

PACIFIC FORUM
INTERNATIONAL

The Coming Age of Strategic Autonomy

BY
DAVID SANTORO





Founded in 1975, the Pacific Forum is an independent, nonpartisan, and non-profit foreign policy research institute based in Honolulu, in the U.S. state of Hawaii. The Forum's focus areas encompass current and emerging political, security, economic, and business issues and work to help stimulate cooperative policies in the Indo-Pacific through research, analyses, and dialogues undertaken with the region's leaders in academia, public policy, military, and industry. The Forum collaborates with a network of more than 30 research institutes around the Pacific Rim, drawing on Asian perspectives and disseminating project findings and recommendations to opinion leaders, governments, and various publics throughout the region. We regularly cosponsor conferences with institutes throughout Asia to facilitate nongovernmental institution building as well as to foster cross-fertilization of ideas.

A Board of Directors guides the Pacific Forum's work. The Forum is funded by grants from foundations, corporations, individuals, and governments. The Forum's studies do not engage in classified or proprietary work.

Support Pacific Forum

Pacific Forum is a private, independent, nonpartisan, and non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization. Make a tax-deductible charitable contribution at www.pacforum.org/support-us

To support a specific program, please contact our Director of Development at: brooke@pacforum.org

PACIFIC FORUM STAFF

President
DAVID SANTORO, Ph.D.

Executive Director
CARL BAKER

Senior Director
KIMBERLY LEHN

Senior Advisor & Director of Research
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

Director for Regional Affairs
ROB YORK, Ph.D.

Director of Development & Grants
Management
BROOKE MIZUNO

President Emeritus & WSD-Handa
Chair in Peace Studies
RALPH COSSA

Director of India Program & Economic
Statecraft Initiative
AKHIL RAMESH

Director of Communication & Outreach
SHANNA KHAYAT

Executive Assistant
GEORGETTE ALMEIDA

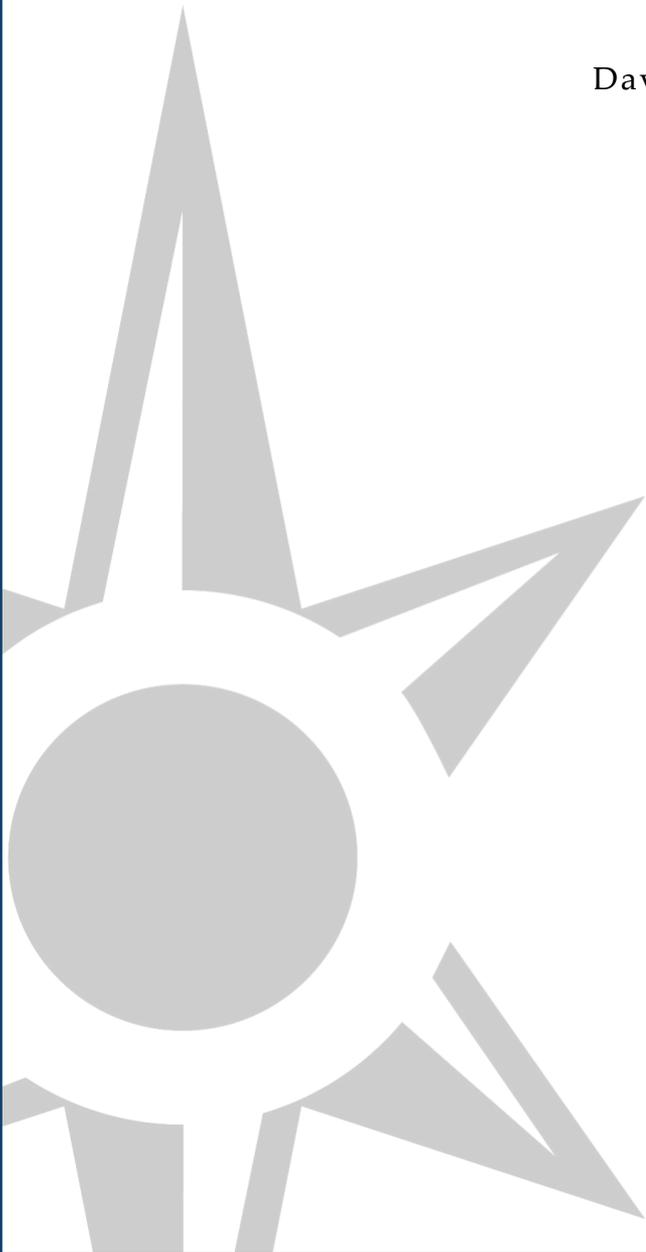
Senior Program Manager
JESSLYN CHEONG

Program Managers
CHRISSY FISHER
KULA KUKONU
BELLE RUDGE



The Coming Age of Strategic Autonomy

By
David Santoro



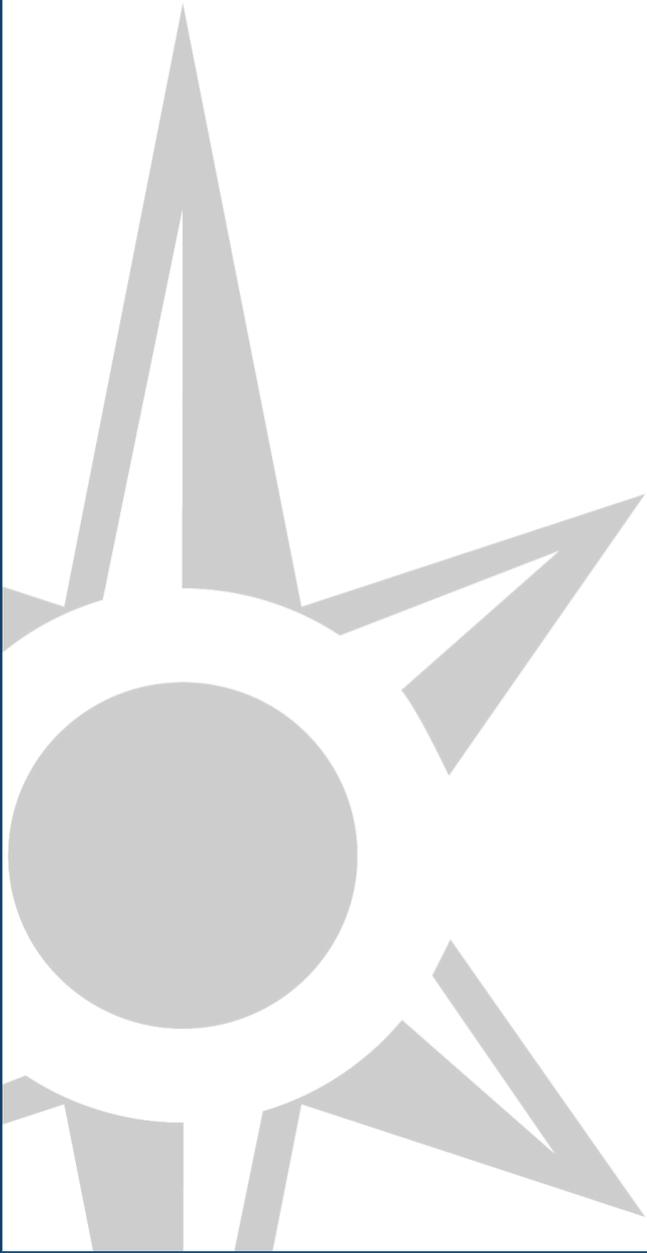


TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	2
THE AUTONOMOUS APPEAL	3
GOING STRATEGICALLY AUTONOMOUS	7
US OPTIONS IN THE EMERGING AUTONOMY-CENTERED WORLD	12
THE PATH FORWARD	13
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	16

