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The Double Squeeze Strategy and European Sovereignty

The EU possesses one of the most attractive markets in the world. If it succeeds in reducing the dependencies that have severely constrained its room for manoeuvre — in areas such as defence, energy, and trade — a new playing field will open up, that may allow it to place a few pieces back on the global chessboard.



In recent weeks, two political developments have stood out as particularly significant from a European perspective. The first was Vladimir Putin's nearly hour-long press conference in Beijing, during which he answered questions from Russian journalists at the end of his visit to China. The second was German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's speech at the CDU's 61st Lower Saxony party conference.

Both events contained statements that caught the eye of the international media. Yet what matters for our purposes is not Putin's invitation to Zelensky to hold talks in Moscow — an offer even Russian journalists found amusing — nor Merz's remarks on migration or Israel. The key takeaway from the chancellor's speech was his emphasis on a constitutional amendment that enabled Germany to implement the largest defense spending package in the history of the Federal Republic. This move must be understood against the backdrop of Merz's conviction that Europe can only emerge from its current crisis by transforming its patterns of dependence. As he put it, "The European Union must become stronger, more self-confident, and more independent."

Merz identified three areas where dependencies must be broken: energy dependence on Russia, security dependence on the United States, and economic dependence on China.

In doing so, he sketched out the geopolitical triangle that effectively places Europe in a double squeeze between two external forces operating in different dimensions. Although Merz did not use the term “strategic autonomy”, his message clearly points in that direction.

This is where Putin's press conference becomes relevant again. A reporter from the Rossiya state television network asserted in the form of a question that the EU is “before our very eyes” transforming from an economic union into a military-political bloc characterized by “a constant stream of aggressive decisions and statements.” Putin responded by reiterating his long-standing opposition to Ukraine's NATO membership, while noting that Russia had never questioned Ukraine's right to join the EU. Crucially, however, he neither nuanced nor rejected the reporter's portrayal of an increasingly militarized EU — a framing that, given the nature of Russian state media, likely reflects the official Russian narrative.

This raises a key question: why would the Russian leadership refrain from questioning Ukraine's EU accession if they truly viewed the EU as becoming a military-political actor? But the real issue here is not this contradiction.

It is whether the EU can actually develop into a viable military-political bloc capable of providing the security pillar of European sovereignty, strategic autonomy.

Even with strong pressure from Washington pushing Europe in this direction, the answer is far from clear. This is not the first time such a geopolitical pressure has emerged. During Donald Trump's first term, European leaders learned the hard way that the Euro-Atlantic security framework — long taken for granted — was not automatic. Trump's ambivalent stance toward NATO revealed that U.S. security commitments to Europe could become conditional at any time.

At the same time, Russia demonstrated in 2014 through the annexation of Crimea that it was willing to revise the status quo by force. For Europe, the 2010s thus brought a double shock: the threat of eastern aggression combined with the unreliability of its western ally. For a brief moment, this seemed to trigger a red light in European capitals. Certain initiatives were launched, but after the Minsk half-measures and Trump's electoral defeat, Europe slipped back into its old routines — as if the security interlude had been nothing more than a bad dream.

A few years later, however, the same dual dynamic returned with elemental force: a full-scale war in Ukraine coupled with a

renewed Trumpian push in U.S. politics. European NATO members' massive increases in defense spending represent only the first, essentially forced step. A genuine geopolitical upgrade would require building an independent European defense architecture.

This idea is not new. A shared European army was part of the founding fathers' vision for the European project. Yet the original plan — the European Defence Community (EDC) — collapsed in 1954. Now, more than 70 years later, the combination of external pressures and internal necessity offers a historic opportunity to revisit that vision.

A similar inflection point is emerging on the economic and technological front, the second dimension of the double squeeze. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China goes far beyond trade disputes or technological competition; it shapes the entire structure of the global order. In this game, Europe finds itself under simultaneous pressure from both poles. Washington expects the EU to move decisively from a “de-risking” approach toward a full “decoupling” doctrine, and this expectation is only likely to intensify. Beijing, meanwhile, is seeking to embed itself more deeply into Europe's economic fabric through trade and technology cooperation.

This is a situation defined by powerful constraints and competing gravitational pulls — one that could easily become a trap. But it is also a potential strategic opportunity. The European Union commands one of the most attractive markets in the world. If it succeeds in reducing its dependencies — in defense, energy, and trade — it could carve out new strategic room for maneuver, putting some of its pieces back on the global chessboard.

In other words, the double squeeze does not only threaten European sovereignty — it may also create a path to strengthen it. This insight seemed to inform Ursula von der Leyen's 2025 State of the Union address, the third development worth noting. She appeared to grasp the stakes. The real question, however, is whether Europe's political elites possess the intellectual and strategic depth required to craft a genuinely autonomous strategy — and whether they can convince their citizens that the double squeeze is not merely a threat, but possibly Europe's last real chance to become the master of its own destiny.