

THE FUTURE INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S SOFT POWER DILEMMA

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Abstract: *The change in the balance of power on the global stage marks the end of an era, and a new beginning in the International System, devoid of a central power. For 80 years, the United States has been a guarantor of peace and democracy. Moreover, thanks to the American initiative, the precursor organizations of the current European Union were born. With the re-election of the American President, Donald Trump, the post-war order began to erode. A reorganization is taking shape on the world stage, and a trade war is intensifying day by day. In this system, however, a dilemma arises for the European Union. Can the EU continue its activity only through soft power, or is there a need for a revitalization of the current mechanism? The study in question aims to develop an analysis in which it will establish a potential scenario of the future world order, and a potential paradigm shift in the dynamics of the European Union. The work is based on official speeches, specialized literature in the field of international relations and strategic documents.*

Keywords: *Soft Power, Hard Power, Smart Power, International Order*

1. INTRODUCTION

Classified as anarchic by realist theorists, the international system is shaped by the decisions of the great powers, which act in accordance with their own interests.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, a unipolar global order was established. The USA became the only entity with world power. In this new system, it fought for peace and democracy, and in this whole equation, the European Union was an essential partner. The two actors collaborated for the democratization of Eastern Europe and integration into the European community after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Additionally, new NATO expansions took place towards Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary. A strategic rapprochement was that of the invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty by the USA after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The European Union supported the United States in the "War on Terror".

Essentially, until Donald Trump's first term, US-EU relations were based on a close partnership. The United States was a guarantor of security, while the European Union promoted democracy and human rights, exercising its influence through values, rules and

standards, not through force, in the logic of soft power, as Joseph Nye shows. The two actors complemented each other. A substantial rupture, however, occurred with the appearance of Donald Trump on the scene as President of America. With him, disagreements regarding trade relations and strategic autonomy emerged. New realities are taking shape on the international stage. The United States hesitates from the perspective of supporting democracies against aggressors, the most relevant example being the Russian-Ukrainian war. In order to obtain military and financial support against Russia, Ukraine accepted the signing of an agreement for the exploitation of rare minerals on Ukrainian lands by the Americans.

The situation on the world market is equally unsatisfactory. The United States is imposing colossal tariffs on products imported from the EU, China and Canada, which has led to a tense economic climate. In a press statement, Trump said "The European Union has been very unfair to the United States" (Euronews, 2025), and announced 25% tariffs on European cars. Currently, the general tariff applied to almost all goods imported into the US is 10%. We can see how relations between the two actors are gradually deteriorating. In this regard, the EU will have to make decisions regarding the security of the community and the gradual liquidation of dependence on the United States.

This paper aims to analyze a potential evolution of the future world order, from the perspective of Offensive Realism. At the same time, in the context of these changes, the Soft Power dilemma of the European Union will be introduced. The study aims to demonstrate the attempted transition from soft to hard power of the EU.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Soft Power and Hard Power: a conceptual delimitation

Before analyzing possible scenarios of action of international actors, or the EU's transition to Hard Power, it is important to know some theoretical bases of International Relations used in this study. Only through them is it possible to classify actors or explain the actions taken by leaders.

The concepts of Soft Power and Hard Power were first introduced by the representative of the neoliberal school of international relations, the American specialist in foreign policy and professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University - Joseph Nye. In its early stages, the term soft power was found in Joseph Nye's work "Bound to lead: The changing nature of American Power". It is a theoretical concept that describes "the ability of states or institutions to attract and persuade others through non-coercive means". In other words, soft power is "obtaining results based on positive convictions". In Nye's view, this type of power is based on three main elements: *Culture*; *Diplomacy*; *Political ideology*.

The theorist believes that "the state, the holder of this power, will be able to realize its own interests without resorting to direct and hard influence or threats." At the opposite pole is Hard Power, also introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990. In contrast to Soft power, hard power means exercising influence over another actor through coercion (Ejova, 2025:209-210). It involves the use of various instruments of influence such as: economic sanctions, bribery or the threat of military action, to achieve political goals. In short, a coercive power.