Executive Summary

David Santoro

The return of force as an instrument of statecraft, the growing fragmentation of global interdependence, and the changed and changing role of the United States in the world are driving increasingly capable countries to strengthen their strategic autonomy. Doing so is challenging, however, because it is often constrained by costs, the depth of global interdependence, and power asymmetries. Still, even as it will continue to be dominated by the United States and China, the next international order will include a rising number of relatively powerful countries—middle powers—that can influence and shape that order. Once it has materialized fully, that new international order will thus be more regionalized and pluralistic and less hierarchical and universalist than the current order. The result will be a shift from order enforcement by one or two major power(s) to order management by major and middle powers. That new world will present benefits, costs, and risks to the United States. If it adapts wisely its approach to this new world, Washington will maintain the upper hand.

Introduction

We are entering a new age. That new age is dominated by two major powers—the United States and China—and a rising number of countries able to protect and assert themselves as well as influence or even shape the course of international events. That new age is thus increasingly multipolar and different from the bipolar age of the Cold War, which was ruled by the United States and the Soviet Union, and the unipolar age of the post-Cold War era, which had Washington at the helm. Its key feature is strategic autonomy.

The pursuit of strategic autonomy is not new, and it has long had its champions. Two such champions are India and France.

Despite its reliance on the Soviet Union and then Russia, India has always been steadfast in preserving its sovereignty and ability to act as it pleases, and it has encouraged others to do the same, notably through the Non-Aligned Movement. More recently, to remain master of its destiny, India has developed relationships with other countries throughout the Western world and Asia, and it has joined very diverse international organizations and arrangements.

Similarly, even as it sits firmly in the Western world, France has always sought to maintain national decision-making power and an ability to act alone if it so chooses. That's why it is a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but opted out of its integrated military structure. France withdrew from that structure to preserve its sovereignty and national control of its nuclear forces, and because it did not want to become over-dependent on US decision-making in NATO.

Both India and France are doubling down on strategic autonomy today. Recently, several countries have become more autonomous as well, and many others are following a similar path.

This essay examines this important ongoing development—especially the implications for the United States.

After providing conceptual grounding about strategic autonomy, this essay details key drivers; it explains *why* many countries want to become autonomous. It then moves on to explaining key dynamics—*how* countries proceed to becoming autonomous—before highlighting that there are limits to how autonomous countries can become. The essay finally turns to the potential benefits, costs, and risks of this new age for the United States, and it closes with recommendations for policy and action by Washington.

The essay's chief argument is that the trend towards strategic autonomy is real and increasingly entrenched, but it is still emerging and therefore has not materialized fully. What's more, important obstacles stand in the way. The upshot is that Washington has opportunities to shape that new age to its liking, if it makes the right decisions.

On strategic autonomy

What does it mean to be strategically autonomous? How does it differ from other strategies? What are the requirements to become autonomous?

Strategically autonomous countries stand on their own feet. They can make decisions and act alone or with partners, and by choice, even if doing so diverges from the preferences of others, including major powers. They can protect and defend themselves and impose their will on others. They are not omnipotent, however, and neither are they fully independent, a quality that not even major powers enjoy. Still, they are weaker than major powers but considerably stronger than "rank-and-file countries."

The concept of strategic autonomy is not new, but one of its clearest definitions came from the Council of the European Union in 2016. The Council talked about the "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible."¹ A few years later, then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell elaborated on that definition, writing that "[s]trategic autonomy is not a magic wand but a process, a long-term one, intended to ensure that Europeans increasingly take charge of themselves."²

¹ Foreign Affairs Council (Council of the European Union), "Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the Area of Security and Defence" (14149/16, November 14, 2016),

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22459/eugs-conclusions-st14149en16.pdf>.

² Josep Borrell, "Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters," *A Window on the World*, December 3, 2020, European External Action Service,

Indian Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy echoed these words, stressing that strategic autonomy is “the ability to act independently, not necessarily as a linear function at all times, but when required, a country should be able to express itself independently and make suitable choices.”³

The quest for strategic autonomy stands in contrast with other strategies.

Some countries choose to “oppose the strong,” i.e., defend against, or even counter, a major or emerging power, typically by allying with other, usually like-minded countries—a strategy that international relations scholarship calls balancing. That’s Japan or the United Kingdom allying themselves with the United States against, respectively, China and Russia. Other countries prefer to “join the strong,” i.e., align with a major or emerging power, either to gain protection or extract favors. That’s band-wagoning in the language of international relations—something that Belarus does with Russia, for example. Still other countries opt to “keep one foot in all camps”—hedge—by taking a mix of competitive and cooperative actions with many countries, notably major powers, to maximize benefits and minimize costs and risks. Hedging is the preferred approach of many Southeast Asian countries: they are engaging both the United States and China. Meanwhile, some countries go for isolation, i.e., seek to insulate themselves and “stay out of the game,” by choosing neutrality, for instance, as is the case of Switzerland or Austria.

To be strategically autonomous, countries require minimum national power. They need a relatively strong defense capability, a sufficiently diversified economy, a decent level of scientific and technological innovation, and multiple diplomatic partnerships. This is necessary so that they can influence, even shape, their environment, and so that they can maintain their sovereignty and withstand pressure, sanctions, or coercion from rival countries, even major powers.

Strategic autonomy, therefore, is typically only within reach of regional, middle, or emerging powers. Today, such powers include countries such as India or Indonesia in Asia; France, Germany, the United

Kingdom, or the European Union (collectively) in Europe; Israel, Saudi Arabia, or South Africa in the Middle East and Africa; and Brazil or Mexico in the Americas. Smaller countries, for their part, are usually left to choose between the balancing, band-wagoning, hedging, or isolation options because they are too weak to become strategically autonomous, albeit they can aspire to get there at some point.

The autonomous appeal

There are three interrelated reasons why a rising number of countries are either strengthening or pursuing strategic autonomy: the return of force as an instrument of statecraft, the growing fragmentation of global interdependence, and the changed and changing role of the United States in the world.

