

# Securing Europe's Future: EU Law and Policy Responses to Supply Chain Vulnerabilities in Times of Geopolitical Crisis

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**Abstract.** The European Union (EU) is redefining its legal and policy frameworks to address supply chain vulnerabilities amid intensified geopolitical crises and systemic disruptions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the weaponisation of trade dependencies by global powers have exposed the EU's reliance on external suppliers, catalysing a shift from liberal market principles toward a more security-oriented, geoeconomic approach. The research explores how the Union integrates supply chain resilience into its broader security and foreign policy agenda, balancing openness with autonomy, and economic efficiency with resilience. It examines the intersections between EU law, economic security, and resilience, while addressing the tensions between national sovereignty and supranational coordination during times of crisis. In doing so, it sheds light on how supply chain security has become a central component of European defence and foreign policy, reinforcing the EU's position as a geopolitical and diplomatic actor.

**Key Words.** European Union, Economic Security, Supply Chain Resilience, Strategic Autonomy, Geoeconomics

## 1. Introduction

Europe's golden age of globalisation has ended with an echo rather than applause. The European Union (EU), once the poster child of liberal interdependence, is now navigating a world where trade routes, data flows, and energy pipelines are as strategic as tanks and treaties. The *permacrisis* (Zuleeg, Emmanouilidis, and Borges de Castro, 2021) of the past decade, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, has forced Europe to rethink the balance between openness and protection.

The exposure of critical dependencies on external suppliers has triggered a paradigm shift: *resilience* has become synonymous with *security*. As the EU's 2023 Economic Security Strategy makes clear, the stability of supply chains underpins not only competitiveness but sovereignty itself (Szczepański, 2025). Where interdependence once promised systemic stability, it now demands precaution.

This paper examines how EU law and policy respond to supply chain vulnerabilities in times of geopolitical crisis and how these responses reflect a deeper transformation in the EU's political economy. It argues that the Union's evolving governance of economic security represents the emergence of a new geoeconomic logic; what Balfour and Ülgen (2024) describe as *economic statecraft*: the strategic use of economic instruments to achieve foreign policy and security goals.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a conceptual and policy-analytic approach grounded in recent EU legal and institutional developments. It traces the embedding of resilience within the Union's regulatory order, drawing on the frameworks of *geoeconomics* and (open) *strategic autonomy*.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The governance of supply chain resilience in the EU today sits at the crossroads of economics, law, and security. The increasing interpenetration of these domains reflects a broader *paradigm shift* in European integration, from functional cooperation to strategic coordination. As Balfour and Ülgen (2024) observe, the EU's political economy is evolving from a liberal model that prioritised efficiency toward one that prizes *resilience as a public good*. Supply chains, once

understood primarily as logistical networks, now operate as both *infrastructures of prosperity* and *vectors of vulnerability* (Szczepański, 2025). They not only sustain Europe's economic engine but also expose it to strategic pressure, as disruptions, whether accidental, geopolitical, or coercively engineered, can cascade across sectors and translate into political or security crises. Consequently, resilience is not only a policy target but also a mode of governance through which the EU seeks to preserve autonomy amid global turbulence. Three interrelated concepts frame this transformation: resilience and economic security, strategic autonomy, and geoeconomics.

## 2.1 Supply Chain Resilience and Economic Security

Resilience, once a managerial term, has been elevated to the level of strategic doctrine (Szczepański, 2025). It signifies not merely recovery after disruption but the capacity to anticipate, absorb, and adapt without losing systemic function. Within the EU, resilience is now the economic expression of sovereignty (Balfour and Ülgen, 2024), its material underpinning. The Commission's framing of resilience increasingly mirrors security doctrine: threats are assessed, vulnerabilities mapped, and countermeasures institutionalised.

The concept of *economic security* reframes resilience as a policy objective encompassing risk reduction, diversification, and control over critical supply chains (Zuleeg, 2023). This reconceptualisation embeds supply chains within the EU's broader strategic logic of *de-risking rather than decoupling*, especially from systemic rivals such as China. It signals a move away from efficiency-maximising integration (Guntram and Poitiers, 2025) toward *redundancy-based security*, where the cost of preparedness is justified as a collective insurance premium. The logic is preventive: identifying vulnerabilities, mapping dependencies, and managing exposure through a mix of regulatory screening, investment control, and industrial coordination.

