

A Strong EU for a Balanced World

ძლიერი ევროკავშირი დაბალანსებული მსოფლიოსთვის

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Abstract

Introduction: The evolving multipolar international order, increasingly shaped by strategic competition between the United States and China, has intensified debate over the European Union’s capacity to act as an independent geopolitical actor. This paper examines how a stronger and more cohesive EU could contribute to global power equilibrium, with particular attention to strategic autonomy and enlargement as instruments of geopolitical influence. **Methods:** The study employs a qualitative review and policy-analysis approach. It synthesizes recent academic literature, European Union policy documents, institutional communications, and contemporary policy analyses concerning EU–US and EU–China relations, European strategic autonomy, and the ongoing enlargement process. Particular attention is given to developments involving Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans, transatlantic trade relations, and EU dependence on Chinese critical supply chains. **Results:** The analysis indicates that enlargement can increase the EU’s economic, demographic, geographic, and geopolitical weight and strengthen its capacity to act as a stabilizing counterweight within an increasingly multipolar international system. Recent accession developments involving Ukraine and Moldova illustrate the growing geopolitical role of enlargement. However, greater territorial and economic scale does not automatically produce strategic autonomy. Internal divisions among member states, unanimity-based decision-making, dependence on United States security guarantees, and reliance on Chinese strategic supply chains continue to constrain the EU’s capacity for collective action. **Conclusion:** A stronger EU can contribute to a more balanced and multilateral global order, but enlargement alone is insufficient. Its geopolitical benefits depend on parallel institutional reform, greater economic and security resilience, diversification of external dependencies, and stronger political cohesion. Enlargement and internal reform should therefore be pursued as complementary elements of a broader European strategy for strategic autonomy and global influence.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, Geopolitical Enlargement, Multipolarity, Stabilizing Counterweight.

აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი: თანამედროვე მრავალპოლუსიანი საერთაშორისო წესრიგი, რომელიც სულ უფრო მეტად განისაზღვრება შეერთებულ შტატებსა და ჩინეთს შორის სტრატეგიული კონკურენციით, აძლიერებს დისკუსიას იმის შესახებ, თუ რამდენად შეუძლია ევროკავშირს დამოუკიდებელი გეოპოლიტიკური აქტორის როლის შესრულება. წინამდებარე ნაშრომი განიხილავს, თუ როგორ შეუძლია უფრო ძლიერ და ერთიან ევროკავშირს ხელი შეუწყოს გლობალური ძალთა ბალანსის შენარჩუნებას, განსაკუთრებული ყურადღებით სტრატეგიულ ავტონომიასა და გაფართოებაზე, როგორც გეოპოლიტიკური გავლენის ინსტრუმენტებზე.