The return of force as an instrument of statecraft

The re-emergence of wars, confrontations, and conflicts is the top reason motivating many countries to reinforce or seek to achieve strategic autonomy.

There was no direct war between major powers and an imperfect yet relatively stable order during the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era then brought more stability (and prosperity) to the world. Over the past decade and a half, however, the international security environment has become unstable, marked by overlapping and intensifying conflicts—even direct confrontations and wars—that have illuminated both the fragility of peace and the limitations of current security architectures while also wrecking strategic trust between countries.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine have shattered post-Cold War assumptions about European security. Ukraine is neither a member of NATO nor the European Union, but the war has put these organizations under severe stress, challenging the security order they were built to uphold in Europe. The collapse of the Budapest Memorandum—where Ukraine gave up nuclear weapons in exchange for Western (and Russian) security assurances—has magnified this stress; it has exposed the limits of Western deterrence. Today, Russia’s belligerent attitude towards European countries and multiple

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en

³ Sujan R. Chinoy, “Address by Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy (Retd), Director General Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and

Analyses” in *Fifth General KV Krishna Rao Memorial Lecture – India’s Strategic Autonomy: Opportunities and Challenges in the Emerging World Order* (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2024), 16, <https://usiofindia.org/pdf/M-3-2024%20FIFTH%20KV%20KRISHNA%20RAO%20MEM%20LEC.pdf>

violations of European, including NATO, airspace are adding insult to injury.

For many countries, the war in Ukraine is a cautionary tale: security cannot be outsourced, and dependence on external powers or the United Nations can be dangerous. That's why the European Council stressed in early 2025 that "Europe must become more sovereign, more responsible for its defense, and better equipped to act and deal autonomously with immediate and future challenges and threats with a 360° approach."⁴

Self-reliance, plainly, is now seen as a matter of national survival, even though such a posture is not bulletproof, as exemplified by persistent border tensions and clashes between India and China and, in mid-2025, yet another violent conflict between India and Pakistan—all longtime autonomous powers.

Continued instability in the Middle East, including the war in Gaza, the growing influence of malignant non-state actors, and the rise of Iranian power, also reflects the collapse of traditional Western dominance in the region. That's why Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel are now hedging their bets, pursuing increasingly independent diplomatic, security, and economic strategies that reduce reliance on US or Western guarantees.

The tacit acceptance of rogue-state actions, such as North Korea's nuclear-armed status, is another problem that has persuaded many countries—notably South Korea—that they should do more to provide for their own security.

More importantly, many countries are refusing to be pawns in the intensifying cold war between the United States and China, which could, given rising tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea, turn into a hot war. These countries do not want to sacrifice blood and treasure on behalf of either the United States or China and, as a result, are seeking

greater self-reliance and freedom of action—the essence of strategic autonomy.

The growing fragmentation of global interdependence

Strategic autonomy is more than a response to issues of war and peace. It is also driven by changes in global interdependence pertaining to the economy, new technologies, and critical resources.

In a few years, the global economy has undergone major change. That process began with the 2008 financial crisis, which shattered faith in the idea that the global financial system self-regulates. The crisis revealed that global capital mobility could destabilize economies everywhere and that international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund cannot prevent contagion.

In response to backlash due to massive job losses, governments reasserted control. They prioritized domestic stability over financial openness, ending the "hyper-globalization" of the post-Cold War and causing a slowdown of global economic integration, dubbed "slow-balization."⁵

Then, from the mid-2010s, the emerging US-China rivalry did to global trade what the 2008 financial crisis had done to global finance: it politicized the free exchange of goods and services. As competition intensified, the United States and China came to view their interdependence as a source of vulnerability, not mutual benefit, and Washington became convinced that Beijing's state-capitalism was incompatible with the principles of the World Trade Organization (WTO).⁶

The ensuing US-China trade war and efforts by both countries to prioritize national safety (some call it protectionism) over global efficiency and rally countries to their side replaced the logic of globalization by the logic of geoeconomics. Adam Smith's invisible-hand idea that "markets will integrate the world for everyone's benefit" gave way to the Colbertist idea that "countries, with their

⁴ Council of the European Union, "European Council Conclusions on European Defence," press release, March 6, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/06/european-council-conclusions-on-european-defence/>.

⁵ The term "hyperglobalization" was coined by Dani Rodrik in *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2011). The term "slow-balization" was coined by Adjiedj Bakas in 2015 and popularized in the late 2010s. See, for instance, "Slowbalisation – The Future of Global Commerce," *The Economist*, January 26, 2019.

⁶ From 2016, US Trade Representative reports show that China's expanded role for state-owned enterprises, party organs inside companies, and subsidies and industrial policy mean that China has not become the market-oriented economy the WTO presupposes. See, for instance, United States Trade Representative, *2021 Report to Congress on China's WTO Compliance* (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2022), <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/Press/Reports/2021USTR%20Report%20CongressChinaWTO.pdf>.

friends, must control economic interdependence to advance their interests.”

Economic relations, to put it plainly, became “strategic,” i.e., no longer universal but organized around competing blocs. Some countries vowed allegiance to specific blocs over others, but many chose to strengthen or pursue strategic autonomy.

Two major shocks further entrenched these developments.

The first was the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the problem of over-optimizing global supply chains. Many countries discovered that they lacked essential medical supplies, which were all concentrated in a few countries, notably China.

The second shock was the war in Ukraine, which militarized economics. In response to the invasion, the West froze Russia’s central bank assets, banned SWIFT access, and cut many energy imports. Russia retaliated by weaponizing food, gas, and information exports, and it leaned on China and others, notably North Korea, to assist its war effort.

These shocks deepened geoeconomic blocs as much as the determination of those committed to strategic autonomy. Already in 2021, for example, then President of the European Council Charles Michel insisted that “[s]trategic autonomy...means managing our interdependencies while avoiding excessive dependencies”—a message he amplified in subsequent years, stressing in 2024 that “European sovereignty, the strategic autonomy of the European Union, means more influence, more resilience, less dependence.”⁷

The result has been the fragmentation of the global economy. Such fragmentation has been so deep that it has extended beyond the global economy—the fabric of interdependence—into its current “infrastructure,” or technology (the systems and networks through which it operates) and “material underpinning,” or resources (the physical foundation upon which it rests).

⁷ Charles Michel, “State of Europe” (speech, Berlin, November 9, 2021), Council of the European Union, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/09/the-state-of-europe-speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-berlin-conference-2021/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social; Charles Michel, “Speech by President Charles Michel at the Interparliamentary Conference during European Parliamentary Week 2024” (speech, Brussels, February 12, 2024), Council of the European Union, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/12/discours-du-president-charles-michel-lors-de-la->

New technologies and digital platforms are now seen as strategic assets, not just tools of growth. Who designs, makes, and trains the best artificial intelligence or semiconductor models rules the world. So too for those who possess digital platforms, such as cloud, 5G, submarine cables, or identity stacks, and who control the raw materials and key components to make such technologies and platforms, especially rare earths, magnets, and some specialty chemicals.