2.2. Smart Power in International Relations: Strategic Efficiency and Adaptability

Joseph Nye also later developed the concept of “smart power”. Appearing during the Barack Obama administration, it involves a combination of hard and soft tools. A classic approach to the balance between fear and attraction is formulated by Machiavelli in his work “The Prince”: “The question is thus put, whether it is better to be loved than feared, or vice versa. The answer is that you should be both. But since it is difficult to reconcile these two things, I say that, when one of the two must be missing, it is much safer for you to be feared than loved.” (Machiavelli, 2022:61). This famous quote is easily applicable to the case of smart power. Joseph Nye sees the combination of hard and soft means as an effective strategy for achieving the desired objectives. However, the fusion of the two is difficult to manage, sometimes resulting in failures.

The most relevant example, at present, is the erosion of American soft power. The current Trump administration promotes unilateralism and a transactional approach to international relations, instead of multinational cooperation and diplomacy. The American leader no longer considers soft instruments - cultural exchanges or foreign collaboration - but opts for "hard" mechanisms, i.e. customs tariffs or withdrawal from international agreements.

In this context, the American example justifies the idea that the balance between soft and hard power is difficult to manage, and the existence of the smart power paradigm does not mean its effective implementation in a system.

3. The return to bipolarism and the EU dilemma

3.1. Reconfiguring the world order: A look at international affairs

These new geopolitical changes can be validated by the evolution of actors over time. In the last 25 years, the US has tended to consolidate its position as a hegemon by coercing other state actors that posed a threat to its status: "When a country becomes really strong, in the international system, you can be sure that Uncle Sam will point his gun at that country." (Xuetong et al., 2025). This perspective has led to the projection of American influence in the strategic proximity of China and Russia. Feeling threatened, the two states have decided to consolidate their power. The emergence of the Chinese state on the scene seems to be taking place through soft power. The Belt and Road Initiative is an attempt to bring to light Chinese infrastructural innovations. Moreover, there is a global affirmation of China through the "Chinese Dream", an adaptation of the "American Dream" according to Chinese ambitions. Although it seems to be only soft power, Chinese consolidation actions are also accompanied by an investment in the modernization of military forces. The "Chinese Dream" is a political and ideological concept promoted by the President of China, Xi Jinping, which designates the objective of China's national revival.

In the current circumstances, the Chinese fleet is making its presence felt in the South China Sea. Moreover, in 2022, a university in Amsterdam closed a research center. Although it was supposed to be independent, it was funded by Chinese entities: “Their disinformation is spreading from the internet into the halls of our universities.” (European Commission, 2022). The center disseminated human rights research, dismissing evidence of forced labor camps for Uyghurs.

Russia, however, has been expanding its influence through aggressive initiatives. Actions of electoral manipulation, cyber-attacks, and the war in Ukraine, which is currently

underway, are what define the strengthening of Russian authority against American external pressure. Before making a classification of these actions, we must understand that according to realist theory, the international system is devoid of a central power, and survival is the main concern of the actors. Therefore, China and the Russian Federation act according to the principles of offensive realism.

This brief explanation and justification of the actions was necessary to be able to introduce the following scenario.

The future world order will be characterized by a "Cold War 2.0" between American and Sino-Russian forces. The current trade war will turn into an arms race. The Chinese rise cannot be peaceful for the simple reason that the United States does not accept the presence of a new regional hegemon on the scene. In this whole equation, the European Union will have to survive on its own. The dilemma I mentioned earlier is nothing more than the transition from soft power to hard power. Although it was initially built as a soft actor, the challenges on the world stage force the organization to adopt a new policy for its functioning. Since neither of the two actors - China or the USA - demonstrates loyalty in terms of defense and collective collaboration, the EU will have to strengthen its strategic autonomy in relation to other actors.

3.2. The Crisis of the Post-Pandemic International Order

In 2019, the world was hit by an unprecedented health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound global impact, affecting not only public health, but also economies, societies and the existing geopolitical order. According to official data from the World Health Organization (WHO), by May 2022, the number of deaths due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus had exceeded six million victims worldwide (<https://stats.who.int>). This was just one of the many devastating effects of the pandemic. To overcome such a global crisis, one would have expected states to cooperate internationally, share resources, and act in a coordinated manner. However, the reality was much more complex and less collaborative. Instead of building a united front against a common threat, the international system, already characterized by a high degree of anarchy and geopolitical competition, was marked by a "self-help" behavior, in which each state acted in its own interest, significantly limiting global collaboration.