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მეთოდები: კვლევაში გამოყენებულია თვისებრივი მიმოხილვისა და პოლიტიკის ანალიზის მიდგომა. გაანალიზებულია უახლესი აკადემიური ლიტერატურა, ევროკავშირის პოლიტიკის დოკუმენტები, ინსტიტუციური კომუნიკაციები და თანამედროვე პოლიტიკის ანალიტიკური მასალები, რომლებიც ეხება ევროკავშირი-აშშ-ისა და ევროკავშირი-ჩინეთის ურთიერთობებს, ევროპულ სტრატეგიულ ავტონომიასა და მიმდინარე გაფართოების პროცესს. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა უკრაინასთან, მოლდოვასთან, დასავლეთ ბალკანეთთან, ტრანსატლანტიკურ სავაჭრო ურთიერთობებთან და ჩინეთის კრიტიკულ მიწოდების ჯაჭვებზე ევროკავშირის დამოკიდებულებასთან დაკავშირებულ პროცესებს. **შედეგები:** ანალიზი აჩვენებს, რომ გაფართოებას შეუძლია გაზარდოს ევროკავშირის ეკონომიკური, დემოგრაფიული, გეოგრაფიული და გეოპოლიტიკური წონა და გააძლიეროს მისი უნარი, შეასრულოს დამაბალანსებელი ძალის როლი სულ უფრო მრავალპოლუსიან საერთაშორისო სისტემაში. უკრაინისა და მოლდოვის გაწევრიანების პროცესთან დაკავშირებული უახლესი მოვლენები ცხადყოფს გაფართოების მზარდ გეოპოლიტიკურ მნიშვნელობას. თუმცა, უფრო დიდი ტერიტორიული და ეკონომიკური მასშტაბი ავტომატურად არ ნიშნავს სტრატეგიულ ავტონომიას. წევრ სახელმწიფოებს შორის შიდა უთანხმოება, ერთსულოვნებაზე დაფუძნებული გადაწყვეტილების მიღება, აშშ-ის უსაფრთხოების გარანტიებზე დამოკიდებულება და ჩინეთის სტრატეგიულ მიწოდების ჯაჭვებზე მიბმულობა კვლავ ზღუდავს ევროკავშირის კოლექტიური მოქმედების შესაძლებლობას. **დასკვნა:** ძლიერ ევროკავშირს შეუძლია მნიშვნელოვანი წვლილი შეიტანოს უფრო დაბალანსებული და მრავალმხრივი მსოფლიო წესრიგის ჩამოყალიბებაში, თუმცა მხოლოდ გაფართოება ამისათვის საკმარისი არ არის. მისი გეოპოლიტიკური სარგებელი დამოკიდებულია პარალელურ ინსტიტუციურ რეფორმებზე, ეკონომიკური და უსაფრთხოების მდგრადობის გაძლიერებაზე, საგარეო დამოკიდებულებების დივერსიფიკაციასა და უფრო მტკიცე პოლიტიკურ ერთიანობაზე. შესაბამისად, გაფართოება და შიდა რეფორმები უნდა განიხილებოდეს როგორც ევროპული სტრატეგიული ავტონომიისა და გლობალური გავლენის გაძლიერების ერთიანი სტრატეგიის ურთიერთშემავსებელი ელემენტები.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: სტრატეგიული ავტონომია, გეოპოლიტიკური გაფართოება, მრავალპოლუსიანობა, დამაბალანსებელი ძალა.

1. Introduction

The international system is undergoing a period of profound structural transformation. After the brief unipolar moment that followed the end of the Cold War, the global order is once again being shaped by competition among major powers. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China increasingly influences debates over trade, technology, security, and global governance across virtually every region of the world, compelling other actors to reconsider their geopolitical positioning (Simón & Fiott, 2025). Within this evolving landscape, the European Union (EU) occupies a distinctive position. It is neither a conventional nation-state nor merely an economic bloc, but a hybrid political entity in which member states retain substantial sovereign prerogatives in foreign policy while participating in an increasingly integrated economic, regulatory, and, more recently, security architecture (Anghel, 2025). This paper proceeds from the premise that the EU's ability to emerge as an autonomous pole within an increasingly multipolar international order—rather than being drawn predominantly into the strategic orbit of either Washington or Beijing—cannot be taken for granted. Rather, such a position must be actively constructed through deliberate political and institutional choices, among which enlargement is one of the most consequential.

The argument advanced in this paper is twofold. First, a cohesive and internally resilient EU can function as a stabilizing counterweight to the economic and political influence of the United States and China while offering a distinctive model of global governance grounded in multilateralism, the rule of law, institutional cooperation, and negotiated compromise rather than unilateral coercion. Second, the EU's ongoing and prospective enlargement—most visibly toward Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans—should not be understood merely as a technical process of regulatory alignment and institutional adaptation. It also constitutes an increasingly important geopolitical instrument capable of expanding the Union's economic weight, geographic reach, demographic base, and collective security capacity (European

Commission, 2025). In this sense, enlargement is increasingly framed by EU institutions not simply as an expression of solidarity or a continuation of the European integration project, but as a strategic means of preserving and strengthening Europe’s relevance in an international system in which scale, resilience, and collective capacity increasingly shape geopolitical influence.

This argument engages with a growing body of recent scholarship that characterizes the EU’s post-2022 trajectory as a process of “geopoliticization,” whereby enlargement, industrial policy, trade policy, and defense cooperation are increasingly understood as instruments of strategic power rather than as policy domains pursued primarily for their own sake (Anghel, 2025). Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is widely identified in this literature as a critical turning point. It returned enlargement to the center of the EU’s political agenda after more than a decade of so-called “enlargement fatigue,” while simultaneously exposing the Union’s continuing economic, technological, and security dependencies on both the United States and China (Hopewell, 2025; Meneley, 2026). At the same time, the literature cautions against interpreting these developments as evidence that the EU has already evolved into a traditional great power. Significant differences remain among member states in threat perceptions, economic exposure to China, strategic relations with the United States, and willingness to transfer additional sovereign authority to the EU level (Su & Liu, 2025). These internal divergences continue to constrain the Union’s capacity to translate its economic and regulatory strength into coherent geopolitical action.

