation and the Orban regime in Hungary).

Interference can also be quite overt, like in the case of American pressure on European regulatory autonomy: the recent escalation of US threats against European digital and competition legislation should be read in this light. The so-called *Vance Doctrine* articulated openly in Munich, marks the transition from covert to overt political interference: explicit warnings, conditionality, and direct attempts to influence legislative outcomes by framing EU regulation as an illegitimate constraint on American corporate power. The Vance Doctrine, in particular, is a clear example of both the first and third imperial mode: it is a form of rejection of any form of external sovereignty, since it claims that the rights of American corporations are absolute, do not recognize borders, and should take precedence on regulatory self-determination of other polities; and it is a form of extractive imperialism, since it aims at putting national companies in a comparatively privileged situation vis à vis local and global counterparts.

Beyond interference we find provocations, boundary-testing and covert coercion: these include cyberattacks, illegal border crossings by military personnel or aircrafts, actual sabotage against airplanes, transport infrastructure or even military assets and installations (1) (2), drone attacks, and even engineered waves of migrants to put pressure on borders. All these actions are designed to impose continuous physical costs without crossing the formal threshold of war. Russia has normalised this approach

through sustained hybrid campaigns across Europe since 2022, with more than 500 attacks in the EU counted in 2025 alone.

These are difficult to counter not only because the perpetrators, while often intuitively identifiable, are hard to prove, but also because they do not represent a formal act of war (and therefore, responding in the conventional domain would represent an escalation) and rarely carry loss of life, which means public outrage is limited. China, too, has made use of hybrid warfare, especially through sustained grey-zone tactics, most visibly in the form of naval and air blockades rehearsed around Taiwan. The general consensus is that these actions are not alternatives to military force, but rather 'shaping' and 'rehearsing' operations aimed at increasing the chances that future open military confrontations succeed. And finally, at the far end of the continuum lies overt coercion: invasion, territorial control, and the use of force as a bargaining instrument. Recent examples include Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine and continuous intervention across many African countries, but also the rapid US "decapitation strike" on Venezuela, and the open normalisation of military pressure in strategic negotiations.

The partition of the globe in sphere of influence is facilitated by the return of military might as a key parameter of global relations and the consequential hollowing of the international rule of law. In this perspective, if Putin has a claim on Eastern Europe as Russia's imperial sphere, and Xi wants to expand Chinese control over Taiwan and the entirety of the South China Sea, then it is only natural that the United States claim hegemony on the Americas, from Greenland to Argentina.

This is what many have described as an emerging imperial world partition enforced through external pressure and *faits accomplis*, along with sheer military force if needed. In this system, rules (be national or international) survive only where backed by real power. Europe – the most strenuous defender of the global legal order – sits at the centre of this transformation not as an architect, but as a target.

## Europe's Sovereignty Paradox

In this context, the European Union is a genuine *géant aux pieds d'argile*. On the one hand, it is vulnerable because its incomplete regime of "partial sovereignties" (for neither the old nation-states nor the new European Union are fully sovereign) can be too easily exploited in the pursuit of the proverbial *divide et impera.* The European Union's splintered political system creates multiple entry points for external manipulation, both at national level (in the national elections) and European level. Supporting Eurosceptic forces in a handful of member states is enough to paralyse collective action, and these individually weak nations become the levers through which larger empires exert control thanks to the outdated veto system at European level. This institutional weakness is compounded by a widespread lack of capabilities: the European Union lacks both the fiscal powers and the military means to pursue true strategic autonomy; both fiscal and military powers are closely guarded at national level, and governments' appetite to share them into a common European institution is limited, despite the mounting

external pressure and clearly supportive public opinion in both the conventional domain (Nicoli et al. 2025) and in the nuclear one (Nicoli 2025). If Europe's weakness in conventional military terms is worrying, the fading of the transatlantic alliance between Europe and the United States exposes the European Union to an even stronger issue, that is the lack of nuclear capability (Gilli and Nicoli 2025). Without a nuclear arsenal, the European Union is exposed to blackmail of nuclear-capable powers, making any form of strategic autonomy nigh impossible.

Yet vulnerability alone does not explain the intensity of pressure. Europe risks of being targeted not only because it is weak, but because it is dangerous, as the only remaining space where democratic institutions still meaningfully constrain oligarchic power. For the time being, the European Union is akin a pristine island where public policy has a chance of prevailing: European competition policy still limits market concentration; digital and climate regulation restrict extractive and abusive business models; liberal institutions, for all their imperfections, still provide checks and balances capable of restraining most would-be autocrats, even though the cracks begin to show. Moreover, the EU embodies a balanced form of globalisation. Trade and openness are coupled with joint rules and shared responsibilities, reducing the capacity of corporations to play national systems against one another in pursuit of regulatory arbitrage (Nicoli 2020). The Vance Doctrine is to be interpreted also in this context, since the sheer EU's market size means that many of the EU own regulations are usually applied by companies on the global operations (and unavoidably so when it comes to digital markets). Most threatening of all, Europe demonstrates that building sovereignty without violence is possible. It is the only historical attempt to achieve political unity without coercive domination.

