

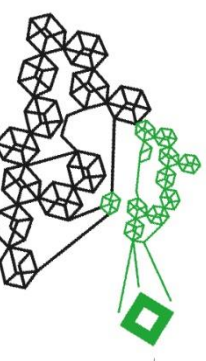


Assessing the Potential of EU Trade Agreements as an Instrument for Achieving Strategic Autonomy: An Analysis of the European Commission's Goals and Objectives.



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Abstract

This thesis is written with the objective to answer the question: *To what extent can EU trade agreements be an instrument to attain the strategic autonomy goals set out by the European Commission?* The concept of strategic autonomy is ambiguous and multi-faceted which results in different definitions. By first exploring the different definitions of the concept of strategic autonomy, it was discovered that the concept best be defined as *“the capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries – in strategically important policy areas.”* The second part of the analysis aimed to discover how European institutions have implemented their strategic autonomy objectives into trade agreements signed between 2010-2020. The research has shown that there is no clear strategy for incorporating such strategies into trade agreements, mostly due to the selected timeframe. The research did show that with the changing global order in the late 2010s and early 2020s, the Von der Leyen Commission made it a priority to attain the strategic autonomy goals and they have represented their ambitions in European (trade) policy.

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List of abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement	HS	Harmonized System
AI	Artificial Intelligence	IEA	International Energy Agency
API	Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients	IoT	Internet of Things
CCP	Common Commercial Policy	JSTOR	Journal Storage
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union	LED	Light Emitting Diode
CPE	Collective Power Europe	LI	Liberal Intergovernmentalism
CRM	Critical Raw Materials	LNG	Liquified Natural Gas
CSDP	Common Security and Defense Policy	MPE	Market Power Europe
EC	European Commission	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ECIC	European Chips Infrastructure Consortium	NPE	Normative Power Europe
EDTIB	EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base	NZIA	Net Zero Industry Act
EEAS	European External Action Service	OSA	Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy
EP	European Parliament	REE	Rare Earth Minerals
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreement	RG	Regional Group
ESA	Eastern- and Southern Africa	SA	Strategic Autonomy
EU	European Union	SADC	South African Development Community
EUCO	European Council	TEU	Treaty on European Union
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy	TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement	UK	United Kingdom
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade	US	United States
GPS	Global Positioning System	WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of (European) Strategic Autonomy has gained significant attention as the European Union (EU) seeks to position itself as a leading player in a changing global order (Youngs & Ülgen, 2022). At its core, strategic autonomy (SA) refers to the ability of the EU to act independently and assertively in its policies without relying on third countries such as the United States, although this is not undisputed. In recent years, the definition has shifted more towards an overarching concept in other strategic areas, such as trade, finance and supply chain resilience. The concept has become increasingly important due to a variety of events, for example, the election of Donald Trump as United States (US) president in 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) voting to leave the EU in 2016 and the ongoing invasion of Russia in Ukraine (Besch, 2016; Simón, 2022).

The transatlantic partnership, which has traditionally been a cornerstone of Europe's foreign and security policy, has come under stress in the past years (Berriault, 2022). The election of US President Trump in 2016, who advocated for a more isolationist foreign policy and expressed scepticism towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), led many European leaders to question the reliability of the United States as a strategic partner (van Ham, 2018; Barnes & Cooper, 2021). In addition, the rise of China as a global superpower has created new challenges for Europe. The supply chain disruptions caused by China's zero-covid policy have severely impacted the EU (Castro Ribeiro, 2023). Secondly, China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region and its increasing economic influence in Europe has raised concerns about its impact on European security and economic interests (Hirsch, 2020). However, not only security issues contribute to the call for a stronger Europe. An increasingly multipolar world urges the EU to stand up and expose its power.

As a result of these developments, several European leaders with French President Macron as a frontrunner, have called for a greater and stronger EU that is capable of making its own decisions (Macron, 2017). This has involved the re-evaluation of the EU's foreign and security policy, including its approach to defence and its relationship with NATO. European leaders have also called for greater cooperation and integration in areas such as defence procurement and military capabilities, to enhance the EU's ability to act independently and respond to security challenges. Since 2020, however, the discussion

has expanded into other strategic areas such as technology, energy (infrastructure) and healthcare.

Despite these efforts, however, achieving SA is a complex and difficult task. Not only because the EU is made up of 27 member states with diverse interests and perspectives, but also because there is no conformity in the definition of the concept (Franke & Varna, 2019; Brudzinska et al., 2021). Furthermore, there are significant disagreements among EU member states about issues such as defence spending and the role of NATO. In addition, there are practical challenges to building a more integrated and resilient Europe. To realize its proposed goals, the EU needs to seek instruments to enable more autonomous decision-making with the aim to become more resilient.

In recent years, global trade policy has become more politicized. This has led to the concept of geoeconomics, referring to the use of economic tools to advance (geo)political objectives (Schneider-Petsinger, 2020). The concept of geoeconomics is often intertwined with the concept of SA in an economic sense. Economic power is more often used strategically, as was shown by President Trump who threatened to leave the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Swanson, 2019). Such events forced the EU to think about how they see the future of global trade and the single market. This has led to a new way of thinking in which the EU utilizes its vast economic power to accomplish its own goals (Schmitz & Seidl, 2022a). The trend of politicizing trade has its effects on SA as well (Meunier & Nicolaïdis, 2019; Babic et al., 2022; Moraes & Wigell, 2022; Weinhardt et al., 2022).

This research will examine whether trade agreements can be used as an instrument to attain the goal of SA as introduced and defined by the European Commission. It aims to build upon existing research on SA by exploring the possible relationship between trade policy and SA. Trade policy is primarily developed at the EU Commission level, involving multiple actors and different interests, making it possibly an ideal instrument to spread European norms and values. Existing research primarily examined the effects of trade deals or the meaning of SA in different sectors separately, but not the connection between the policy and the policy objective: SA.

1.1 Research questions and thesis structure

This thesis will study and answer the following research question:

Main research question: To what extent can EU trade agreements be an instrument to attain the strategic autonomy goals set out by the European Commission?

To answer the main question, the research was divided into four sub-questions.

SQ1: What is the academic definition of strategic autonomy?

This sub-question will be discussed in Chapter 2, where a literature review is carried out to identify the institutional definition of SA. The institutional definition of the concept is important because it will help to position the course the European institutions aim to follow to become more strategically autonomous. This sub-question will be answered in the conclusion of Chapter 2.

SQ2: How do the different relevant European institutions define strategic autonomy?

Similar to sub-question one, the answer to this sub-question is to be found with the help of a literature review. The academic definition helps to further place the concept into context, and define how it has evolved. The second sub-question will be answered in the conclusion of Chapter 2.

SQ3: How have the European institutions presented European interests in trade agreements that were concluded between 2010 and 2020?

The third sub-question is the next part of the analysis carried out in this research. The analysis consists of an overview of all trade agreements signed between 2010 and 2020. They will be analysed to see whether there are articles that refer to strategic autonomy, and how the EU institutions have presented their interests in the trade agreements. The answer to this sub-question is found in the conclusion of Chapter 4.