Unsurprisingly, much of the competition between the United States and China has been about which of the two can impose its technological and digital terms. Some countries have accepted—or have had to accept—US or Chinese rules, but others have rejected that choice, opting for technological and digital sovereignty. That’s because they trust neither Washington nor Beijing and want to obtain insurance against coercion and sudden cutoff, to protect civil-military advantages (given that many new technologies and digital platforms are dual-use), or to build domestic capacity and increase freedom, maintain competitiveness, and create high-value jobs. So, in that spirit, many in India have, of late, argued that New Delhi should strive for digital sovereignty and develop indigenous operating systems, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence through a “Digital Swaraj Mission” by 2030.⁸

The failure of cooperation to address global challenges is another driver of strategic autonomy.

Despite repeated warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change about the severity and urgency of the problem, decades of climate summits have produced pledges without implementation and unmet climate finance promises, and major carbon emitters are now weakening or withdrawing from their commitments. Yet for many countries, climate change has become a national security issue; it is no longer an environmental problem. That’s because rising sea levels are threatening entire nations, extreme weather is damaging economies, and resource scarcity is causing internal instability.

[conference-interparlementaire-a-l-occasion-de-la-semaine-parlementaire-europeenne-2024/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/12/discours-du-president-charles-michel-lors-de-la-conference-interparlementaire-a-l-occasion-de-la-semaine-parlementaire-europeenne-2024/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social).

⁸ Asian News International, “India Should Develop its Own Sovereign Digital Solutions, Reduce Reliance on US Systems,” *The Economic Times*, September 14, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-should-develop-its-own-sovereign-digital-solutions-reduce-reliance-on-us-systems-gtri/articleshow/1233880101.cms?from=mdr>.

So, these countries feel that they must defend their survival on their own and are racing to secure the resources they need. Resource nationalism, like economic and technological nationalism, is now in vogue.⁹

The changed and changing role of the United States in the world

There is another reason why strategic autonomy is becoming popular: the new role of the United States in the world.

Established after the Second World War, the current international order is largely a US invention. The United States was its principal architect, and it has long been its leader and guardian. While it has not always behaved in ways that honor that order, the United States has generally provided security guarantees to maintain peace, championed globalization and open markets to advance prosperity, and acted as a backstop when crises have emerged. It has played that role both because of its unique capability and the belief that doing so serves US interests.

Over the past decade and a half, however, the United States has been reconsidering its role, for two reasons—first, because of its reduced capability. Today, the United States remains dominant but faces rising peers and suffers from internal constraints. Decades of wars have also raised concerns about the costs—in lives and dollars—of global stewardship. So, on the left and the right of the US political spectrum, many Americans no longer want to continue bearing the same responsibilities.¹⁰

Second, many in the United States have begun wondering whether the current international order helps advance US interests. Some think that it is unfavorable to the United States. They see rivals, notably China, able to exploit the advantages of an open system without reciprocal openness or adherence to norms. They question why the United States should provide security and favorable access to the US market to numerous countries (including

US allies), which they increasingly view as “free riders.” Moreover, many Americans now believe that free trade and global economic integration have harmed US jobs, industries, and the middle class.¹¹

The United States, to put it plainly, no longer sees maintaining the current international order as a strategic imperative. To be sure, it does not want to abandon the order, but it is determined to change its role in it.

The United States is now prioritizing anything it sees as directly and immediately impacting US interests, emphasizing bilateral bargains, transactional agreements, and “burden-sharing” rather than automatic leadership in multilateral institutions. That approach has translated into more conditional commitments and shorter policy time horizons. The new US National Security Strategy is crystal clear on this matter and adds that the United States would only get involved in the internal affairs of other countries if it must do so: “the affairs of other countries are our concern only if their activities directly threaten our interests.”¹²

The United States is organizing its foreign policy around homeland security (and, by extension, the security of the Western Hemisphere) and around managing its primary contender, China, while devoting less time and attention to other security problems, including in Europe and the Middle East. Regarding Asia, and vis-à-vis China, specifically, it talks about the need to “win the future [and] prevent military confrontation.”¹³ The United States is also prioritizing economic statecraft and industrial policy, imposing tariffs (including against allies), securing key supply chains, taking equity stakes in, or providing subsidies to, “strategic” industries, and using export controls as instruments of national power.

To many countries, especially in Europe, such US reprioritization means an erosion of US guarantees, a signal that they should focus on self-reliance because reliance on the United States is no longer a given. As Alex Serban, the Director of the Atlantic Council’s

⁹ See, for instance, Kelvin Ross, “WEC Warned Renewables at Risk of ‘Resource Nationalism’ over Critical Minerals,” *Enlit*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.enlit.world/library/wec-warned-renewables-at-risk-of-resource-nationalism-over-critical-minerals>.

¹⁰ Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, *Americans Grow Less Enthusiastic about Active US Engagement Abroad* (Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2023), <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/CCS%202023%20US%20Role.pdf>.

¹¹ See, for instance, Karlyn Bowman, “US Public Opinion on Internationalism,” *Forbes*, October 21, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bowmanmarsico/2025/10/21/us-public-opinion-on-internationalism/>.

¹² President, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2025), 1, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

¹³ President, *National Security Strategy*, 19.

Romania Office, has stated in reaction to the US National Security Strategy:

This strategic pivot by the United States may force Romania and its neighbors into a period of heightened responsibility and adaptation. This will require greater self-reliance, deeper cooperation among European countries, and a reassessment of regional security dynamics—all while navigating uncertainty over long-term transatlantic security guarantees.¹⁴

Many countries have thus begun strengthening or pursuing strategic autonomy, urgently. That's because while they have long been aware of the United States' reduced capability to fulfill its global responsibilities, they see Washington now readily embracing that reality and changing its role. What's more, many such countries, including US allies, are concerned that the United States may be prepared to act in ways that harm their interests, and that the imposition of tariffs on them could be the first act in a series of other dramatic actions. With the new National Security Strategy, several US allies now believe that their concerns are justified. Alice Rufo, the French Minister of the Armed Forces, has called the document an "extremely brutal clarification" of America's stance and, in response, she has prompted Europe to accelerate its defense autonomy rather than assume automatic US support, a recommendation that German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has echoed.¹⁵

Importantly, the outcome of the United States changing its role in the world is growing interest in strategic autonomy. It is not siding with China. Despite its recent increased, even aggressive efforts to present itself as the alternative world leader (notably promoting, since 2023, what it calls "a community of shared future for mankind"), China's simultaneous assertive behavior and economic coercion in Asia and beyond have undermined its ambitions.¹⁶ Countries who can do so, therefore, prefer betting on themselves.

The three drivers of strategic autonomy—the return of force as an instrument of statecraft, the growing fragmentation of global interdependence, and the changed and changing US role in the world—should be viewed in a broader context.