The EU's Economic Security Strategy formalises this through a three-pillar approach—*promote, protect, and partner*—which integrates competitiveness, resilience, and global engagement. Within this triad, supply chain security occupies a dual role: as a foundation for competitiveness and as a mechanism for strategic deterrence. In contrast to traditional great powers and other coercive state actors that can project influence and resilience independently of reputational costs and rely primarily on hard power, the EU's capacity to withstand shocks is increasingly equated with its capacity to project credibility and influence abroad (Pisani-Ferry, Weder, and Zettelmeyer, 2024).

## 2.2 Strategic Autonomy and Open Strategic Autonomy

The idea of *strategic autonomy*, once confined to defence, now spans technology, energy, and supply chains. As Youngs (2021) notes, autonomy is not isolationism, but a principle rooted in political agency. The EU's newer doctrine of *open strategic autonomy* captures this equilibrium between interdependence and control (Helwig and Wigell, 2022).

This doctrine positions the EU as an actor that safeguards openness through strategy: sustaining global trade while asserting the capacity to defend critical assets and set standards. Legally, this involves embedding precautionary measures, such as the Foreign Subsidies Regulation and investment screening, within the single market framework. It also implies a redefinition of sovereignty as *shared strategic capacity* (Leonard and Shapiro, 2019): the ability of collective institutions to coordinate national resources under common goals. Thus, autonomy operates both as a normative aspiration and a regulatory mechanism. It signals a shift in the EU's self-understanding, from a marketplace governed by rules to a polity defined by the ability to manage risk collectively. Yet this evolution is neither linear nor assured: rising Euroscepticism, national veto politics, and the electoral ascent of parties like the AfD and Le Pen's National Rally underscore how fragile such collective capacity remains, and how easily strategic ambition can be undercut by domestic contestation.

## 2.3 The Geoeconomic Turn

The *geoeconomic turn*, the use of economic tools for strategic ends, marks a decisive break from the EU's traditional "market power" identity (Helwig and Wigell, 2022). It reflects a shift from *normative influence* to *strategic leverage*: the EU is no longer just exporting rules but managing interdependence as a source of power. This reorientation draws on Farrell and Newman's (2019) notion of *weaponised interdependence*, which underscores how global networks of finance, trade, and technology can be exploited for coercive purposes.

In this context, supply chain resilience becomes both shield and sword: it protects the Union from external coercion while enabling it to project influence through market access, regulation, and conditionality (Balfour and Ülgen, 2024). The EU's reliance on legal and economic tools rather than military force represents not weakness but innovation; a form of *civilian power<sup>1</sup> turned strategic*. Geoeconomics thus provides the connective tissue linking resilience, autonomy, and sovereignty into a single European vocabulary of power. This dual role, however, only works because the EU's regulatory and market power sit atop deep structural dependencies: global actors need access to the single market, to European standards, and to its tightly regulated production ecosystems, giving Brussels leverage even in the absence of military force.

## 3. Legal and Policy Shifts in the EU's Approach

### 3.1 From Liberal Market Integration to Risk Governance

The EU's traditional legal order rested on liberalisation, competition, and the assumption that openness breeds stability. For decades, the Union's role was to regulate for *efficiency*, not *resilience*. Yet successive crises have eroded this belief. Europe has entered a phase of "strategic re-constitutionalisation," in which security has become a foundational principle of economic governance; a shift propelled by a decade of shocks that revealed how deeply economic openness, political stability, and geopolitical exposure are now intertwined. The transition from liberal integration to risk governance involves not dismantling openness but recalibrating it through precaution. The European Commission's framing of "de-risking" (Pisani-Ferry, Weder and Zettelmeyer, 2024) captures this evolution: globalisation is no longer assumed to be benign; it must be managed as a source of potential exposure.

Accordingly, resilience has become a *regulatory principle* shaping competition law, industrial policy, and trade defence alike (Szczepański, 2025). In legal terms, this represents the rise of a *preventive rationale*: law not merely as correction after crisis, but as foresight; anticipating vulnerabilities before they materialise. This preventive turn does not rely on the abstract force of law itself, but on regulatory choices that embed deterrence into market access, investment screening, and industrial coordination. In other words, it is the strategic design of legal instruments, not the judicial system in isolation, that enables the EU to manage risks before they escalate into crises.