SQ4: How can the strategic autonomy approach of the European Commission be identified in recent trade policy development?

The fourth and final sub-question aims to see whether trade agreements signed after 2020 and other relevant trade policy development have any mentioning of strategic autonomy, or its goals, as defined by the EC. It will be carried out by the same analysis as for sub-question 3 and the answer can be found in the conclusion of chapter 5.

1.2 Societal and Scientific Relevance

Research on SA concerning trade policy is relevant to society as it can have significant implications for Europe's economic competitiveness and possibly helps the economy to recover from crises and remain competitive (Publications Office of the European Union, 2020). With the increase of protectionism and unilateralism, as well as growing geopolitical tensions, the EU is increasingly seeking to find its role as a global (trade) power (Meunier & Nicolaïdis, 2006).

This research aims to answer a range of questions, such as which instruments the EU can utilize to enhance SA, whether trade agreements have resulted in more SA and, how trade policy and regulatory frameworks have changed in recent years. Furthermore, the research also related to current debates in the EU on how it should further develop its military capabilities, the Single Market and its foreign policy. Therefore, it also relates to European integration theories.

1.3 Thesis Outline

The following chapter will outline the theoretical framework. This includes the specification of the key concepts as well as an extensive literature review. The subsequent chapter focuses on the research design. The central research question provides for descriptive research, therefore a document analysis will be conducted. The final chapters conclude the study by answering the research question.

2. Theoretical framework

The following chapter will provide the theoretical framework for this research. It includes the definition of the relevant concepts, explaining trade policy, and the literature to define the concept of SA. Because the latter is of great importance for the research, it will be elaborated on more broadly with the help of a literature review.

2.1 Trade policy

Trade policy refers to a set of government policies and regulations that are designed to shape the conditions of international trade. This includes policy regarding, tariffs, quotas, and subsidies among others, but also trade agreements can be defined as trade policy. In the EU, the policy that covers the area of trade is the common commercial policy (CCP). The CCP shows the evolution of the international trade regime and the process of economic integration within the EU, as well as the strong relationship between the internal and external aspects of economic integration (Larik, 2020, p. 211). With the establishment of the Treaty of Rome, the founding member states aimed to facilitate trade and investment. Whereas the member states were signatories to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a customs union was required to remove tariffs between the founding countries (Gstöhl, 2013). The CCP was officially implemented in 1968, and although overlapping with GATT, it must be seen as an EU initiative that aimed to develop trade mechanisms to ensure maintaining its leading trade position (Gstöhl, 2013). Whereas GATT was relatively successful, it had no coherent institutional structure. To institutionalize the treaties, GATT was incorporated into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was said to be more decisive and better able to serve its purpose (WTO, 2023).

The core of the CCP can be found in art. 206 and 207 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which states that:

By establishing a customs union in accordance with Articles 28 to 32, the Union shall contribute, in the common interest, to the harmonious development of world trade, the progressive abolition of restrictions on international trade and on foreign direct investment, and the lowering of customs and other barriers (Treaty for the functioning of the European Union, 1957).

Article 207 TFEU not only focusses on goods but includes aspects such as intellectual property and foreign investment as well. Art. 207 TFEU states that:

Article 207

The common commercial policy shall be based on uniform principles, particularly with regard to changes in tariff rates, the conclusion of tariff and trade agreements relating to trade in goods and services, and the commercial aspects of intellectual property, foreign direct investment, the achievement of uniformity in measures of liberalisation, export policy and measures to protect trade such as those to be taken in the event of dumping or subsidies. The common commercial policy shall be conducted in the context of the principles and objectives of the Union's external action (Treaty for the functioning of the European Union, 1957).

A significant part of the EU foreign policy is conducted through the CCP. The CCP is used as an instrument to promote stability, provide humanitarian aid and stimulate trade, thus according to Adriaensen (2020) the CCP can be considered an instrument of foreign policy. Meunier & Nicolaidis (2017, p. 211) argue that “it is crucial to distinguish between the inherent power derived from trade and the use of trade as the backbone of normative power,” showing that the CCP can be a powerful instrument. It consists of five instruments that are used to shape international trade: a common customs tariff, trade barriers and market access, trade defence instruments, trade agreements and dispute settlement (Larik, 2020, pp 216-228). For this research, it is important to have a clear overview of different types of trade agreements. Therefore, they will be discussed in more detail in section 2.2.

Regarding the CCP it is important to note that the decision-making process is clearly defined in art. 207(3) TFEU, where it states that “The Commission shall make recommendations to the Council, which shall authorize it to open the necessary negotiations. The Council and the Commission shall be responsible for ensuring that the agreements negotiated are compatible with internal Union policies and rules.” This means that formally the EU speaks with one voice and through one agent: the EC (Meunier & Nicolaïdis, 2017, p. 212; Larik, 2020, p. 230).

2.2. Trade agreements

Trade agreements are formally negotiated agreements between two or more countries that cover a wide range of issues related to trade, such as tariffs, quotas, regulations, and intellectual property rights, with the ultimate goal to liberalize trade (Young & Peterson, 2006, p. 798; Aghion et al., 2007, p. 10; Rodrik, 2018, p. 74; European Council, 2021). However, not all trade agreements serve the same purposes and to the same extent. Therefore, a classification of EU trade agreements becomes particularly important for this research. (Storey, 2006, p. 335; Harrison et al, 2019, p. 645; Van Elsuwege & Chamon, 2019, p. 24). The legal basis for all agreements is art. 217 TFEU, which states that:

Article 217

The Union may conclude with one or more third countries or international organisations agreements establishing an association involving reciprocal rights and obligations, common action and special procedure.

With the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, a new legal basis was introduced with art. 8 TEU, also called the European Neighbourhood Policy (EEAS, 2023). Although it does not formally belong to the EU's external action treaty provisions, it is considered part of the common provisions (Elsuwege & Chamon, 2019, p. 12). Art. 8 TEU states that:

Article 8

1. The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.
2. For the purposes of paragraph 1, the Union may conclude specific agreements with the countries concerned. These agreements may contain reciprocal rights and obligations as well as the possibility of undertaking activities jointly. Their implementation shall be the subject of periodic consultation.

2.1.1. Association Agreements

Association Agreements (AAs) are bilateral or multilateral agreements that are signed between the EU and third countries creating a framework for increased cooperation between the states and the modernization of the third country its political, economic and social systems. Besides art. 217 TFEU, Art 218 TFEU mentions AAs as a special case, allowing them to conclude after unanimous voting by the EUCO (Elsuwege & Chamon, 2019, p. 10). All aspects concerning

the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSDP) are captured in art. 37 TEU. Often, AAs are also used as a basis for the implementation of the EU accession process, as was the case for Turkey. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) described the purpose of the AA as:

to promote the development of trade and economic relations between the contracting parties [...] so as to improve the living conditions of Turkish people and facilitate the accession of the Republic of Turkey to the Community at a later date (Van Elsuwege & Chamon, 2019, p. 25).