Against this background, the paper examines how enlargement, strategic autonomy, and internal institutional cohesion interact in shaping the EU’s role within an emerging multipolar order. Section 2 reviews the Union’s current geopolitical position between the United States and China, the evolving dynamics of enlargement, and the debate on European strategic autonomy that connects these processes. The subsequent analysis considers recent and prospective enlargement developments as illustrations of the opportunities and constraints associated with the EU’s geopolitical transformation and assesses the institutional and policy conditions under which a larger Union could become a more effective and cohesive international actor. The paper ultimately considers the implications of these developments for the EU’s capacity to contribute to a more balanced, stable, and rules-based international order.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative literature review and policy-analysis approach to examine the European Union’s evolving geopolitical role in the context of intensifying United States–China competition, strategic autonomy, and enlargement. The analysis draws on recent peer-reviewed academic literature, official European Union documents, institutional communications, policy briefs, and selected contemporary policy analyses.

Relevant sources were identified on the basis of their direct relationship to four core analytical themes: (1) the EU’s geopolitical positioning between the United States and China; (2) European strategic autonomy; (3) EU enlargement as a geopolitical instrument; and (4) the institutional and security implications of further enlargement. Particular attention was given to literature and policy documents published after 2022, reflecting the significant changes in European security and enlargement policy following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The academic literature reviewed includes recent studies published in journals focusing on European integration, international relations, strategic autonomy, and EU external relations. In addition, official documents and communications from the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament were examined to assess how EU institutions frame enlargement, strategic autonomy, trade relations, and external dependencies. Policy reports and analyses from established research institutions and reputable international media sources were used to contextualize rapidly evolving developments that were not yet fully reflected in the peer-reviewed literature.

The analysis was thematic and interpretive rather than statistical. Sources were examined comparatively to identify recurring arguments, areas of convergence and disagreement, and changes in the framing of enlargement and strategic autonomy over time. Particular emphasis was placed on the extent to which enlargement is increasingly conceptualized not only as a process of regulatory and institutional integration, but also as an instrument for strengthening the EU’s economic, geopolitical, and security capacity.

Recent developments involving Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans, EU–US trade relations, and EU–China economic interdependence were used as illustrative cases to assess the practical implications of

these broader strategic trends. These cases were selected because they directly demonstrate the interaction between enlargement, external pressure, economic dependency, and internal EU cohesion.

The study does not seek to establish causal relationships or to provide quantitative estimates of the geopolitical effects of enlargement. Rather, its purpose is to synthesize recent academic and policy evidence in order to evaluate the conditions under which a larger and more strategically autonomous European Union could strengthen its position within an increasingly multipolar international order.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The European Union Between the United States and China

Europe's relationship with the United States and China has changed substantially in recent years. Historically, most European states have maintained much deeper security, economic, and societal ties with the United States than with China, and this asymmetry continues to shape the EU's external orientation (Esteban et al., 2025). Nevertheless, growing uncertainty within the transatlantic relationship—including tariff disputes, questions concerning the reliability of long-standing security commitments, and more transactional approaches to alliance politics—has intensified debates within Europe about the risks of excessive dependence on Washington (Meneley, 2026).

At the same time, the EU's relationship with China remains characterized by a complex combination of economic interdependence, strategic competition, and selective cooperation. China is both a major trading partner and a systemic rival whose expanding influence in strategically sensitive sectors, including semiconductors, artificial intelligence, critical raw materials, and advanced manufacturing, is increasingly viewed by European policymakers as a source of economic and geopolitical vulnerability (Su & Liu, 2025).

Recent scholarship suggests that the EU's response to this dual pressure is not straightforward alignment with either power, but rather an effort to preserve room for independent strategic action. Contrary to classical expectations that the United States and China would seek to bind Europe more closely to their respective geopolitical camps, the behavior of both powers has often been inconsistent, transactional, and driven by national interests. Paradoxically, such pressures have reinforced European debates on strategic autonomy and strengthened the Union's determination to defend a rules-based and more independent position in the global economy (Hopewell, 2025). Similar dynamics are visible in the security sphere, where the EU has sought to resist complete alignment with either Washington or Beijing on politically sensitive issues, including relations with Taiwan and broader security policy toward China (Tercovich & Meijer, 2025).