### 3.2 The New Policy Toolbox

The EU's policy architecture has developed into a sophisticated *economic security toolbox*; an assemblage of legal, industrial, and diplomatic instruments. While individually familiar, these instruments now operate within a coordinated framework designed to mitigate interdependence risks and strengthen collective sovereignty.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of "civilian power Europe" was first articulated by François Duchêne (1973) describing the European Community as an actor whose international influence stems from economic, political, and legal instruments rather than military force. Duchêne argued that this approach signaled a distinctive and innovative role for Europe in global affairs.

Recent measures, from the Foreign Subsidies Regulation and the Anti-Coercion Instrument to the Critical Raw Materials Act, the Economic Security Strategy, and the European Defence Industrial Strategy, together establish a unified approach to monitoring vulnerabilities, screening external influence, securing critical inputs, and linking industrial policy to defence preparedness.

Together these instruments constitute a *strategic* legal order: a system where economic, industrial, and external actions are co-ordinated rather than compartmentalised. The shift mirrors a move from *instrumental pluralism* to *policy orchestration*, as the EU seeks coherence in deploying its expanding economic-security arsenal.

### 3.3 Institutional Dynamics and the Logic of Coordination

The governance of economic security has tested the EU's institutional architecture. Competences are fragmented: trade and the internal market are EU prerogatives, while security remains largely national. This dualism has produced what Balfour and Ülgen (2024) term a "governance gap" between risk identification and implementation.

To bridge it, the Commission has emerged as the *strategic conductor*, coordinating DG TRADE, DG GROW, and the European External Action Service under the new *Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security*. Yet, national differences persist. For some states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, economic security equates to energy diversification; for others, to technological sovereignty or industrial competitiveness. These divergences reveal a deeper tension between the *federal logic* of strategic autonomy and the *intergovernmental reflex* of national protectionism.

### 3.4 The Securitisation of the Internal Market

As security considerations permeate economic governance, the internal market itself becomes a field of strategic contestation. Resilience, criticality, and supply security are now legal and economic categories guiding investment screening, competition exceptions, and industrial alliances. The single market thus evolves from a zone of efficiency to a *strategic ecosystem*.

This securitisation entails both opportunities and risks. It strengthens the EU's ability to withstand coercion but may strain its commitment to openness. Pisani-Ferry, Weder, and Zettelmeyer (2024) warn that excessive risk-aversion could undermine competitiveness, potentially resulting in what might be termed as *self-imposed inefficiency*. The challenge is to design a regulatory architecture that enhances autonomy without sliding into autarky. The emerging *Economic Security Doctrine* (Zuleeg, 2023) seeks precisely that balance: transforming Europe's once-reactive market governance into a proactive framework of strategic preparedness.

## 4. The Geoeconomic Turn in EU Security Policy

### 4.1 From Market Power to Strategic Power

For decades, the EU's influence rested on the logic of *Market Power Europe* (Damro, 2012): its regulatory standards set global norms through attraction rather than coercion. But the world in which that logic thrived—stable, liberal, and rule-based—has faded. As Helwig and Wigell (2022) observe, the EU's *open strategic autonomy* represents not the abandonment of liberalism but its adaptation to a more competitive order. The Union's economic identity is being redefined through strategy: the power to decide when and how openness serves its interests.

Sanctions against Russia, restrictions on dual-use exports, and the Anti-Coercion Instrument illustrate this transformation. They show how law becomes a weapon of choice: precise, procedural, and legitimate. In contrast to classic hard power, the EU's strength lies in *institutionalising deterrence*: constraining adversaries not through threat of force but through

the credible promise of regulatory retaliation. This is the essence of Europe's emerging "economic statecraft" (Balfour and Ülgen, 2024).

## 4.2 Resilience as Strategic Depth

Resilience is no longer a passive buffer, but a form of *strategic depth* understood not as geographic space, but as the economic and industrial redundancy that allows Europe to absorb shocks without political paralysis. In this broader geoeconomic sense, strategic depth derives from diversified supply chains, secure access to critical inputs, and the ability to maintain essential functions under stress. The Economic Security Strategy explicitly treats resilience as both shield and signal: the more shock-proof Europe becomes, the more credible it is as a geopolitical actor (Szczepański, 2025). This understanding elevates supply chains from technical concerns to strategic infrastructures, linking industrial, trade, and defence agendas.

As Pisani-Ferry, Weder, and Zettelmeyer (2024) argue, de-risking must focus on *high-impact dependencies*, those whose disruption would inflict systemic costs. The EU's approach is therefore selective, not isolationist: it targets critical vulnerabilities rather than retreating from global markets. This measured strategy, blending pragmatism with ambition, is what makes the EU's geoeconomic model distinctive. It is not a fortress Europe, but a *resilient network state* anchored in law, diversified through partnerships, and guided by risk intelligence.