In general, AAs cover aspects in more different areas than trade only, which can include political, legal or social reforms. It can therefore be seen as some sort of preliminary trade agreement. As AAs are negotiated by the EU to secure commitments from a country to implement political, economic, trade, or human rights reforms. In return, the EU may provide the country with access to its markets (such as for industrial goods or agricultural products) without tariffs, as well as financial or technical support. It is worth noting that the most recent Association Agreements also involve the inclusion of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the EU and the third country (Spiliopoulos, 2014).

2.1.2. Free trade agreements

FTAs are agreements that aim to open markets in developed countries by granting them market access. In international law, FTAs are divided into two types, bilateral agreements and multilateral agreements. FTAs are designed to decrease tariffs and duties and thus eliminate trade barriers and stimulate international trade (European Commission, n.d.). FTAs are often complex agreements that besides regulating tariff treatment related to goods, also contain chapters on intellectual property, technical standards and other trade-related issues (Erixon et al., 2022; European Commission, 2022). General rules concerning FTAs are written down in the GATT, which is part of the regulations of the WTO (WTO, 1986).

2.1.3. Economic Partnership Agreements

Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are agreements which aim to eliminate trade barriers regarding the free movement of goods and services between two or more countries. The EU has negotiated EPAs with several African and Caribbean countries such as the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and Eastern and Southern Africa (European Commission, 2023b). The agreements aim to create a free trade area between the EU and third countries. EPAs in their current form the EU negotiates them can be traced back to the signing of the

Cotonou Agreement in 2000 (Von Moltke, 2004). Before the Cotonou agreement, there was heavy criticism of the way the EU negotiated non-reciprocal and discriminating agreements that were not in line with World Trade Organization (WTO) standards (Koné, 2010). With the implementation of the ‘new style EPAs,’ WTO guidelines are the basis of the agreements, meaning their nature is reciprocal and non-discriminatory. Furthermore, the agreements go beyond conventional free trade agreements (FTAs) by taking into account socio-economic circumstances and creating joint institutions that cooperatively address issues, together with contributing to good economic governance (European Commission, 2005).

Trade Agreements could potentially be an important tool for pursuing SA. Potentially, they can be used as a tool to enhance the EU's economic competitiveness, promote its interests, and strengthen its global influence. Therefore, theoretically, the EU can utilize trade agreements in several ways. One of the theories that argues that the EU can promote its interests and values to potentially shape global norms and standards, is normative power Europe (Manners, 2002). This concept will be discussed in more detail in section 2.3.1. Secondly, the EU can use trade agreements to strengthen its influence in regions with strategic interests by building closer economic ties (Schmitz & Seidl, 2022b). Finally, the EU can increase its strategic flexibility and decrease its reliance on a single partner. This helps the EU to more effectively respond to opportunities and pursue its strategic interests independently (Molthof & Köbben, 2022).

An effective type of agreement to attain more SA would be AAs. Because of its complexity and extensivity, the EU would best be able to further develop its industrial and commercial policy, albeit solely with neighbouring countries, as AAs pursue. The countries that the EU has signed association agreements with are all neighbouring countries, without significant strategic resources. However, an AA could help to strengthen and broaden the single market. To utilize trade agreements as an instrument to further attain SA, the EU should continuously work on modernizing its AAs with the main goal to recentre its trade policy around fewer priorities. This is also argued by Bjerkem (2020), who says that “Priorities include strengthening and modernising the EU’s trade defence instruments, leveraging its Single Market to establish a level playing field, and improving the enforcement of its FTAs.”

2.3 international relations theories

With SA as the goal of the EC, understanding various international relations theories that are relevant to trade policy can help to understand what the possible approaches of the EC are, and how these can contribute to SA.

2.3.1. Normative Power Europe

Normative Power Europe (NPE) is a theory that describes the EU's ability to influence the behaviour of other states by promoting its norms and values. The concept was first defined by Manners (2002), arguing that "the concept of normative power is an attempt to suggest that not only is the EU constructed on a normative basis, but importantly that this predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics" (p. 252). NPE describes how the EU's influence is not solely based on economic or military power, but rather on its ability to shape global norms and values without force or coercion. The concept of normative power is strongly noticeable in EU legislation. For example, Art. 21(1) Treaty on European Union (TEU) mentions that:

The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.

Manners (2002) has defined five core norms within the EU's *Acquis Communautaire*, which consists of all the laws and policies of the EU. These five norms are peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights (p. 242). These norms are visible in art. 21(1) TEU as mentioned above. However, Manners (2002) also argues that "accepting the normative basis of the EU does not make it a normative power, so we need to ask how EU norms are diffused"(p. 244). Therefore, he identified six factors that can shape norm diffusion. The first is contagion, referring to the unintentional diffusion of ideas from the EU to other (political) actors. The second factor is informational diffusion. This is the result of strategic communications such as declaratory communications. Procedural diffusion is the next factor that involves institutionalization of the relationship between the EU and a third party, for example by enlargement. Fourth is transference, which takes place when goods or other means are exchanged through financial or substantive means. Next is the diffusion that is caused by the physical representation of the EU in a third country, for example, Member State embassies or Commission delegations. This factor is called overt diffusion. Lastly, there is the cultural filter. This is based on the interplay between knowledge construction and the creation of social- and political identity (Manners, 2002, pp. 244-245).

When following the NPE concept as coined by Manners, it can be argued that this theory is useful to attain more SA. Mainly because the EU is capable of shaping the system in countries

outside the EU which eventually results in relative power for the EU. Ultimately, this can lead to a multilateral framework that upholds these norms and uses this framework to discourage the emergence of opposing geopolitical or geo-economical blocs (Palm, 2021).

2.3.2. Market Power Europe

Whereas the EU most certainly has normative characteristics, one could argue that the EU affects the international system most with its single market and market-related policies and regulation (Damro, 2012; Damro, 2015). Although it could be argued that the core norm of liberty as defined by Manners (2002) can also include market freedom, the EU adds a layer of regulations and interventions acting as constraints on capitalism, resulting in a theory referred to as market power Europe (MPE) (Damro, 2012, p. 685). MPE contains three characteristics that help better understand the concept.

First, there is the single market. This represents the EU's material existence and its most pressing aspect in the international system (Allen & Smith, 1990). Due to the size of the EU economy in a global context, 14% of world trade in 2021, as a market power, the EU should be taken seriously (Eurostat, 2021). According to Drezner (2008), market size is important for two reasons. First, it affects the material incentives when governments chose to co-ordinate regulatory standards or not. Second, the internal market reduces the incentive to switch standards, which encourages third parties to adjust to set standards (Drezner, 2008, p.32).

