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Margins of Power: The EU's Crisis of Strategic Autonomy and Relevance

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July 2025



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The past year has seen a major increase in tensions with a direct impact on European security. The Russia-Ukraine conflict continues to test the effectiveness of the bloc while the tensions between Iran and Israel culminated in intensive, direct military exchanges in June 2025. Combined with the prominent role of the United States and closeness of the Middle East to Europe, these escalations carry far-reaching consequences for the EU's security environment and its long-held goal of strategic autonomy. While the Middle East has always been a source of great concern for Europe, this crisis has exposed both the contradictions and vulnerabilities inherent to the bloc's approach to external security, as well as the ongoing gap between the bloc's capabilities and rhetoric regarding its strategic autonomy.

The Iran-Israel confrontation is not new, but this escalation represents a qualitative shift in the war. The US, Israel's main ally, acted immediately to bolster Israeli air defenses, supplying key intelligence and logistical operation support. This direct American intervention highlighted the continued relative power of America in the region, but it also complicated the EU's diplomatic and geopolitical stance. For example, the European intelligence agencies, already on high alert due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and hybrid warfare, were completely unprepared.

Moreover, the prospect of the [Strait of Hormuz](#) closing in June 2025 served as a harsh reminder of Europe's vulnerability to supply shocks and the limitations of its diversification strategies. Although the bloc has achieved substantial progress in reducing its reliance on Russian hydrocarbons since 2022, the Middle East continues to be an important supplier of oil and liquefied natural gas for numerous member states. This episode reignited concerns in the EU about the necessity for strategic reserves and the importance of a united energy policy to be immune to external shocks. It also reinforced the idea that instability in the Middle East may easily spread to Europe, whether through terrorism, cyberattacks, or the weaponization of expatriate groups.

From a broader geopolitical standpoint, the Iran-Israel dilemma has forced the EU to confront the limits of its diplomatic power. Following the US withdrawal from the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA) in 2018, the EU attempted to position itself as a guarantor of the nuclear deal and a trustworthy mediator with Iran. However, the failure to protect European enterprises from US secondary sanctions, as well as the uncertainty within the JCPOA framework, significantly harmed the EU's reputation in the eyes of Iran. This has further isolated the EU, while Washington and Tel Aviv drive the diplomatic and military response, leaving European leaders as bystanders or, at most, junior partners.

This marginalization was mirrored in the EU's public messaging during the crisis. While European leaders jointly criticized Iran's actions and highlighted Israel's right to self-defense, their statements frequently mirrored US talking lines and lacked the depth and independence that had previously distinguished EU diplomacy. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's statement that Iran was "[the main cause of instability in the region](#)" and her support for the US-brokered ceasefire were generally seen as indicators of alignment with Washington rather than proof of an autonomous European leadership. This view was reinforced by the EU's failure to develop a clear vision for post-crisis regional security that went beyond appeals for prudence and dialogue.



The crisis also had a significant impact on the EU's internal debates regarding strategic autonomy. The Iran-Israel confrontation has provided a case study for European aspirations to develop autonomous military and diplomatic capabilities. Despite repeated assertions of intent, the EU continues to rely largely on US intelligence, logistics, and military forces for crisis management in its area. The [deployment](#) of French and Italian naval assets to the eastern Mediterranean in April 2025 was symbolic, but it paled in comparison to the scope and pace of US military activities. European efforts to mediate between the parties were largely ignored by both Washington and the regional belligerents.

At the same time, the crisis has highlighted the intertwined nature of the EU's security challenges. Iran's growing alliance with Russia, as evidenced by the supply of drones, missiles, and cyber capabilities for use against Ukraine, has [blurred the distinction](#) between Middle Eastern and European security theaters. European officials now [acknowledge](#) that Gulf instability can have a direct impact on the Ukraine conflict, NATO's eastern flank security, and the resilience of essential infrastructure throughout the continent. This has sparked proposals for a more integrated strategy to security, one that covers the traditional gap between the EU's southern and eastern neighborhoods.

However, the path to true strategic autonomy remains beset with challenges. The EU's decision-making processes have been impeded by the need for unanimity in foreign policy, limiting its ability to move quickly and forcefully in times of crisis. The lack of a uniform European defense posture, along with chronic capacity gaps, and varying threat perceptions among member states all undercut the practical viability of European autonomy. The Iran-Israel conflict has reintroduced arguments about the establishment of a European Security Council, the development of cooperative procurement and defense industry cooperation, and the necessity for a more forceful shared foreign and security strategy. However, progress on these fronts is slow and subject to the whims of national politics.

The crisis has also underscored the conflict between the EU's normative commitments and its strategic goals. While European leaders continue to advocate for multilateralism, international law, and human rights, their alignment with US and Israeli actions—some of which have been criticized by international legal experts—has called into question the consistency and credibility of the EU's external actions. This conundrum is especially evident in the Middle East, where the EU's economic and security objectives frequently differ from its normative goal.

Looking ahead, there is a growing realization that Europe must spend on its own security, both to preserve its interests and to prevent being marginalized in the formation of regional and global order. This will require an increased defense spending and capabilities development as well as a more coherent and unified approach to foreign policy—one capable of harmonizing the EU's principles with power dynamics. It has been proven that the EU's security is closely related to Middle Eastern trends, and that pursuing strategic autonomy is both necessary and aspirational. The issue for Europe is to turn this realization into concrete action, bridging the gap between ambition and reality and guaranteeing that it can play an important role in creating its neighborhood's security architecture.

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