The EU's position should therefore be understood not as neutrality between the United States and China, but as an attempt to increase strategic choice. This distinction is important. Strategic autonomy does not imply equidistance from Washington and Beijing, nor does it require weakening the transatlantic relationship. Rather, it reflects an effort to reduce structural dependence and preserve the capacity to act when European and external interests diverge. The different ways in which this agenda is interpreted internationally further illustrate its ambiguity. While many European policymakers frame strategic autonomy primarily as protection against excessive dependence on external actors, Chinese political and academic discourse has sometimes interpreted a more autonomous Europe as a potential contributor to a more multipolar international order (Su & Liu, 2025). This divergence highlights the still-contested nature of the EU's evolving geopolitical identity.

3.2. EU Enlargement as a Geopolitical Instrument

EU enlargement has returned to the center of European strategic thinking after more than a decade of relative stagnation, particularly in relation to the Western Balkans. The European Commission now increasingly frames enlargement not only as a process of regulatory approximation and political transformation, but also as a geopolitical instrument that contributes to the Union's security, prosperity, and international influence (European Commission, 2025).

This shift in emphasis is significant. Earlier enlargement rounds were frequently presented in normative terms, emphasizing democratization, rule of law, market integration, and the consolidation of peace. These objectives remain important, but enlargement is now increasingly linked to broader questions of strategic competition, territorial reach, economic scale, demographic weight, and security. Candidate states such as Ukraine, Moldova, Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia are therefore entering an accession environment in which enlargement is evaluated not only in terms of compliance with EU rules, but also in terms of its implications for the Union's geopolitical capacity.

At the same time, the strategic value of enlargement is constrained by substantial institutional and political challenges. The accession process, particularly in the case of Ukraine, remains contested among member states. Proposals to accelerate accession have raised concerns about conditionality, the credibility of the merit-based process, institutional readiness, and the ability of an enlarged Union to preserve effective decision-making (DGAP, 2026). These concerns reveal a central tension: enlargement may strengthen the Union externally by increasing its territorial, economic, and demographic scale, while simultaneously making internal consensus more difficult to achieve.

This tension is particularly important because enlargement is no longer taking place in a relatively stable external environment. It is increasingly embedded in wider geopolitical competition, especially in Eastern Europe, where accession has become closely connected to security dynamics involving Russia and, to a different extent, the United States. Enlargement should therefore be understood not merely as an internal EU administrative process, but as part of a broader strategy through which the Union seeks to consolidate political influence, stabilize its neighborhood, and preserve its position within an increasingly competitive international system.

3.3. Strategic Autonomy: Opportunities, Constraints, and Internal Tensions

Strategic autonomy provides the conceptual link between the EU’s external positioning and its enlargement strategy. In broad terms, it refers to the Union’s capacity to act independently in key areas of economic, technological, security, and defense policy without being structurally dependent on a single external power (Meneley, 2026).

In recent years, the concept has evolved from a largely declaratory political aspiration into a framework increasingly associated with concrete policy instruments. These include efforts to strengthen the single market, diversify trade relations, reinforce industrial capacity, protect strategic sectors, reduce supply-chain vulnerabilities, and expand European defense cooperation. Such initiatives reflect a broader shift toward resilience and economic security as central components of European power.

However, strategic autonomy remains incomplete and internally contested. Member states differ considerably in their threat perceptions, economic relations with China, dependence on the United States, and willingness to transfer additional authority to the EU level (Esteban et al., 2025). These differences constrain the Union’s ability to translate collective economic weight into coherent geopolitical action.

Enlargement intensifies both the opportunities and the difficulties associated with strategic autonomy. On the one hand, additional member states can expand the EU’s population, market size, resource base, geographic reach, and bargaining power. On the other hand, enlargement also increases the number and diversity of national interests that must be reconciled within common foreign, security, and economic policies. Thus, strategic autonomy depends not only on scale, but also on the political and institutional capacity to convert scale into coordinated action.