The second characteristic is how MPE takes into account the EU as a regulatory institution. Due to its ability to shape economic regulation, it is capable of both liberalizing and restricting market access and thus exercising this as a power. Furthermore, it has sanctioning authority, and providing the ability to pose sanctions on third parties for non-compliance is a powerful instrument (Damro, 2012, p. 688). By banning market entry or imposing fines, the EU has the power to influence third parties with solely its market power (Bach & Newman, 2007, p. 832). The last characteristic is interest contestation. Damro (2012) describes this characteristic as

[...] interest groups may push specifically for the externalization, whether coercive or non-coercive, of internal regulation. As external actors observe the internal contestation and anticipate outcomes, the EU's unintentional MPE may increase. When pro-externalization interest groups begin to influence policy-making and regulatory outcomes, their activity bolsters the EU's intentional MPE (p. 689).

In conclusion, the EU's identity as an MPE stems from the interplay of three key characteristics: material existence, institutional features, and interest contestation. Similar to Manners' (2002)

concept that the EU has a normative foundation that prompts it to behave normatively, these characteristics build upon the theory of NPE in a way that the presence and interdependence of these three characteristics predispose the EU to act as MPE. Arguably, SA falls into the scope of MPE. SA aims to enable the EU to make decisions without the need for third parties, whenever it desires, in strategic areas. This also means that Europe needs to understand that unilateral free trade sometimes also means tolerating asymmetric terms. Pohl (2021) mentions that

Unilateral free trade today does not just mean eliminating tariffs without reciprocity, but tolerating asymmetric terms of trade whereby a trading partner gains a competitive edge through unfair means that can range from unacceptable labour practices, climate degradation, uncontrolled epidemics, forced technology transfers, subsidies and so on.

Pohl (2021) calls this ‘a controlled burn.’ By protecting against protectionism, the EU benefits by sometimes letting third parties benefit in certain areas. In other words, the EU can benefit by utilizing its market power.

2.3.3. Liberal Intergovernmentalism

Liberal intergovernmentalism (LI) is a theory developed by Moravcsik (1993). Moravcsik argues that Member States are the primary actors in international relations who pursue their interests through negotiations and bargaining with other states. In the context of the EU, LI argues that states participate in the integration process because they believe it will advance their national interests. In essence, this means that Member States willingly transfer part of their sovereignty to institutions such as the EC because they expect it will benefit them in the end and it is not possible to achieve similar results in another way (Moravcsik, 1993). The theory distinguishes between two factors that define the traits and characteristics of EU member states. The first aspect is national preference (Moravcsik, 1993, pp. 489-496; Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2004, pp. 69-70). Member States have different opinions about several issues, such as trade policy or foreign policy. Some Member States focus more on free trade, whereas others prioritize protecting domestic industries.

The second aspect is bargaining power. Member States with more bargaining power - usually the larger and wealthier states such as Germany or France - are more capable of shaping the integration process to their advantage. They can use their economic power to push for beneficial policies, while smaller states are more likely to be sidelined (Moravcsik, 1993, pp. 496-506; Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2004, pp. 70-73). Because according to LI Member States are

more inclined to pursue their interests, which can affect the realization of ESA. Mainly because EU interests are inferior to national interests. An example of this is the case where Germany agreed to buy more COVID-19 vaccines on its own, despite the agreement with the EU to not bilaterally negotiate with the pharmaceutical companies (Deutsch et al., 2021). Although states pursue their interests and will act rationally, liberal intergovernmentalism will result in intergovernmental bargaining power and collective institutions at the European level. As long as it serves their interests, states are willing to delegate powers. The problem, however, is that when it comes to SA, every member state has its national interests. It will therefore be difficult to translate the concept of SA into EU policy as long there are states with a liberal intergovernmentalism view.

2.3.4. Collective Power Europe

Where both NPE and MPE are theories that focus on a specific set of tools - rules and values and the internal market – both theories are insufficient in a multilateral world full of power competition. A theory that aims to describe Europe in a new geopolitical era is collective power Europe (CPE) (Laffan, 2023). The concept of CPE looks beyond NPE and MPE to establish an overarching concept that enables it to identify where Europe needs to go to become a more capable actor of exercising soft power and hard power (Laffan, 2023, p. 3). The theory focusses on three areas: leadership and framing, mobilizing and coordinating institutional capacity and agility and innovation of the policy toolkit.

Leadership and framing refer to the challenge of interpreting and identifying crises before they can react. For the EU to act, it needs to reach an agreement with all member states before action can be taken. Because of the many different leaders, leadership in the EU is considered both collective and reciprocal (Müller & Van Esch, 2019, p. 1052). Together with leadership, collective framing should be taken into account. Because there is a constant tension between forces within the EU, the way crises are framed plays a significant role in EU politics. Steinberg (1998) defined framing as “the process of deliberative and focused persuasive communication essential for the mobilization of a consensus before collective action and as the cognitive process necessary for orienting and sustaining collective action.” The EU's ability to collectively agree on a frame promptly is a key component of CPE (Laffan, 2023, p. 6).

The second element of CPE is mobilizing and coordination institutional capacity. The institutions involved in EU policymaking are central to EU governance, and to effectively express collective power, all institutions must work within a collaborative framework (Laffan, 2023, p. 9-10). Lastly, there is the element of agility and innovation in the policy toolkit. This

element is potentially the most relevant for attaining more SA. When confronting crises, the EUs first reaction is to look at the existing policy toolkit (Laffan, 2023, p. 13). When there is no suitable solution, only then will the EU start to look at innovative instruments to tackle the crisis. Whereas this is more politically demanding, it is often seen as a last resort. However, new policy instruments can be critical to get things done. In the case of SA, it is possible that the existing policy is not enough for specific measures, and new instruments need to be implemented. According to Laffan (2023), however, CPE must be seen as a theory that analyzes crises. One of the examples is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where the EU swiftly reacted by cutting off the supply of Russian oil and gas, showing leadership, mobilizing institutional capacity and innovating the policy toolkit.

2.4 Strategic Autonomy

SA is a relatively new term that emerged in the late 1990s. The term is used extensively in academic literature and think tank pieces, but much less in official documentation from EU institutions. This section aims to identify both the academic definition as well as the institutional definition. This is done by an extensive review of existing literature. The academic definition includes articles as well as policy papers and reports by think tanks, whereas the institutional definition will focus on official documents published by any of the EU institutions.

2.4.1 Institutional definition

The concept of SA has been around since the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s. In the St. Malo agreement of 1998, Great Britain and France included a passage referring to “the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so” (Rutten, 2001, p. 9). After the Balkan wars, European military units shifted from heavy force to more crisis management-oriented capabilities, leaving a big part of their defensive capabilities to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Up until this moment, SA was seen purely as a military-related concept. The concept of SA was forgotten about until 2007 when Commissioner for Transport of the EU Jacques Barrot gave a speech about Europe’s space program Galileo and said that “I am still convinced that Europe needs Galileo, Galileo is very important for the strategic autonomy of Europe” (Deutsche Welle, 2007). Barrot referred to the situation where Europe was fully dependent on either the US or Russia for the use of GPS navigation. After the words from Barrot, and all the budget cuts during the financial crisis and Euro crisis in 2008 and 2009, it took until 2016 before the concept resurfaced.