Back in the Cold War, the world was dangerous and divided, and thus, in theory, fertile for the pursuit of strategic autonomy by countries unwilling to participate in the US-Soviet contest. In practice, however, most countries were too weak to implement such a strategy. By the end of the Cold War and in the years that followed, several countries had become capable powers, but the need and urgency to become autonomous had vanished. That's because the international environment had become more stable and was overall at peace, prosperity was rising (at least in the aggregate) thanks to globalization, and the United States, enjoying its "unipolar moment," was upholding international rules and norms.¹⁷

Today, not only have many more countries become increasingly powerful, but the need and urgency for strategic autonomy is also re-emerging with a vengeance because crises, conflicts, and even wars are coming back, global interdependence is fracturing, and the United States is both less capable and seemingly less willing to play its traditional role of leader and guardian of the current international order.

Going strategically autonomous

The next questions are about key dynamics: how do countries proceed to enhance their autonomy or become autonomous, and how successful are they—can they be—in that quest?

The pathways to autonomy

Going strategically autonomous entails building a strong national defense, regaining control over global interdependence, and diversifying diplomatic relations.

¹⁴ "Experts React: What Trump's National Security Strategy Means for US Foreign Policy," *Atlantic Council*, December 5, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-what-trumps-national-security-strategy-means-for-us-foreign-policy/#alex>.

¹⁵ "France Calls New US Security Doctrine 'Brutal Clarification,'" *Reuters*, December 9, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-calls-new-us-security-doctrine-brutal-clarification-2025-12-09/>; see also Geir Moulson, "German Leader Says US Strategy Shows the Need for More European

Security Independence," *Associated Press*, December 9, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/germany-merz-us-security-strategy-europe-11a5042d7f7cdb39f8fa020b83aead55>.

¹⁶ Xi Jinping first used that formulation during an address at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in March 2023. See "Community with a Shared Future," February 18, 2019, *Xi Theory*, http://xitheory.china.com.cn/2019-02/18/content_56446756.html?utm.

¹⁷ The formulation was coined by Charles Krauthammer in "The Unipolar Moment – America and the World in 1990," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 1990.

To build a strong national defense, re-anchoring defense budgets around autonomy goals is the starting point. Doing so means reframing defense spending as an investment in sovereignty, not a cost, and tying increases to roadmaps and benchmarks.

France has been doing just that to sustain its nuclear forces—the core of its national defense—and others are following suit. On every continent, countries are increasing defense spending. Recently, NATO countries have agreed to spend 5% of their annual gross domestic product by 2035 on defense, a significant upward shift from earlier commitments, and Japan, South Korea, and Australia are implementing major increases as well.¹⁸

These increases will improve these countries' freedom of action. European countries have suggested as much, and Japan said that it aims to "protect its sovereignty and independence, autonomously determining its domestic and foreign policies, and defending its territory and the safety...of life, person, and the properties of its nationals."¹⁹ That's because countries are prioritizing indigenous production of "sovereign systems." South Korea's KF-21 fighter jet is an example of such a system; it enables Seoul to act without reliance on external powers, notably the United States.²⁰ So do Türkiye's Bayraktar drones; they reduce Ankara's reliance on Western defense suppliers.²¹

Several countries are also developing national satellite constellations and early warning systems. The European Union's Galileo, India's Radar Imaging Satellite, and Japan's Quasi-Zenith Satellite System reduce reliance on US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.

Moreover, because strategic autonomy rests on an ecosystem that can sustain power without foreign chokepoints, many countries have been investing in

their defense industrial base. France and Germany have launched joint ammunition and battery production acceleration plans, the European Defense Fund has allocated €8 billion for collaborative research and development among EU member states, and Saudi Arabia, under its "Vision 2030," is building a more self-reliant defense industry.²²

A strong national defense must also address gray-zone and hybrid threats. Doing so means hardening critical infrastructure, strengthening cyber and information defense, and building societal and economic resilience, much of which is happening at the national (or regional) level. That's the case of Finland's "comprehensive security" approach—one of the most integrated, society-wide defense systems in the world—or the European Union's Hybrid Fusion Cell, which monitors gray-zone threats in real time.²³

A strong national defense alone does not confer strategic autonomy. Action is also required to regain control over global interdependence.

Economic statecraft is now the name of the game. Countries are incentivizing local production, especially of goods and services deemed strategic, and pushing procurement linkages with trusted partners; they are doing re-shoring and friend-shoring. In that game, industrial policy and subsidies are essential to create domestic capacity where market signals alone do not deliver.

Post-pandemic, for example, many countries, including the United States, the European Union, Brazil, and India, have sought to re-shore, near-shore, or friend-shore medical and pharmaceutical supply chains to reduce dependence on China. They have done the same with steel and electric vehicle batteries.²⁴

¹⁸ "Defence Expenditures and NATO's 5% Commitment," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified June 27, 2025, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/defence-expenditures-and-natos-5-commitment?utm_

¹⁹ National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022), 10, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

²⁰ "South Korea's KAI KF-21 Set to Become World's Safest Fifth-Gen Fighter Jet," *Global Defense News*, November 29, 2024, Army Recognition Group, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/focus-analysis-conflicts/army/defence-security-industry-technology/south-koreas-kai-kf-21-set-to-become-worlds-safest-fifth-gen-fighter-jet>.

²¹ Abdulkadir Gunyol, "Türkiye's Main Goal Is to Be Independent in Every Field": Baykar CEO," *Anadolu Ajansı*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiyes-main-goal-is-to-be-independent-in-every-field-baykar-ceo/3639137>.

²² For details about Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030," see "Agency of Strategic Affairs and Vision Realization," Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, last modified July 30, 2025, <https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en/ministry/about-ministry/minister-headed/ministers-agencies/agency-strategic>.

²³ For details about Finland's "comprehensive security" approach, see "Comprehensive Security," Turvallisuuskomitea Säkerhetskommittén—The Security Committee, <https://turvallisuuskomitea.fi/en/comprehensive-security/>.

²⁴ For a comprehensive analysis on these developments, see Capgemini Research Institute, *The Resurgence of Manufacturing – Reindustrialization Strategies in Europe and the US* (2025), <https://www.capgemini.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Final-Web-Version-Report-Reindustrialization.pdf>.

Rather than decoupling, however, countries are engaging in diversification, i.e., they are keeping trade open but reducing exposure to vulnerable chokepoints. The EU concept of “Open Strategic Autonomy” is clear that the goal is a balance between openness and control.²⁵

Countries now also screen inbound foreign direct investments to limit foreign leverage. In India, investments from neighboring countries now requires government approval, and Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Russia implement capital controls, especially in contexts of financial volatility or currency defense.²⁶

Nowhere are countries seeking greater control than in new technologies and digital platforms.