The evidence therefore suggests that strategic autonomy should not be treated as a final condition that the EU either possesses or lacks. Rather, it is an evolving process shaped by the interaction between external pressure, internal cohesion, institutional design, and political willingness. Enlargement can strengthen this process, but only if greater size is accompanied by greater decision-making capacity and internal coordination.

3.4. Recent Geopolitical Developments and Their Implications for the EU

Recent geopolitical developments provide a useful test of the EU’s capacity to translate enlargement, economic policy, and strategic-autonomy objectives into effective action. Three areas are particularly significant: the accelerated accession processes of Ukraine and Moldova, changing EU–US relations, and persistent economic-security tensions between the EU and China. Together, these developments illustrate both the potential and the limitations of the Union’s emerging geopolitical role.

3.4.1. Ukraine and Moldova: Enlargement as a Strategic Response

The acceleration of Ukraine’s and Moldova’s accession processes in 2026 illustrates the extent to which enlargement has become embedded in the EU’s broader geopolitical strategy. The opening of negotiating clusters with both countries signaled not only progress in institutional integration, but also a political commitment to anchoring them more firmly within the European political and security order.

These developments reinforce the argument that enlargement is increasingly used as a strategic response to external geopolitical pressure. In the case of Ukraine, accession has become closely linked to questions of sovereignty, security, and Europe's long-term relationship with Russia. Moldova's accession trajectory similarly reflects the EU's broader objective of consolidating stability and influence in its eastern neighborhood.

At the same time, accelerated enlargement has raised concerns about institutional capacity, budgetary implications, public support, migration, economic competition, and the sustainability of consensus within an enlarged Union. These debates demonstrate that the geopolitical benefits of enlargement cannot be separated from the question of internal reform. The larger the Union becomes, the more urgent the need to reconsider decision-making procedures that were designed for a smaller and more homogeneous membership.

3.4.2. EU–US Relations: Transatlantic Dependence and Strategic Rebalancing

Developments in EU–US relations further illustrate the limits of European strategic autonomy. The Union remains deeply integrated with the United States in security, defense, trade, investment, and technology. Nevertheless, recurring disputes over tariffs, industrial policy, and burden-sharing have highlighted the risks associated with asymmetric dependence.

The tariff arrangements negotiated between the EU and the United States demonstrate both the resilience and fragility of the transatlantic relationship. Although negotiated frameworks can reduce immediate tensions, they do not eliminate the EU's exposure to unilateral American policy decisions. These developments have therefore strengthened arguments within Europe for greater economic sovereignty, diversification of trade relations, and enhanced capacity to defend European interests independently when necessary.

The implication is not that the EU should seek strategic separation from the United States. Rather, the emerging debate concerns the need for a more balanced relationship in which European security and economic interests are supported by stronger internal capabilities. In this sense, strategic autonomy is better understood as a mechanism for strengthening partnership through reduced vulnerability than as an alternative to transatlantic cooperation.

3.4.3. EU–China Relations: Economic Interdependence and Strategic Vulnerabilities

Relations with China present a different but equally significant challenge. The EU remains economically interconnected with China while simultaneously seeking to reduce dependencies in sectors considered strategically sensitive. Tensions surrounding critical raw materials, rare-earth exports, advanced technologies, and industrial competition have demonstrated the risks associated with concentrated supply chains and asymmetric economic dependence.

European responses have increasingly emphasized “de-risking” rather than full economic decoupling. This approach reflects the recognition that China remains too important to the European economy for disengagement to be realistic, while continued dependence in critical sectors could constrain Europe's strategic choices.

The evolution of EU–China relations therefore illustrates a central dilemma of strategic autonomy: interdependence can generate prosperity, but excessive concentration can produce vulnerability. The Union's challenge is to preserve the benefits of economic engagement while developing sufficient resilience to withstand external pressure. This requires diversified supply chains, stronger domestic industrial capacity, coordinated economic-security policy, and closer integration between trade and geopolitical strategy.

3.5. From Enlargement to Geopolitical Power: The Role of Institutional Reform

The preceding analysis indicates that enlargement alone cannot transform the European Union into a more effective geopolitical actor. Although enlargement can increase the Union's population, territory, market size, economic capacity, and strategic reach, these advantages do not automatically translate into political influence.

The central challenge lies in converting scale into collective action. A larger Union may possess greater aggregate resources while simultaneously becoming more internally heterogeneous. Without institutional mechanisms capable of reconciling divergent national interests, enlargement could produce greater fragmentation rather than greater power.