In the 2010s European power politics re-emerged. After the annexation of Crimea by Russian soldiers and the situation in the Middle East, including the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the call for stronger defence capabilities became louder in the European Union (Järvenpää et al., 2019, p. 3; Zandzee et al., 2020, p. 7). Ultimately, this led to the presentation of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016. In this document, officially published by the European External Action Service (EEAS), the aim was to improve the state of the security and defence of the European Union but not unimportantly also emphasizing implications in areas such as economy and multilateralism (EEAS, 2016a). After the publication of the EUGS, some member states remained sceptical about the concept of SA, fearing the decoupling from NATO or the US and thus not having safety guarantees (Bargués, 2021, p. 8). The notable exception is France. French President Emmanuel Macron has always been transparent about his ambitions for Europe. During his speech at the Sorbonne University in Paris he stated that “in the area of defence, our aim needs to be ensuring Europe’s autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO. The basis for this autonomy has been laid, with historic progress in recent months [...]” (Macron, 2017). Later in his speech, he laid out his ideas to link together different areas, including the economy and technological infrastructure to become more strategically autonomous. Macrons’ plans were again met with scepticism, especially in Germany (Nienaber, 2017; Pothier, 2017; Dempsey, 2018). It is interesting to note that the concept of SA slowly shifted from purely focused on defensive capabilities to including other strategic areas such as new technologies and critical raw materials. The first big change in conceptualizing SA was in March 2020 when the European Commission (EC) introduced ‘A New Industrial Strategy for Europe.’ The Commission dedicated a chapter to SA in the areas of finance, industry and healthcare defining the concept as

Europe’s strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas. They also provide Europe’s industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness. (European Commission, 2020)

The definition provided by the Commission opened the door to a more broad interpretation. More specifically, by acknowledging the EU needs to reduce its dependence on “things we need the most,” the concept was given a more specific meaning. However, it still lacks a clear definition of strategic areas or markets which is necessary to design policy. The industrial

strategy was quickly followed by “a roadmap for recovery” in April 2020, in which the EU’s response to COVID-19 was laid out. In this report, it was mentioned that

We must ensure the strategic autonomy of the EU through a dynamic industrial policy [...] The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the pressing need to produce critical goods in Europe, to invest in strategic value chains and to reduce over-dependency on third countries in these areas. There is a need to build more resilient infrastructure to deal with unforeseen events, in particular in the health sector (European Council. 2020).

In this example, SA has a strong economic aspect. A dynamic industrial policy aims to strengthen European industries which results in economic benefits. When looking at the characteristics of MPE, it has many similarities. This example includes material existence, institutional features and interest contestation. This definition by the Council builds upon the one from the Commission, however, it is more focused on supply chains and critical goods, comparable to the ambition on enhancing the EU’s Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) (Kleczka et al., 2021). Whereas supply chains have become more global and complex, regulating them is required to protect critical assets and industries (Gehrke, 2022). Nonetheless, again there is no clear definition of what critical goods entail in a broader sense. This shows again that the concept of ESA has evolved from a strong focus on security and defence in the early 2000s to a more broad focus including several strategic areas and critical goods, even though it remains unclear which areas are considered strategic. To identify the critical areas, it is more useful to look at individual member states. Since the concept is constantly being developed, national leaders are defining their definition of critical areas. For example, Finnish prime minister Marin opted that Europe needs SA in energy, food, defence and technology (Marin, 2022). Another example is where French minister Bruno Le Maire spoke of “an exceptional alignment of stars, an opportunity to achieve ESA, through disruptive innovation, research and industrialization” talking about SA in healthcare specifically (Le Maire, 2022). Another area that is often referred to as critical, is raw materials. Commissioner Thierry Breton said that “The goal being to make sure that our strategic dependencies diminish. Because achieving our digital, green and resilience objectives without a secure access to raw materials is simply not possible,” referring to the dominant position of China for the supply of raw materials (Breton, 2022). Lastly, the European Commission aims to reduce reliance on countries like China and Russia for natural resources, critical infrastructure, and renewable energy in the 2020s (European Council, 2023). In the 2021 strategic foresight report it was ultimately

identified what the ten strategic areas are that the EU should focus on to ensure the EU's freedom to act (European Commission, 2021). These defined areas are:

1. Ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems
2. Securing decarbonised and affordable energy
3. Strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting edge technologies
4. Securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials
5. Ensuring first-mover global position in standard-setting
6. Building a resilience and future-proof economics and financial systems
7. Developing and retaining skills and talent matching EU ambitions
8. Strengthening security and defence capacities and access to space
9. Working with global partners to promote peace, security and prosperity for all
10. Strengthening the resilience of institutions

This shows that the EC has prioritized a plan of action based on the continuously evolving concept of SA. The ten strategic areas are derived from discussions from the past decades and provide an overview of the priorities for the coming years. Furthermore, the EC has identified four key global megatrends that will have the most severe impact on the EU in the future: climate change, technological transformations, pressure on democracy and values and shift in the global order and demography.

2.4.2 Academic definition

When looking at the academic definition of SA, it is expected to be less coherent. The reason, thereof, is that literature often is focused on one specific academic field, not looking beyond the scope of that field.

In academic literature, the concept is often looked at from a military perspective. Meijer and Brooks (2021) define the concept as

the institutional capacity to independently plan and conduct military operations across the full spectrum of conflict (including in high-intensity military operations such as expeditionary warfare and territorial defense missions) and to autonomously develop and produce the related defense capabilities with minimal or no assistance from the United States (p. 8).

This definition specifically defines the concept in the military field and touches on the dependence on the US. The reference to the US is not on itself, as it is mentioned more often in the literature related to military capabilities, for example by Besch and Scazzieri (2020) who argue that “in the traditional sense [...] strategic autonomy refers only to security and defence, and denotes Europe’s ability to act without the US or NATO if necessary.” The statement that Europe should become less dependent on the United States is not agreed upon by all the European member states. For example, Estonia, argues that SA would be damaging to NATO and its relation with the US or Poland which sees NATO and the US as the pillars of its security policy (Franke & Varna, 2019, pp. 41-68). This misalignment makes it difficult to define the concept of SA, as there is still no cohesion in what it should entail.

A consensus in the literature is that Europe should become more autonomous when it comes to security and defence matters in general. Järvenpää et al. (2019) defined SA as “the ability of European states to set their priorities and make their own decisions in matters of foreign policy, security, and defence, and have the means to implement these decisions alone, or with partners if they so choose” (p. 1). This definition touches upon priority setting and decision-making autonomously. Interesting about the definition is that it clearly states that the EU should have the ability to act autonomously, but only when they choose to do so. This is similar to the institutional definitions and likely can be accepted by more member states as well. Priority setting and autonomous decision-making are broadly defined, but a similar definition is given by Zandzee et al. (2020, p. 8), who define the concept as “the ability to set one’s priorities and make one’s own decisions,” which is very general and lacks a more specific definition of what this should include. Lippert et al. (2019) use a similar definition, albeit more political than strategic:

strategic autonomy as the ability to set one’s own priorities and make one’s own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone (p. 5).