## 4.3 Law as Instrumental Power

In this new order, law has become Europe's most sophisticated weapon (Bradford, 2020). Legal mechanisms, such as export controls, procurement rules, and competition exemptions, now operate as tools of strategic intervention. The EU's "power of regulation" functions as a diplomatic language through which Europe projects authority without confrontation. The *Economic Security Doctrine* aims to formalise this by providing guidelines on when and how these tools should be deployed coherently (Szczepański, 2025).

This represents a quiet revolution in EU governance: the fusion of *legality and strategy*. The same legalism once designed to constrain power now enables it. The EU's procedural rigor, often derided as technocratic inertia (Bradford, 2020), has become a source of credibility in an era of transactional politics. Brussels wields complexity as deterrence.

## 4.4 Normative Tensions and Strategic Coherence

Yet this geoeconomic assertiveness introduces normative friction. By framing economic openness as conditional on security, the EU risks alienating partners who view its measures as disguised protectionism. The challenge, as Zuleeg (2023) warns, is to prevent *defensive policy* from morphing into *defensive identity*. The Union must preserve its normative legitimacy while exercising strategic discipline.

The coherence of the EU's new model will depend on its ability to navigate three delicate balances: between *autonomy and alliance* (vis-à-vis NATO and the U.S.) not as a path toward military decoupling but as a way of managing asymmetrical interdependence, between *protection and competitiveness* ensuring that security measures do not ossify the single market, and between *principle and pragmatism* echoing the EU's own doctrine of "principled pragmatism" as it seeks to maintain normative commitments while operating in a far harsher strategic environment. Europe's strength lies not in imitation of great powers, but in the sophistication of its interdependence (Balfour and Ülgen, 2024).

Ultimately, the geoeconomic turn does not signal Europe's militarisation but its *strategic maturation*. And while ports, pipelines, and critical nodes remain anchored in national jurisdictions, their strategic relevance lies in how domestic infrastructures now shape collective exposure, illustrating how economic systems, not just territorial borders, define Europe's

security landscape. The EU's ability to translate law into leverage, and resilience into credibility, may well define what European power means in the twenty-first century.

## 5. Implications for European Defence and Foreign Policy

The EU's turn toward economic security and geoeconomic strategy has far-reaching consequences for its evolving role in defence, diplomacy, and alliance politics. The growing integration of supply chain resilience, industrial policy, and external relations signals a paradigm shift: Europe's capacity to act militarily or diplomatically now depends on its capacity to *produce, procure, and protect*. The frontier of security has expanded from borders to factories, from military arsenals to microchips.

At the same time, this shift drops Brussels straight into an old-but-new academic quarrel: can a Union built on law and regulations really anchor a credible security posture? Some see the rise of a "regulatory security state" governing threats with rules rather than rifles (Kruck and Weiss, 2023); others note that no amount of regulation stops a tank (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2023).

### 5.1 Economic Security as Strategic Foundation

Defence and foreign policy increasingly hinge on the integrity of economic systems. The Economic Security Strategy (2023) and European Defence Industrial Strategy (2024) jointly recognise that technological sovereignty and supply chain continuity are prerequisites for strategic credibility. As Guntram and Poitiers (2025) discuss, Europe's rearmament cannot rely on policy declarations; it must rest on an integrated industrial and regulatory foundation.

This blurring of civilian and defence economies is visible in tools such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), which reveal how industrial policy has become an instrument of security governance. The logic is simple: resilience is deterrence. The ability to supply, sustain, and substitute becomes as crucial as the ability to deploy.

Economic resilience also functions as strategic signalling: a Europe able to withstand coercion shows credibility to allies and adversaries alike. This is deterrence by durability; a distinctly European form of strength built on preparedness rather than projection. Yet here the EU's security paradox emerges: its influence flows through standards and regulation, not heavy armour. A regulatory security state can streamline procurement, but it cannot replace the hard capacities that still determine outcomes when crises escalate (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2023).

### 5.2 Strategic Autonomy and Transatlantic Balance

The EU's pursuit of *open strategic autonomy* does not imply disengagement from NATO or the U.S., but a recalibration of burden-sharing through economic means. As Helwig and Wigell (2022) note, autonomy and alliance are complementary: securing supply chains and diversifying dependencies strengthens collective defence.