Faced with this Neoimperial ecology, European reactions have often appeared hesitant and fragmented, especially so in in defence and security. But it would be a mistake to blame "Brussels" for this outcome. Military competences are an eminently national prerogative, at the core of the general understanding of national sovereignty and often seen as deeply connected with an essentialist notion of national identity: risking one's life for one other is often described as the highest form of group solidarity, which – essentialists argue — requires high levels of identification between group members[1]. Not surprisingly, therefore, European states have for decades refused to delegate meaningful sovereignty in defence, despite repeated warning signals due both to external pressure (from Russian aggression to American retrenchment, and now open coercion) and internal dysfunction (the repeated use of veto powers by Hungary). Hence, the EU's lack of action is by and large attributable to national fragmentation and national jealousy over military and external action capabilities, which retain symbolic meaning but little actual value when considered individually. For their part, the leaders of European institutions have relentlessly pushed, since 2022, for a more ambitious integration roadmap in the

security and defence field, and have consistently displayed an appetite for creative legal solutions to sideline national vetoes, including voting during breaks in the absence of the Hungarian delegation to ensure Ukraine's candidate status, and adopting a very generous interpretation of the art.122 of the treaty (the so-called solidarity clause, which allows for majority voting on matters that impact the economy of a member state in distress) to permanently freeze Russian assets.

Legal acrobatics aside, things might be beginning also on the institutional side of military integration. Since the new Commission took office in late 2024, it took the matter of defence and security much more seriously in its hands, not last by creating the first-ever post of Commissioner for Defence and Space (as a separate position from the intergovernmentally-appointed High Representative for External Action). Under Mr. Kubilius tenure as a defence Commissioner, the Commission introduced multiannual capability planning through the Defence White Paper and the Readiness 2030 agenda, identifying genuinely pan-European "flagship projects" such as missile defence, anti-drone systems and satellite intelligence. These are inherently cross-border assets, and therefore natural foundations for a future European defence capacity. Moreover, with the European Defence Industry Programme and the SAFE concessional loan scheme (150 bn Euros), the EU became a co-financier of defence industrial capacity, opening the door — however cautiously — to a future single market for defence.

Institutional consolidation followed: improved military planning, a command centre for civilian missions, simplified military mobility, and the operationalisation — at least on paper — of the Rapid Deployment Capability, a force of 6000 operatives which should be ready to counter threats to the EU territory. Finally, in December, EU leaders agreed on a €90bn common loan to finance Ukraine, delivered by means of Eurobonds backed by unused resources in the EU budget. For the first time, the emission of Eurobonds (which was first used in 2021 with the Resilience and Recovery Facility) was achieved without unanimity. Between the 150 billions of SAFE and the 90bn of this new Ukraine loan, the amount of Eurobonds emitted (although qualitatively different) and in line with what some observers indicated as necessary (Palacio et al. 2022) in the immediate aftermaths of the invasion in 2022. Although far too late, Eurobonds were accepted — if only as a last resort — as a legitimate instrument of collective action, which along with the liberal interpretation of art. 122 means the EU has now effectively found a way to circumvent national vetoes in matters of financing. In perspective terms, the EU is therefore laying the foundation for the medium term development of EU-level capabilities (see p.5 of Beetsma et al. (2025) for a roadmap) even though the political will for the institutional buildup that would require is still at large.

These are good signals and represent unprecedented steps both in the institutional integration of a policy field incredibly dominated by national jealousies, and the more general plumbing of the European Union's capacity to counter crises.

However, they are too slow and too limited, since they need to be read against the bleak reality of an accelerating transition out of the global system of norms and rules in which a peaceful European Union was born and thrived. Without treaty change in sight attributing formal military competences to the EU, the Union's hands remain largely tied. However, the EU can still push the agenda in 2026 and further, while preparing the ground for the next Multiannual Financial Framework starting in 2028 and which should devote substantial resources to defence. In this transition period, priorities should include the following steps forward:

- consolidate the piloted use of art. 122 and enhanced cooperation to avoid national vetoes; establishing a de-facto practice of majority voting even in economic and security issues insofar they have economic implications for one member state;
- push forward with the integration of the single market for defence products, coupled with additional financing to support the expansion of European strategic industries and with joint procurement[2] for common projects agreed under the SAFE regulation and the flagship projects;
- push forward with the joint financing of flagship projects (cyber, air defence, drone walls and space) and put them squarely under joint command, if necessary through the use of PESCO;
- consolidating the use of Eurobonds for financing defence and strategic investment, especially in light of the negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework;
- stimulate the emergence of multiple, established country coalitions (e.g. the Nordic coalition, the so-called "Coalition of the Willing", and others), providing these coalitions with financial resources, institutional support to coordinate their actions under a common umbrella, and access to common capabilities.
- Prepare the ground and accelerate the process of Ukraine's EU membership accession, while continuing to provide support to Ukaine's defenders in economic, industrial and military terms and learning from Ukraine's war industry experience.

While these actions would substantially increase European security in the short to medium term, especially if mirrored by substantial advances in joint financing of genuine military European public goods (Beetsma et al. 2024), they are a poor substitute for the actual construction of EU-level capabilities that would enable the European Union to survive and compete in a world dominated by new, aggressive empires. There is no alternative, in the long run, to the join exercise of sovereignty. Europe must, at last, face the ghosts in its closet: in an era of neo-imperialism, *national* sovereignty is inherently at disadvantage. European nations are too small, too fragmented, and too old to own sovereignty in a form that is not only symbolic but meaningful, even more so as the world becomes ever a more dangerous place. Fragmented sovereignty, exercised through vetoes and symbolic prerogatives, offers neither protection nor autonomy.

On the contrary, it creates the very vulnerabilities through which imperial power penetrates. What is defended today in the name of national sovereignty is often little more than the right to be individually coerced. This is the paradox confronting Europe. The more jealously national capitals guard formal competences (especially in defence, fiscal capacity, and foreign) the less sovereignty they will retain in practice.

## Note

[1] See Negri et al. 2020 and Nicoli et al. 2024 for a review of various arguments linking solidarity and identity

[2] See Beetsma and Nicoli (2024) for a discussion

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