It becomes clear that the core of SA lies in the ability to set own priorities and make autonomous decisions, whether this is in a defence context or not. That the concept has developed over the years is shown by literature that builds upon the definitions in different academic fields. Van den Abeele (2021), for example, took the definition more broadly. He argues that the concept was solely linked to the common foreign and security policy of the EU, mentioning that “Europe needs a more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive defense technological and

industrial base to develop and sustain defense capabilities” (p. 13). However, he argues that with the communication from the EC regarding *A New Industrial Strategy for Europe*, the definition needs to be interpreted more broadly (European Commission, 2020). The industry strategy of the EC placed SA in a broader perspective, stating that

Europe’s strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas. They also provide Europe’s industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness (p. 14).

This definition is focused more on industrial and trade policy than it is on defence policy. This shift started with the implementation of *A New Industrial Strategy for Europe*, where the EC aims “to ensure that European industry can lead the way as we enter this new age (European Commission, 2020)” a topic that became increasingly important after the COVID-19 crisis when Europe’s economy was hit hard and exposed how global supply chains demonstrated the role of a well-functioning and globally integrated European Single Market. Based on this report, one could argue that SA is a more comprehensive concept of MPE. Other academics, for example, Schmitz and Seidel (2022b), argue that (open) strategic autonomy has become the conceptual cornerstone of the EC’s new trade strategy, emphasizing the economic aspect in the definition. This is confirmed by Miró (2022) who argues that

The concept of open strategic autonomy has been employed by EU policymakers to refer to a long but relatively coherent list of policy issues, most obviously defence, foreign, industrial and trade policy, but also financial governance, climate change, energy policy or digital sovereignty, emerging as a core principle justifying EU-level state action in the post-COVID19 world (p. 2).

A similar definition that focuses more on the economic aspects of SA is the one of Weinhardt et al. (2022) who define SA solely around economic aspects. They define it as

On the one hand, it [strategic autonomy] is geared towards reducing external economic dependencies on others. On the other hand, it is about building internal capabilities, both related to economic capabilities (e.g. through industrial policies) and through improved internal coordination (p. 110).

Lastly, some scholars argue that SA does not focus on a specific policy area per se, but it is more the general term that can be applied to different areas and proposals. This is for example done by Tocci (2021) who describes it as “ the EU’s capacity to shape international norms and

practices towards formally accepted institutions, laws and procedures” (p. 6). This more general definition does not imply that the EU has to act autonomously in any way, but rather that it can shape norms and use regulation as an instrument to project its power, much like the concept of Normative Power Europe defined by Manners (2002) and the EEAS (2016b). Similarly, Lavery et al. (2022) argue that SA is “understood as the need to develop into a more cohesive regional bloc capable of projecting its power internationally.” Furthermore, it is argued that the concept has expanded from solely a geopolitical concept towards a geoeconomics program. The shift from being solely geopolitical to a broader view is agreed upon by Franke and Varna (2019) who argue that “European strategic autonomy is – like European sovereignty and strategic sovereignty –one of many concepts that seek to promote a more capable, independent EU at a time of growing geopolitical competition,” highlighting that the core on the concept is an increasing power for Europe in a new world order.

2.4.3 Preliminary conclusion

The St. Malo Agreement in 1998 introduced the concept of strategic autonomy without calling it such. The passage that mentioned: “the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so,” ultimately ended up being the foundation for the concept of SA. Starting as a concept that referred solely to military capabilities, it slowly expanded into other areas such as economy and technology. It took a while before the concept was introduced in official EU policy, but in March 2020, the EC released ‘A new industrial strategy for Europe,’ introducing SA as a concept relevant to raw materials, technology, food and security (European Commission, 2020). The introduction of this concept also led to a variety of interpretations and ideas about SA. It was followed by more generic definitions and took until 2021 before it was further developed into a strategy. The 2021 strategic foresight report defined ten strategic areas in which the EU should aim to become more SA.

With the introduction of new concepts, it becomes part of the academic debate. It is interesting to see that there are differences between how the concept evolves institutionally and how the academic debate evolves around this. As for the institutional definition, in the academic debate, the concept evolved mostly around military capabilities, more specifically around the capabilities of the EU to act without assistance from the US (Franke & Varna, 2019; Järvenpää et al., 2019; Besch & Scazzieri, 2020; Meijer & Brooks, 2021). With the expanding definition of the EC into areas besides security, the academic debate followed. A more economic and trade-oriented approach was introduced by Miró (2022), Schmitz and Seidel (2022b) and

Weinhardt et al. (2022). This shows that the debate is ever-evolving and there is no coherence in the academic debate about the definitions of the concept. Therefore, the answer to sub-question 1, ‘*what is the academic definition of strategic autonomy?*’ is ambiguous. There is not one coherent definition, but there are elements that tend to return in the debate. Of all the different definitions, the most common similarity is that the EU should be able to act autonomously when it desires to do so. This could include military capabilities, supply chains, and the production of critical goods, among others. However, there is relative accordance that the EU needs the capability to make its own decisions and set its priorities. Secondly, several scholars mention the reduced dependence on third countries. This is a step further than solely being able to act on its own. It is, however, not entirely clear in what specific areas and to what extent dependence should be reduced. Moreover, the literature shows that the concept is ever-evolving and that there is not one uniform definition that includes all strategic areas and finds accordance between scholars.

The second sub-question, ‘*how do the different relevant European institutions define strategic autonomy?*’ offers the possibility for a more specific answer. The EC ultimately defined the concept as “the capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries – in strategically important policy areas” (Grevi, 2019, p. 3; Anghel et al., 2020, p. 1; European Parliament, 2020; Michel 2020; Van den Abeele, 2020, p. 6; Damen, 2022, p. 1). This definition includes the most important aspect of the concept, not being dependent on third countries, while not excluding certain policy areas. Furthermore, mentioning the capacity to act autonomously implies that the goal is not to decouple from its allies, but rather that the EU aims to have the possibility when needed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research on ESA will employ a qualitative research design. This approach has been chosen because the primary goal of the research is to understand the concept of SA and to investigate its possible presence in trade agreements. This will be achieved by analysing literature, existing documents and publications, and previous academic research.

Additionally, the research will have a descriptive design. This is because it is not possible to influence variables to measure SA before and after concluding a specific trade agreement. Many other factors also influence the outcome and are not easily measurable. Therefore, the

descriptive design will be used to identify certain characteristics or trends. This includes the extent to which the dimensions of SA are present or absent at certain points in time.

3.2 Method of Data Collection

To answer the central research question, the research is divided into four sub-questions. This is done to make the research more comprehensible, therefore, several methods are used to answer the sub-questions.