This problem is particularly visible in foreign and security policy, where unanimity requirements can delay decisions, weaken collective responses, or allow individual member states to block common positions. As enlargement progresses, proposals to expand qualified-majority voting in selected policy areas are therefore likely to become increasingly central to debates on institutional reform. Such reforms, however, also raise legitimate concerns regarding national sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and the relative influence of large and small member states.

The EU’s future geopolitical capacity will therefore depend on the interaction between enlargement and institutional reform. Enlargement can provide scale, resources, strategic depth, and greater international relevance, while institutional reform can provide the decision-making capacity needed to use those advantages effectively. Neither is sufficient in isolation.

A stronger European Union should consequently be understood not simply as a larger Union, but as one that combines broader membership with stronger internal cohesion, greater economic resilience, more effective decision-making, and a clearer strategic orientation. Under these conditions, enlargement could contribute to transforming the EU from a predominantly regulatory and economic power into a more coherent geopolitical actor capable of playing a stabilizing role in an increasingly multipolar international order.

4. Conclusions

Taken together, the developments examined in this study support the paper’s central argument: the European Union’s relevance in an increasingly multipolar international order depends on its capacity to convert scale into effective geopolitical leverage, and enlargement is emerging as one of the principal instruments through which it seeks to do so. The acceleration of Ukraine’s and Moldova’s accession processes in 2026, following years of relative stagnation, illustrates the extent to which enlargement is increasingly being treated not only as a normative commitment to European integration, but also as a strategic response to external geopolitical pressure.

At the same time, recent developments reveal the limits of enlargement as a source of power. The EU’s continued exposure to unilateral trade measures from the United States and its vulnerability to Chinese controls over critical raw materials demonstrate that a larger Union is not automatically a more autonomous, resilient, or secure one. Geopolitical weight must therefore be matched by institutional cohesion, economic diversification, strategic resilience, and the political capacity of member states to act collectively under pressure.

This makes institutional reform increasingly important. As the EU expands, decision-making structures designed for a smaller and more homogeneous community may become less capable of producing timely and coherent responses to external challenges. The continued reliance on unanimity, particularly in foreign and security policy, has already demonstrated significant constraints, including delayed decision-making, diluted common positions, and the potential for individual member states to block collective action. Proposals to expand qualified-majority voting in selected policy areas may offer one means of improving the Union’s responsiveness, but such reforms also raise legitimate concerns regarding sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and the balance of influence between larger and smaller member states. Institutional change must therefore be accompanied by sustained efforts to strengthen trust, solidarity, and political legitimacy across the Union.

Beyond institutional design, the EU’s future geopolitical influence will depend heavily on its ability to strengthen strategic autonomy and resilience. Reducing critical dependencies—whether on United States security guarantees or on Chinese supply chains for strategically important materials and technologies—will require coordinated investment in infrastructure, innovation, research, industrial capacity, and defense capabilities. It will also require a more coherent external policy capable of signaling strategic consistency to both partners and competitors and of reducing reliance on ad hoc or reactive responses to external pressure.

The EU therefore faces a dual imperative: to use enlargement as a source of economic, demographic, and geopolitical strength while simultaneously undertaking the internal reforms necessary to ensure that greater scale does not lead to greater fragmentation. This balance will be tested by geopolitical crises, economic disruptions, technological competition, changing alliances, and evolving public expectations within both member states and candidate countries.

The implications extend beyond Europe itself. If enlargement is accompanied by stronger institutions, greater internal cohesion, and enhanced strategic capacity, the EU could play a more consequential role as an anchor of stability, multilateralism, democratic governance, and rules-based cooperation in a world increasingly shaped by great-power rivalry. Conversely, if expansion proceeds without parallel reforms, the

Union risks becoming larger but less capable of coherent collective action, thereby limiting its ability to influence the emerging international order.

Ultimately, the EU's future power will depend not simply on how many states it includes, but on whether it can transform increased scale into coordinated political action. Enlargement can strengthen Europe's geopolitical position, but only when combined with institutional adaptability, economic resilience, and a shared strategic purpose. Under these conditions, a stronger and more cohesive European Union could contribute meaningfully to a more balanced international system—one that is not defined solely by bilateral competition between the United States and China, but by a broader distribution of power anchored in multilateral cooperation and institutional restraint.

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