A relevant example of this individualistic reaction is the measures imposed by nation states, which have introduced border restrictions and taken control of essential resources, such as protective equipment. The US, for example, under the Trump administration, decided to ban the export of N95 masks, gloves and other personal protective equipment (PPE), arguing that available resources should be used exclusively for domestic needs, thus ignoring the needs of other countries affected by the pandemic. This measure underlined the "zero-sum" principle characteristic of realist theory in international relations, in which "others' gain is your loss" and each state protects its own interests, to the detriment of international cooperation (Çatakli et al., 2023).

The pandemic has also deepened divisions between major powers, and the rivalry between the US and China has reached a peak. On 7 April 2020, President Donald Trump announced a temporary suspension of US funding to the World Health Organization (WHO), citing the WHO's "China-centrism" and accusing the organization of being too favorable to

Beijing in its handling of the crisis. At the same time, the US administration has suggested that the virus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, while Chinese authorities have claimed that US soldiers were responsible for the spread of the virus. These mutual accusations and manipulation of information have shown how a global crisis can exacerbate existing geopolitical tensions and harm international cooperation (Çataklı et al., 2023).

On the other hand, another manifestation of geopolitical competition during the pandemic was China's "Mask Diplomacy", which became a key player in providing medical protective equipment to European countries, especially when Europe became the new epicenter of the health crisis (Bram, 2020). China has offered significant donations of masks and equipment, which many European states have interpreted as an opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations with Beijing, at a time when cooperation between the European Union and the United States has been marked by uncertainty and divergent approaches. These diplomatic gestures, however, have been perceived differently by European leaders, who, while acknowledging China's help, have become increasingly aware of the risks of growing dependence on a non-Western power that could exploit the crisis to advance its geopolitical influence.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point for the European Union, which was forced to reassess its security and strategic autonomy. Instead of relying entirely on traditional partnerships, especially with the United States, for its security, the Union realized that greater autonomy in critical areas was essential to respond effectively to future crises. The crisis demonstrated that, in a volatile and uncertain global context, the EU cannot depend exclusively on other international actors, especially when they prioritize their own interests over a collective global response. The pandemic was thus a revealing moment in the process of strengthening the European Union's strategic autonomy.

The speech by European Council President Charles Michel at the opening session of the Bled Strategic Forum in September 2021 highlighted this reality. Michel said that the pandemic was the "acceleration of history" and stressed the need for Europe to "speak the language of power", developing a "common strategic culture" and preparing to become an autonomous global actor, capable of protecting its own interests in the face of external threats. Michel stressed that Europe must build its own capabilities to ensure its security, in order not to depend on other actors who, in times of crisis, might act in their own interests (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/>).

The pandemic has also had a significant impact on the European Union's position in international relations, highlighting the need to strengthen internal security, develop a more assertive foreign policy and invest in strategic industries, such as the production of protective equipment, medicines and essential technologies. Although the Union has implemented economic and financial measures to support affected Member States, the pandemic has shown that, in the face of global crises, the EU needs to build its own resources and capacities, without relying exclusively on external actors.

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis accelerated the process of digitalization and innovation in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries, but also in key economic sectors, which was essential for strengthening the economic and technological autonomy of the European Union. In this sense, the pandemic was not only a test of the crisis response, but also a turning point that led to a reconsideration of the Union's foreign and security policy.

Thus, the post-COVID context was one in which the European Union understood more clearly that in order to navigate global challenges and assert itself on the international stage, it must abandon its traditional "soft power" policy and invest in a "hard power" strategy. This includes not only the development of military and defense capabilities, but also greater internal cohesion and a more assertive foreign policy, reflecting the strategic interest of the Union.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a defining moment in the process of strengthening the European Union's strategic autonomy, and political speeches, such as that of Charles Michel, emphasized the need for a serious commitment by the Union to become an autonomous global actor, capable of acting in its own interest, regardless of external circumstances.

3.3. The conflict in Ukraine - the threshold of redefinition

Another major event that significantly influenced the redefinition of the European Union as a global actor was the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022. It represented a decisive rupture in Europe's perception of its security and highlighted the vulnerabilities of the international system to aggression. The war demonstrated once again the unpredictable nature of contemporary geopolitics and the dangers to which regions without a solid and unitary defense are exposed.