Several countries are using export licensing on advanced chips, artificial intelligence tools, and dual-use technologies to control flows while subsidizing research and development. In addition to imposing new rules and vetting for foreign collaborations, creating barriers around sensitive research and dual-use knowledge transfer, and implementing research security measures in universities and laboratories, countries seek greater data control on governance and localization and want to set new standards for foreign cloud providers to reduce exposure.

Because of geopolitical tensions and the lack of leadership to address global challenges, notably climate change, countries also want to secure critical minerals, become energy independent, and build sustainable infrastructure. Interest in nuclear power has thus skyrocketed, especially in Asia, with projected increases between 50% and 160% by 2050.²⁷ Many countries think nuclear power will help them transition to a greener economy and become energy secure, and they want to use new technologies, notably small modular reactors, given their lower costs than traditional nuclear power plants.

Beyond building a strong national defense and regaining control over global interdependence, going

strategically autonomous requires flexible diplomatic engagement, i.e., diverse relationships to reduce dependence on traditional powers and assert greater control over foreign policy.

European countries, in that spirit, have strengthened intra-European diplomacy and broadened their partnerships beyond the United States, especially in Asia and the Middle East. Asian countries, meanwhile, are adopting strategies that balance traditional partnerships with new relationships. For example, Indonesia is engaging France to diversify its options beyond the United States and China. So is Vietnam, by engaging India. The same is taking place in the Middle East; Saudi Arabia’s “strategic mutual defense” pact with Pakistan signals a move away from reliance on the United States.

These countries also engage multilateral organizations to protect their autonomy (more than to cooperate). They are pushing frameworks that preserve freedom of action, such as advocating new digital sovereignty rules in the WTO.²⁸ Oftentimes, they engage very diverse organizations to better advance their interests. Case in point: India uses both the Group of 20 and the BRICS (short for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, its core members), even though the former is Western-led and seeks greater coordination among advanced and emerging economies and the latter is composed primarily of Global South countries and promotes major reforms of global economic governance.

Minilateralism (i.e., small-group, goal-oriented diplomacy) is especially attractive to countries interested in strategic autonomy because it allows collaboration without ceding decision-making control. Of late, these mechanisms have flourished. Composed of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, the “Quad” has facilitated coordination among its participants on regional security issues without treaty constraints. Similarly, “I2U2,” which consists of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, has enabled its members to

²⁵ “Open Strategic Autonomy, Economic, and Research Security in EU Foreign Policy,” European Commission, April 28, 2025, https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/HORIZON_HORIZON-CL2-2025-01-DEMOCRACY-04.

²⁶ For an analysis on this question, see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD FDI Regulatory Restrictiveness Index – Key Findings and Trends*, OECD Business and Finance Policy Papers, No. 72 (2024), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/oecd-fdi-regulatory-restrictiveness-index_3b446fc8/c56f8a14-en.pdf.

²⁷ International Atomic Energy Association, “IAEA Raises Nuclear Power Projections for Fifth Consecutive Year,” press release, September 15, 2025, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/iaea-raises-nuclear-power-projections-for-fifth-consecutive-year>.

²⁸ For details, see International Monetary Fund, *Digital Trade for Development* (The International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, 2023), https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/dtd2023_e.htm.

cooperate on strategic sectors while maintaining independent policies.

The limits to autonomy

Going strategically autonomous is challenging, however. Countries can strengthen their autonomy or act to become more autonomous, but doing so is often constrained by costs, the depth of global interdependence, and power asymmetries.

Building a strong national defense is difficult because modern military capabilities are expensive, even for middle powers. Few countries can sustain the necessary investments without creating domestic economic strains. Even if countries build such a military regardless of the costs, they are often dependent on foreign technology, weapons, or components, and they need time to develop proper human capital and expertise to operate modern forces.

Despite the European Union's push for joint procurement and defense funds to reduce reliance on NATO and the United States, EU members depend on US intelligence, logistics, and deterrence; this dependence has been especially glaring since the Ukraine War.²⁹ Defense integration is also difficult across 27 members, and competing with NATO capabilities is inefficient, further undermining the case for autonomy.

Similarly, South Korea's attempt to enhance its autonomy with the KF-21 is limited because that system relies on US and European components, and while it wants to build its own defense industry, Saudi Arabia still imports most of its weapons from the United States and Europe and depends on foreign experts to maintain them.³⁰

There is another dimension: security guarantors sometimes constrain their partners' defense choices, limiting their ability to enhance their autonomy. For years, for example, the United States has sought to prevent several of its allies from developing nuclear weapons.

In addition to costs, autonomy in defense is thus bound by hardware dependence, industrial and human capital ecosystems (which take decades to grow), and pressure from major powers.

Seeking economic and technological autonomy is equally difficult, as is control over resources critical to national survival. That's because interdependence is "sticky;" it can't be unbuilt instantly, and countries cannot insulate themselves from it easily.

Global supply chains are deeply integrated, in part because rare earths, semiconductors, and energy resources are unevenly distributed. Producing critical items domestically is costly, sometimes impossible. Besides, interdependence is mutual, so cutting ties or "localizing" production may provoke retaliation, raise prices, or reduce market access. There are also bottlenecks. Frontier technologies, such as artificial intelligence chips, quantum computing, or biotech, are concentrated in a few countries, and developing indigenous alternatives, in addition to requiring investments, time, and cooperation in the face of external pressures, is not always feasible.

Intended to reduce reliance on Western technology and boost domestic innovation, China's "dual circulation" strategy has faced limits.³¹ China has made progress in electric vehicles and artificial intelligence but remained dependent on Western semiconductors and critical software, and US export controls on advanced chips have exposed this vulnerability.

The upshot is that even the world's second-largest economy cannot decouple from global technological and supply networks. No wonder the European Union has struggled to reduce its dependence on Russian gas; the bloc has diversified its suppliers (by engaging Qatar and increasing its reliance on US liquefied natural gas) but become exposed to price

²⁹ Ben Barry et al., *Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states/new/iiss_defending-europe-without-the-united-states_052025.pdf.

³⁰ See Joon Ha Park, "Lee Jae-myung's Self-Reliant Defense Plan Undermined by Dependence on US Systems," *KoreaPro*, October 2, 2025,

<https://koreapro.org/2025/10/lee-jae-myungs-self-reliant-defense-plan-undermined-by-dependence-on-us-systems/>, and Alice Gower, "The Business of Defence in Saudi Arabia," *Azure Strategy*, August 22, 2025, <https://azure-strategy.com/the-business-of-defence-in-saudi-arabia/>.

³¹ For information about China's dual-circulation strategy, see "'Dual Circulation' Correct Way Forward," *China Daily*, September 26, 2020, https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/policywatch/202009/26/content_WS516e766ec6d0f7257693cae6.html.

volatility and infrastructure constraints.³² Likewise, Indian efforts to localize manufacturing and technology through the “Atmanirbhar Bharat” initiative (Hindi for “Self-Reliant India”) have had limited success because India continues to rely on imported components from the United States and China.³³

Diplomatic diversification, another key feature of strategic autonomy, is not problem-free either.