SQ1: What is the academic definition of strategic autonomy? To answer this sub-question, research will mostly rely on the analysis of academic journals and publications from think tanks and other organizations. This can best be described as a literature review, or more specifically a semi-systematic literature review. The latter was chosen because this type of literature review focuses on topics that have been conceptualized differently and are studied within various disciplines. Because knowledge on this topic develops very quickly, it is hard to keep up with the latest developments. However, a thorough literature review is important to gain an understanding of the definitions of the research (Snyder, 2019). This literature review is carried out in chapter 2.

The number of articles on this subject is vast and cannot be completely analysed. For example, when looking at the Journal Storage (JSTOR) database, there are 13.564 results when searching for ESA in journals between 2010-2020. It is, therefore, necessary to make a selection of the documents and cross-reference them with the date of publication and the timeframe of the research.

SQ2: How do the different relevant European institutions define strategic autonomy? To answer sub-question 2, the analysis will mostly focus on document analysis. A document analysis is a procedure for reviewing documents. It requires that data is examined and interpreted in order (Bowen, 2009). Since it is about definitions from European institutions, the most important data has to be collected from documents published by these institutions. This will include documents from the EC, EP, and EEA, among others, and will be carried out with the help of a literature review in chapter 2. This will also include a vast amount of documents. When looking at the Publications Office of the European Union and searching for ‘strategic autonomy’ there are 117.238 results. This makes it impossible to analyse all documents, again needing to filter the documents. It is important to understand that the definition the EC uses has only been used in official documents since 2020. This makes it more difficult to find the right

documents. Using a search with synonyms or terms that imply similar concepts, such as open strategic autonomy or strategic sovereignty, will provide more relevant results.

SQ3: How have the European institutions presented European interests in trade agreements that were concluded between 2010 and 2020? To answer this sub-question, a detailed analysis of the trade agreements is required. This includes all trade agreements that were signed between 2010 and 2020. The agreements will be analysed in chapter 4, to see whether there are chapters that can be linked to the list from the EC containing, ten strategic areas of which five are considered relevant for this research. These five points are

1. Ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems
2. Securing decarbonized and affordable energy
3. Strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge technology
4. Securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials
5. Building a resilience and future-proof economics and financial system

To analyse the trade agreements, all individual agreements will be analysed, and the five points will be linked to relevant chapters in the trade agreements. This will be done on the hand of the following model:

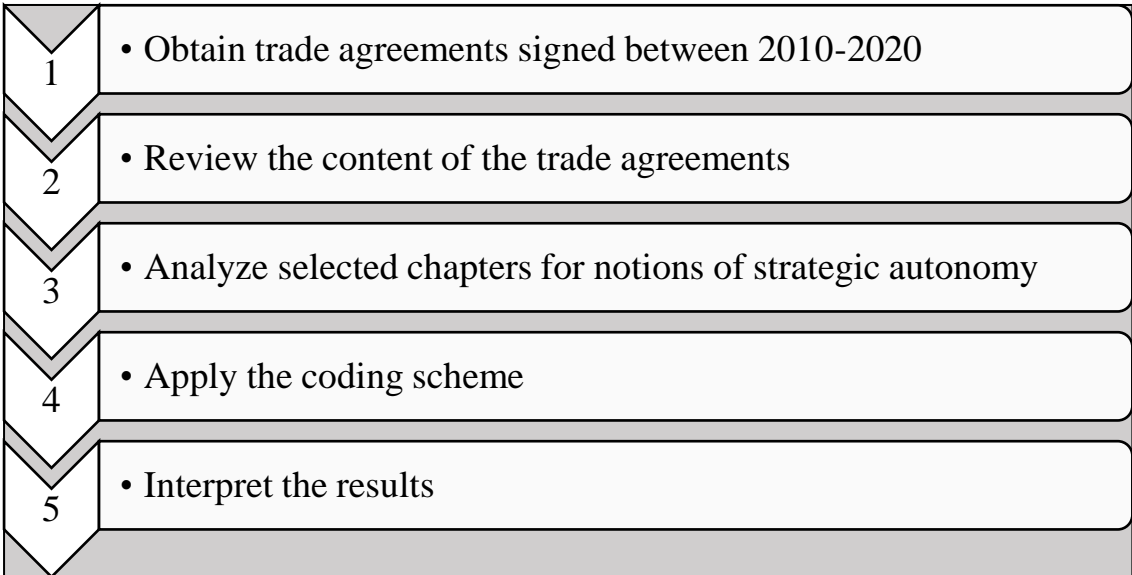


Figure 1: Analysis of trade agreements.

First, the relevant trade agreements that were signed between 2010 and 2020 will be gathered. The agreements are available in the Official Journal of the European Union. Secondly, the content of the trade agreements will be reviewed carefully, paying close attention to the relevant

chapters or sections that address the five points as described above and analysing the topics of interest.

The next step is to analyse the content of the relevant chapters, sections and articles to determine whether there is a notion of concepts related to SA. Here it will be analysed if some explicit statements or provisions indicate a desire for autonomy or independence in the strategic areas mentioned or provisions that promote policies or measures that align with the concept of SA. This will be done with the help of the scheme as seen in Figure 1. This will capture the presence or absence of elements related to the five points in every selected trade agreement per country.

Trade agreement with Country X	Notion Present	Typology of relevant articles
Ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems	Yes/No	
Securing decarbonized and affordable energy	Yes/No	
Strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge technology	Yes/No	
Securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials	Yes/No	
Building a resilience and future-proof economics and financial system	Yes/No	

Figure 2: Scheme to analyse notions of strategic autonomy per country.

After following the scheme, the chapters or sections are analysed to identify the presence or absence of the elements related to the five points derived from the EC. This helps to quantitatively analyse the frequency and extent to which the trade agreements address certain topics, and identify patterns or trends across different agreements or countries. This is done by carefully reading through the articles of all the selected trade agreements and scanning for relevant articles.

The last step is to interpret the results. Once the agreements are coded, the results are analysed to determine the extent to which the notion of SA is present in the trade agreements. Hereby it

is important to consider the frequency, scope, and specificity of the language, and interpret the findings in the context of the broader goals, objectives, and provisions as set out by the EC.

Because of the descriptive methods for this research, most information comes from published documents by institutional actors. This includes the actors mentioned before (EP, EC, EEA) but also, for example, documents from the government of the third country that ratified the agreements or even documents from the WTO. Documents from the WTO can help to gain insight into the rules and procedures of trade agreements.

SQ4: How can the strategic autonomy approach of the European Commission be identified in recent trade policy development? The analysis for sub-question four will be similar to the analysis for sub-question three. The difference is that it will focus on trade policy in a more general sense, as well as look at trade agreements that are completed since 2020, as there are no agreements signed in this period. This also means that the coding scheme is updated to include concepts, notions or policies that are implemented after 2020.