In the analysis of this conflict, an essential concept is that of power, which plays a central role in determining the behavior of international actors. Within the realist theory of political science, power is defined as "the capacity of an actor (A) to determine another actor (B) to take actions that B would not have taken voluntarily". Extending this definition to the level of the international system, power also becomes the capacity of a state to create, transform or destroy worlds and international orders. In the specific case of the Russian Federation, the military power it holds, as well as its use against Ukraine, had devastating effects, not only on Ukraine, but also on the entire region. In this sense, Russia played the role of an aggressor, having the capacity to destabilize an entire society, destroying critical infrastructure and causing large-scale economic and political crises in Eastern Europe, but also in the entire European Union.

This war had a direct impact on the European Union, highlighting a series of strategic vulnerabilities that required a rapid and coordinated response. One of the most obvious effects was the energy crisis, largely generated by the sanctions imposed on Russia and the halt in natural gas and oil supplies to Europe. This crisis clearly demonstrated that the European Union could no longer depend on other actors to ensure the energy security and stability of its region. Faced with this reality, European leaders were forced to find alternative solutions to diversify energy sources and reduce dependence on Russian resources. This was a crucial moment in understanding the need for greater strategic and economic autonomy in the face of an obvious external threat.

In this context, Josep Borrell, as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, emphasized in an important speech that "the idea of power is 'new in Europe'" (<https://www.g4media.ro/>). According to him, for the first time since World War II, "danger, threat and fear have materialized in an undeniable way". This reasoning was supported by the current geopolitical context, which led the European Union to directly

confront its own vulnerabilities in the field of security. The war in Ukraine forced the European Union to rethink its security strategy and re-evaluate its place on the global stage. Thus, the Union began to understand that it could no longer depend exclusively on the “virtue of soft power”, as it did in the past, but must also invest in stronger defense and security capabilities, in order to be able to protect its own interests and fundamental values.

A key point in this discussion is that, although the European Union has implemented economic and sanctions measures against Russia, it has not yet fully strengthened its own defense capabilities. Borrell stressed that the process of strengthening defense and security will be long and uneven, but that this step is absolutely necessary for the future of the Union. He noted that there is no quick fix and that this process should be accompanied by greater coordination between member states and a more integrated defense policy. Borrell also stated that the future of the European Union depends on its ability to adopt a more coherent and assertive foreign policy, reflecting current security needs, but also preparing for possible future crises.

The war in Ukraine was a determining factor in reconfiguring the position of the European Union as a geopolitical actor. It showed that, in the face of major external threats, the EU cannot maintain its strategy based exclusively on “soft power” and that it must invest in “hard power” to ensure its long-term security and stability. Thus, the crisis highlighted the need to strengthen the Union’s strategic autonomy, which is a strategic priority for European leaders in the context of new global challenges.

3.4. The EU Dilemma: Soft Power in a Hard World

This brief explanation was necessary to introduce the scenario that is looming before the European Union in the current context of geopolitical changes. The future world order will undoubtedly be marked by a confrontation between two dominant blocs – that of the American forces and the Sino-Russian one, a “Cold War 2.0” that will transform the economic and commercial conflict into a veritable arms race. The rise of China, supported by an alliance with Russia, cannot be a peaceful one, given that the United States, as an undisputed global leader, will not accept a new regional hegemon that threatens the established order. In this complex geopolitical equation, the European Union will be forced to navigate alone. The challenges imposed by the crisis in Ukraine, but also by the post-pandemic context, will force the EU to redefine its foreign and security policy.

The dilemma referred to is not just a theoretical one, but represents a concrete reality: the transition from soft power to hard power. Although the European Union was initially built as a global actor based on economic, diplomatic and cultural power, the international context has rapidly evolved into a more conflictual and unstable environment, in which influence can no longer be obtained solely through non-coercive means. The war in Ukraine and the energy crisis caused by Russian aggression have demonstrated that, faced with direct threats, the Union cannot depend exclusively on external partnerships or the “virtue” of soft power. Just as the pandemic has shown that the EU must build its own resources to deal with global crises, in the context of a hybrid war such as the one in Ukraine, the Union will have to build its own defense. In a world where neither China nor the United States offers full loyalty in terms of collective defense, the EU will no longer be able to rely on external solidarity and will need to strengthen its strategic autonomy to ensure the peace and security of its region.