Engaging multiple powers provides flexibility but can create contradictory obligations. Partnering with the United States and China risks major issues with one or the other, or both. As the US-China rivalry is intensifying and broadening in scope, now encompassing both military and economic affairs, it is becoming difficult for countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, and others to remain engaged with the United States, mostly for security guarantees, and with China, primarily for economic opportunities. The pressure to choose is real and rising.

It is also difficult for countries close to the United States or China to pursue diplomatic diversification because neither truly welcome that pursuit.

The United States approves of diplomatic diversification by its allies, but only so long as such diversification complements US influence and does not legitimize China’s competing world order narrative (or, significantly, undermine US interests in any way). France’s 2023 call for Europe to turn itself into a third superpower and for European countries to reject becoming “vassal states” of the United States or “followers” in a US-China confrontation drew criticism and resistance from Washington.³⁴

Except for North Korea, China does not have allies; it has partners. In theory, China does not prevent its partners from engaging others. But in practice, China expects them to align with its priorities, especially with regards to Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea—its “core interests.”

³² Ron Bousso, “Europe Will Struggle to Wean Itself Off Russian Gas,” *Reuters*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/europe-will-struggle-wean-itself-off-russian-gas-bousso-2025-05-14/>.

³³ For information about Atmanirbhar Bharat, see Prime Minister of India, “PM gives a clarion call for Atmanirbhar Bharat,” press release, May 12, 2020, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-gives-a-clarion-call-for-atmanirbhar-bharat/?utm_

³⁴ For the translated version of Macron’s speech and his interview after his trip to China, see Sophie Jacquier, “Europe Must Not Be America’s ‘Vassals’: The Full Macron Interview After His China Visit,” *WorldCrunch*, April 11,

Lack of deference has led China to retaliate. For example, China froze ties with Norway after the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to dissident Liu Xiaobo, and it imposed costs on South Korea after Seoul deployed advanced US missile defense systems on the Korean Peninsula in 2016.³⁵

Diplomatic diversification is thus tough business, and challenges abound beyond the sole US-China context. Recently, India has struggled to maintain its longtime “multi-alignment” strategy, notably its balancing act between the West and Russia, because Washington has called on Delhi to end its energy relationship with Russia to pressure Moscow into ending its war in Ukraine.

There are other reasons that make diplomatic diversification difficult, even discouraging.

One is regional constraints—geographic neighbors, historical conflicts, and strategic dynamics limit the freedom to diversify partners. European countries may want to increase their activities in Asia but challenges on their continent, notably the war in Ukraine, stand in the way.

Another reason is that regional, middle, or emerging powers have limited influence in multilateral forums. They can shape decisions, but rarely do they drive outcomes. Note, for example, that despite broad middle-power coordination in favor of a binding agreement on phasing out fossil fuels, the final text of the 2025 United Nations Climate Change Conference sidesteps direct commitments about transitioning away from such fuels due to resistance from major producers.³⁶

A world that includes multiple autonomous countries will move away from US-led unipolarity, or loose bipolarity with China, towards a more diffuse multipolar order, where power and decision-making are distributed among the United States, China, and several capable countries. That world will be regionalized and pluralistic, not hierarchical and universalist, and it will shift from order enforcement

2023, <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/full-macron-interview-china-us/>.

³⁵ See Lieke Bos, “Norway-China Relations ‘Unfrozen,’” *The Diplomat*, December 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/norway-china-relations-unfrozen/>, and Christine Kim and Ben Blanchard, “China, South Korea Agree to Mend Ties After THAAD Standoff,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-south-korea-agree-to-mend-ties-after-thaad-standoff-idUSKBN1D003C/>.

³⁶ For information about “COP30,” visit <https://unfccc.int/cop30>.

by one or two major power(s) to order management by major and middle powers.

Such a world is emerging, but as seen, it hasn't yet materialized. Current dynamics show strategic distancing from today's world, not strategic divorce.

US options in the emerging autonomy-centered world

What does this emerging world mean for the United States, and what should Washington do to best advance its interests?

Benefits, costs, and risks

Today's emerging world has the potential to provide significant benefits to the United States.

One such benefit is better burden-sharing on defense. The new world might help solve an important, longstanding US foreign policy problem: getting US allies and partners to shoulder more defense tasks.

From a US perspective, having allies and partners that are more militarily capable and willing to take on a greater share of the defense and deterrence burden is essential, both because of the United States' reduced capability to act as their security guarantor and the rise of powerful competitors. For Washington, it is especially crucial that its European allies step up to defend the European continent because the United States needs to devote more time and attention to Asia, especially China. The decision by NATO members to up their defense spending to 5% of their annual gross domestic product by 2035 is thus a welcome development.

Similarly, if more countries invest in their own capabilities beyond defense, be it by creating new critical-technology supply chains or becoming new economic centers, global systems will become less brittle because they will be less dependent on a handful of providers, or one—China—as in the case of rare earths. The outcome—greater resilience of global public goods—will benefit the United States given its global role and numerous partners. The United States can also gain negotiating partners in an autonomy-centered world. That's because that world opens the door to more countries able to

engage the United States bilaterally (or unilaterally) instead of through alliances or blocs. The United States has already benefited much from the Quad by anchoring its Indo-Pacific strategy in shared security and technology frameworks and from I2U2 by extending that logic westward.

An autonomy-centered world is not cost-free for the United States, however.

The most obvious cost is the erosion of US influence. More autonomous countries means more countries able to make independent decisions and act as they see fit, regardless of whether it comports with US preferences, in matters of defense, the economy, or technology.

The United States will thus become less capable of setting the agenda and dictating its terms. Increasingly, it will have to work *with* countries, i.e., negotiate, and thus make compromises. US influence will remain significant, and in many cases the United States will still be able to impose its will, but its ability to do so will decrease.

The result will be increased complexity in US relations with allies and others and greater transactions costs for the United States. That means a heavier and more time-consuming diplomatic workload, especially if the United States wants to keep coalition coherence to address international problems.

In addition to costs, an autonomy-centered world brings major risks for the United States.

In defense, one risk is that US partners make choices that lead to incompatible systems, command problems, or delayed coalition responses. Such an outcome would be problematic at a time when integration is a priority. That's why the United States, of late, has talked about the need for "integrated deterrence."³⁷

Another risk is that US allies split from the United States and take care of their own defense, such as by developing their own nuclear weapons or, worse, by siding with US competitors. For example, South Korea is deeply supportive of its alliance with the United States and does not want to abandon it and

³⁷ The reference to "integrated deterrence" first emerged from the US Indo-Pacific Command in the late 2010s and became the formulation of choice for

the administration of Joe Biden. The Trump administration has chosen not to use that formulation, even though integration efforts have continued.

embrace China as a replacement, but its interest in independent nuclear weapons has never been higher.³⁸

There is also a risk that framing strategic autonomy as industrial self-reliance could lead to widespread protectionism, higher costs, and slower innovation. Such a development would weaken the open international system, which has been a godsend to US trade and investment.