However, transatlantic coordination is far from frictionless. Divergent approaches to industrial subsidies, export controls, and green technologies have produced tension, particularly over the U.S.'s *Inflation Reduction Act* and EU countermeasures under the *Net-Zero Industry Act*. As Zuleeg (2023) notes, the risk lies not in divergence itself but in fragmentation: without policy interoperability, Europe's efforts at autonomy could be misread as protectionism.

The challenge is alignment without subordination; ensuring Europe can act jointly with NATO while retaining discretion over its economic instruments. Still, a structural truth remains: Europe's regulatory strength ultimately rests on NATO's hard backbone. Regulation may shape the battlefield, but it does not replace it.

### 5.3 The EU as a Diplomatic Geoeconomic Actor

The EU's external action increasingly fuses diplomacy with economics. Initiatives such as the Global Gateway, the Critical Raw Materials Club, and supply chain partnerships with Japan, Canada, and Australia illustrate how the Union exports *resilience as diplomacy* (Balfour and Ülgen, 2024). Rather than wielding coercion, the EU seeks to shape global governance through incentives, regulation, and connectivity investments. This reflects a new form of European statecraft, the *diplomacy of interdependence*. It is not interdependence itself that is new, but the EU's deliberate use of it as a strategic instrument.

By promoting interoperable production networks and setting standards for transparency, sustainability, and security, the EU extends its influence while nudging national industrial systems toward greater alignment. The approach is subtle but strategic: it cultivates convergence rather than commanding it. In a transactional world, this remains Europe's competitive edge, its ability to translate values into supply-chain architecture.

### 5.4 Risks, Constraints, and Strategic Coherence

Despite these advances, Europe's emerging security architecture faces internal and external constraints. Divergent threat perceptions, industrial asymmetries, and fiscal limits complicate a unified economic-security posture. Nationally fragmented de-risking strategies risk inefficiency and incoherence (Pisani-Ferry, Weder, and Zettelmeyer, 2024). The EU's *Economic Security Doctrine* aims to prevent precisely this by establishing a unified framework for risk assessment, decision-making, and burden-sharing (Szczepański, 2025).

Yet coherence requires more than institutional design; it demands political clarity. As Zuleeg (2023) discusses, Europe must decide what kind of power it wants to be before it can act like one, a hardly a new conundrum. The EU must balance three enduring tensions: between *defence integration and national sovereignty*, between *security and competitiveness*, and between *resilience and openness*.

Ultimately, the EU's emerging geoeconomic paradigm compels a *cultural* shift. Security is no longer confined to soldiers or sanctions; it is embedded in supply chains, data flows, and industrial ecosystems. Whether the EU can integrate law, economy, and strategy will shape not only its role in NATO but its identity as a geopolitical actor. Yet limits remain: a Union adept at managing risks is not automatically capable of deterrence. As Levi-Faur (2023) stresses, risk governance cannot substitute for the coercive capacities that rest with the positive state.

## 6. Conclusion

The European Union's reorientation toward economic security and supply chain resilience signifies more than regulatory reform; it marks a *strategic reinvention*. The Union is moving from being a market-driven integration project to a *geoeconomic polity* capable of governing interdependence through law and policy.

This paper has shown that the EU's shift from liberal economic governance to risk-based strategic management reflects a new political economy of security. Supply chains are no longer neutral conduits of trade but infrastructures of power. The EU's evolving legal instruments, such as investment screening, anti-coercion measures, and critical raw materials governance, constitute the legal scaffolding of this transformation.

Yet Europe's challenge lies in coherence and restraint. An excessive focus on security risks undermining the multilateral order the EU seeks to preserve. The task ahead is to translate *resilience into strategy*, not just insulating Europe from shocks but positioning it to shape global norms.

At the same time, Europe's turn to legalised geoeconomics is not a substitute for traditional power. The EU may excel at governing interdependence, but it remains constrained by the

simple reality that regulation cannot fully replace capacity. The future of European security will hinge on whether Brussels can align its regulatory ambition with the hard-power responsibilities that still rest with member states, and whether this hybrid model can deliver credibility in a far less forgiving world.

In sum, Europe's future security will depend less on fortifications and more on foresight. In a world where supply chains are the new front lines, the EU's experiment in *legalised geoeconomics*, anchored in resilience, openness, and rule-based autonomy, may prove its most sophisticated form of defence.

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