4. The „ReArm EU” Project – Transition to Hard Power?

4.1. From Crisis to Reaction: The Triggers of “ReArm Europe”

In her State of the Union address, Ursula von der Leyen highlighted the need to increase the strategic resilience of the European Union in the field of defence. In her speech on 14 September 2022, she addressed a number of topics that require special attention. Discussing reform, the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine in her address, the Commission President stated: “We will not allow Trojan horses of autocracy to attack our democracies from within...That is why we will present a package to defend democracy.” (European Commission, 2022). The President’s initiative emphasized the need to mobilize the Union to secure its Member States. In her 2023 speech, Ursula Von Der Leyen noted the idea that “European citizens want a Union that defends them in a time of fierce competition between powers.” (European Commission, 2025). Many of these arms and security measures have been triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, the incursions were given greater weight this spring - 2025 - when US President Donald Trump showed a tendency to withdraw from economic and security collaborations with the EU.

A series of public statements by the new president have forced a reorientation of European community policies. His expressions, such as: “If they don’t pay, I won’t defend them” (D. Trump) expressed reservations about the US commitment to defend NATO members that do not reach the established level of defense spending. On March 3, Trump suspended military aid to Ukraine, after a confrontation with leader Volodymyr Zelensky. There have been numerous moments that have made European leaders worry about the reliability of security guarantees offered by the US.

On 4 March, the Commission President presented the "ReArm Europe" plan, which aims to mobilise €800 billion to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities. By implementing this project, Member States will each receive a long-term loan of up to €150 billion. With their contribution, States can support joint public procurement of defence products, with priority being given to: missiles and ammunition, military mobility, air and missile defence, etc. This new EU instrument will be established under Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), providing "financial assistance to Member States threatened with serious difficulties caused by exceptional events linked to the political situation".

4.2. Support and reservations: Political echoes of the "ReArm Europe" project

When presenting the White Paper on European Defence, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, "The era of the peace dividend is long over. The security architecture on which we relied can no longer be taken for granted." (Calea Europeană, 2025), thus signaling the urgent long-term need to strengthen Europe's security and defense.

European leaders welcomed the initiative, but also expressed some reservations. The Polish Prime Minister noted that "Europe, as a whole, is truly capable of winning any financial, economic or military conflict with Russia. We are simply stronger." (Poland Prime-minister, 2025), expressing confidence in the organization's ability to meet the challenges. Antonio Costa, President of the European Council, highlighted the unprecedented consensus among EU leaders "In one month we have given birth to the Europe of Defense" (European Parliament, 2025), emphasizing the need for strategic autonomy on the continent. However,

the project has also met with criticism. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez argued that the term "ReArme" is "an incomplete approach", and that "defense can be explained under a much broader umbrella, which is security". (Grosu, 2025).

For the Americans, however, this measure would mean restricting access to defense contracts for American companies. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has told European allies that restricting the opportunities for American companies to obtain defense contracts would be viewed negatively by Washington. Adding to this, at a NATO meeting in Brussels, Rubio proposed increasing NATO members' defense spending to 5%, claiming that "wealthy Western countries are not investing enough in their own defense capabilities." These statements reflect tensions between the US and the EU over European strategic autonomy - an action viewed quite skeptically by American officials.

In general, this approach, within the structures of the organization, is a logical consequence of the current situation. First of all, it is an expression of the European Union's transition to hard power. The project in question will increase the EU's credibility in the geopolitical plan, making it an independent actor on the stage. Although the plan presents significant political and operational complexity, its implementation will facilitate a consolidation of the position in relation to other major powers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, the global geopolitical climate remains characterized by a constant level of tension. The United States prefers nationalist initiatives to alliances with external partners. The Chinese state demonstrates a significant rise as a regional power. Xi Jinping exercises greater influence over Russian leader Vladimir Putin than Donald Trump could demonstrate. Thus, realignments are emerging between the great powers, a context in which the European Union is forced to navigate autonomously. For this reason, it can no longer act as a soft actor on the stage, but only as a hard power, having strategic independence in relation to other actors and greater influence internationally.

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