Yet another risk is the emergence of competing blocs or hedging coalitions, as opposed to today's loose blocs and coalitions. The result would be the repolarization of the world, complicating US power projection and undermining the rules and norms that have long served US interests.

Today's emerging world, therefore, can produce two outcomes for the United States.

One outcome is positive. Current dynamics could lead to countries increasing their defense spending and enhancing interoperability with the United States while cooperating on shared threats at the economic and technological levels, benefiting Washington in terms of burden-sharing and resilience and limiting the US loss of influence. Such an outcome would help the United States in its competition with China.

But a negative outcome is also possible. Current dynamics could morph into increased competition, leading to duplication of military forces, protectionist markets, and different technology standards. The result would be divergence in allied policy and strategy and drastic reduction of US leverage as the international system becomes fragmented, and crises and conflicts rise. That outcome would cost the United States vis-à-vis China.

The path forward

What should the United States do to shape this emerging autonomy-centered world to its liking?

The United States should recognize and accept that the world is—will be—composed of an increasing number of autonomous countries even as its competition with China intensifies. It should not try

to resist or reverse that trend. Rather, it should encourage these countries to act independently but within a framework that sustain coordination, cooperation, and shared rules and norms, i.e., not in ways that dilute collective leverage or invite fragmentation.

In defense, the United States should urge its allies, partners, and others to build capabilities that complement, not compete with, US alliance structures, and it should push them to do so in a way that enables interoperability with US forces.

One way to convince countries to deliver in this regard is for the United States to maintain its longstanding defense commitments but offer conditional incentives for capability building. The United States, to put it plainly, should tie targeted security guarantees, co-funding, co-production, and technology sharing to interoperability commitments.

The United States should also invest in rapid coalition mechanisms, such as pre-negotiated rules of engagement templates tailored to regional needs. Doing so would help autonomous partners realize the importance of interoperability and of acting in a coordinated manner to address crises and conflicts without prolonged bilateral bargaining. Running stress tests and tabletop exercises can help further align interests and strengthen coalition coherence and permanent crisis coordination units in NATO or the Quad can operationalize coalition formation and action.

The goal is simple: keep allies on America's side and attract new partners.

To an extent, the United States is already acting along those lines, with different approaches to different regions. In Europe, it is encouraging "capability building without separation." It supports a stronger Europe that can defend itself, but within the shared strategic architecture led by NATO. In much of Asia, meanwhile, its focus is "partnership without alignment." The United States is expanding cooperation on defense innovation and critical technology frameworks but avoiding pressing India, Vietnam, and others into a formal alliance, recognizing their proclivity for engagement of

³⁸ For information, check Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "Asan Poll: 'South Koreans and their Neighbors 2025' Record 76.2% Public Support for Nuclear Armament," press release, April 28, 2025,

https://www.asaninst.org/data/file/s3_4_2_eng/f15af67c43af11afd7a990dc4f32fd2b_ibqN3niH_f8111c8c672b91ff679cf1147f75861e6c5eca99.pdf?utm_

multiple poles in the West, Russia, or the Gulf or Global South.

In terms of economics, in addition to scaling up its industry in cutting-edge areas (notably through stronger public-private partnerships), the United States should pursue targeted restrictions and safeguards for security-sensitive sectors while preserving open markets and promoting allied industrial cooperation where feasible. Through shared research and development, pooled procurement, and export control harmonization, the United States should cultivate and coordinate allied “industrial basins” for semiconductors, batteries, rare earths, and pharmaceuticals so that allied markets remain open but increase their resilience, especially vis-à-vis China.

In this regard, the newly launched US-led initiative “Pax Silica,” which brings together the United States and several allied countries to secure global silicon and artificial intelligence-era technology supply chains, is a step in the right direction.³⁹

The United States, simply put, should implement focused controls, not proceed with blunt closure. It should de-risk, not decouple, and it should do so in partnership with its allies and partners.

The goal is clear: enhance economic security to advance US and allied interests while limiting potential protectionist blowback.

US leadership on global standards for critical technologies, export controls, and supply chain resilience is especially critical because it will help prevent the emergence of closed, rival systems. To do so, the United States here too should tailor its approach to different regions.

In Asia, the United States should deepen its recently established Technology Prosperity Deals with Japan and South Korea as well as the Quad’s work on critical and emerging technologies.⁴⁰ These mechanisms focus on resilience and redundancy, not exclusion. They encourage sourcing away from China without banning all trade with China, which is important given that Asian countries remain

interlinked with China. That’s a form of de-risking that emphasizes trusted networks.

In Europe, meanwhile, the United States should continue to align US-EU frameworks on artificial intelligence, data governance, and export controls through the Trade and Technology Council.⁴¹ Doing so is useful because it enables the European Union to maintain its regulatory autonomy, but within a shared normative architecture, reducing the risk of a “Washington versus Brussels” model rivalry. That’s de-risking through rules and coordination.

The coming age of strategic autonomy will bring considerable change in the international system because an increasing number of countries will have agency to influence and shape that system even as it will remain dominated by the United States and China.

In that new age, the United States can maintain the upper hand if it leads by convincing, enabling, and embedding, i.e., if it convinces its allies, partners, and others of shared interests, enables them with capacity and incentives, and embeds common rules, norms, and standards so that their autonomous choices converge towards an open, resilient, and well-regulated international order. That approach—leadership through influence, empowerment, and structure rather than power and dominance—is anchored in the belief that for one to lead others must want to follow. The United States should recognize that this approach will pay the most dividends, and it should embrace and implement it swiftly.

³⁹ For more information, see “Pax Silica,” U.S. Department of State, accessed December 16, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/pax-silica>.

⁴⁰ “The United States Signs Technology Prosperity Deals with Japan and Korea,” *White House*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/10/the-united-states-signs-technology-prosperity-deals-with-japan-and-korea/>.

⁴¹ For information about the Trade and Technology Council, visit the European Commission’s webpage at https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/eu-us-trade-and-technology-council_en.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID SANTORO is the President and CEO of the Pacific Forum. He specializes in strategic and security issues with a regional focus on both Asia and Europe. Dr Santoro's current interests focus on great-power dynamics, US alliances, and deterrence, particularly the role of China in an era of nuclear multipolarity. In 2021, Lynne Rienner published his volume on *U.S.-China Nuclear Relations – The Impact of Strategic Triangles*. Dr Santoro also leads several of the Forum's track-1.5 and track-2 strategic dialogues. Before joining Pacific Forum, Santoro worked on similar issues in France, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In the spring of 2010, Dr Santoro was also a visiting fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and, in 2010-2011, he was a Stanton nuclear security fellow at the Institute for International Strategic Studies in London.