3.3 Validity, Reliability and limitations

In terms of validity, there is a distinction between content validity and construct validity. Content validity refers to the range of meanings within a specific concept. In this research, the different meanings of SA will be examined. There may be differences between academic definitions and definitions used by European institutions such as the EC. Distinguishing between academic literature and institutional documents is useful since the concept of SA has changed over time. The first institutional notion was in 1998, as described in the literature review. The academic literature is useful to find out how the concept was incorporated into policymaking in several areas, and how it changed when it became more institutionalized. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that all dimensions within the concept are covered. This will be done by analysing different definitions, both academic and institutional, to determine if the dimensions between definitions vary, and where there are similarities. Since the research focuses on trade agreements that are concluded by institutional actors, most likely the institutional definition will play a more significant role. In light of the above, content validity in this research is guaranteed by the use of the official journal of the EU, where trade agreements are published which means that the data used is considered objectively and correct. For construct validity, the academic and policy framing used in the theory is taken into account.

The research focuses on analysing trade agreements and their impact on SA, primarily using official documents from European institutions such as the EC, the EEA, and the EP. Reliability

is a critical concept in research and is used to evaluate the quality and validity of the research. It refers to the consistency and stability of results across multiple measurements or observations. In other words, if a measure or instrument is reliable, it should produce consistent results when used repeatedly under the same conditions. Since the analysis for this research is based on publications from the official journal of the EU, the data processed can be considered reliable. Furthermore, the methods used are the same for every trade agreement or (policy) initiative, thus consistent. However, this also results in some limitations.

As with all research, there may be limitations to consider. For this research, the following limitations should be taken into account. First, there is the interpretation of language. Interpreting and analysing the language used in the relevant documents can be subjective and open to different interpretations. For example, legal and technical terms, nuances in wording, and contextual understanding may be required for accurate analysis. Another aspect to consider is the timeframe. Focusing on trade agreements signed since 2010 could limit the broader context and evolution of the concept of SA in trade agreements. Furthermore, findings from one trade agreement may not apply to other regions, countries, or periods. Trade agreements can vary vastly in their provisions, goals, and context. Findings in different agreements or regions should not be considered equal without thorough consideration of the specific context.

Lastly, there is the concept of contextual complexity. As discussed in the literature review, SA is a multifaceted concept with varying interpretations and can be influenced by different factors. Analysing trade agreements in isolation may not capture the full complexity and dynamics of SA in practice. It is important to take notice of these limitations and consider them when interpreting the results of the research.

4. Strategic autonomy in trade agreements between 2010 and 2020

In this chapter, sub-question three, *how have European institutions presented European interests in trade agreements that were concluded between 2010 and 2020?* will be answered. All trade agreements signed between 2010 and 2020 are analysed and discussed based on the strategic areas as defined by the EC. Within this timeframe, 19 agreements were signed, of which seven AAs, five FTAs and seven EPAs. Furthermore, five agreements are with countries in Europe, three in the Americas, eight in Asia and three in Africa. A complete overview of the trade agreements signed between 2010 and 2020 can be found in appendix 1.

4.1. Ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems

According to the EC, the EU's healthcare systems are among the best in the world, but it is necessary to increase its resilience and sustainability. When looking at the trade agreements, there will be distinguished between health systems and food systems to keep the analysis clearer.

4.1.1. Health systems

Of the 20 trade agreements that fall within the selected timeframe, five contain articles relevant to health systems. Whereas most of them are general in the sense that it is agreed that both parties 'aim to cooperate' to some extent, some are more extensive. For example, in the agreements with Armenia (2016), Central America (2012), Kazakhstan (2016), Moldova (2014) and Ukraine (2014) there are general articles that mention 'the aim to cooperate in developing efficient health systems.' Most likely, the aim to cooperate is included to increase healthcare service access and make it easier to increase healthcare standards for potential member states, although the latter statement is not specifically mentioned. An example is article 91 of the Armenia agreement, which states:

Article 91

The Parties shall develop their cooperation in the field of public health with a view to raising its level, in line with common health values and principles, and as a precondition for sustainable development and economic growth (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, 2017).

This article is almost identical to art. 44 of the Central America agreement (2012)¹, art. 233 of the Kazakhstan agreement (2016)², art. 113 of the Moldova agreement (2014)³ and art. 426 of the Ukraine agreement (2014)⁴. The only differences are in the wording of the articles. These articles are formulated generically and will most likely not contribute to SA. It can, however, be considered as the EU shaping norms and values, which are specifically mentioned in the articles. Shaping international norms and values will also add to EU influence.

The agreement with Moldova is more extensive when it comes to healthcare. In art. 114, it is specified what the cooperation shall cover under the agreement:

Article 114

The cooperation shall cover, in particular, the following areas:

- (a) strengthening of the public health system of the Republic of Moldova, in particular through implementing health sector reform, ensuring high-quality primary healthcare, and improving health governance and healthcare financing;
- (b) epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and tuberculosis, as well as increased preparedness for public health threats and emergencies;
- (c) prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, mainly through exchange of information and best practices, promoting healthy lifestyles and addressing major health determinants, such as nutrition and addiction to alcohol, drugs and tobacco [...] (EU-Moldova association agreement, 2014)

In addition, in art. 115 it is added that the cooperation should enable “the progressive integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU's health related networks” and “the progressive enhancement of interaction between the Republic of Moldova and the European Centre for

¹ The Parties agree to cooperate in developing efficient health systems, competent and sufficient health workforce capacity, fair financing mechanisms and social protection schemes.

² The Parties shall develop their cooperation in the field of public health with a view to raising the level of protection of human health and reducing health inequalities, in line with common health values and principles, and as a precondition for sustainable development and economic growth.

³ The Parties agree to develop their cooperation in the field of public health, with a view to raising the level of public health safety and protection of human health as a precondition for sustainable development and economic growth.

⁴ The Parties shall develop their cooperation in the public health field, to raise the level of public health safety and protection of human health as a precondition for sustainable development and economic growth.

Disease Prevention and Control.” Similar objectives are also laid out in the Ukraine agreement, in articles 426-429. It could be said that the articles add to the theory of NPE, whereas the EU influences the norms of other states, in this case, Moldova and Ukraine, which are both bordering EU member states. Although this may not directly add to SA, it does strengthen the EU’s position because like-minded countries can increase the resilience of the EU by forming a bloc of likeminded countries.

4.1.2. Food systems

When it comes to food systems, the EC mostly refers to the issues of climate change and nature degradation distorting the supply in major food-producing regions. A special reference is made to biotechnology, where it is mentioned that:

Biotechnology, including new genomic techniques, could play a key role in developing innovative and sustainable ways to protect harvests from pests, diseases and the climate change effects. A coherent and sustainable approach to the whole food system, from food production to reducing food waste will be crucial (European Commission, 2021d, p. 9).

In the agreement with Canada (2016), some articles relate specifically to biotechnology, these are Articles 25.1 and 25.2). In art. 25.1(a), it is agreed upon to “strengthening bilateral cooperation on biotechnology through the Dialogue on Biotech Market Access Issues.” In art. 25.2 section 2, more specific cooperation is agreed upon. For example, as mentioned in the following article:

Article 25.2

The Parties also note the importance of the following shared objectives with respect to cooperation in the field of biotechnology:

- (a) to exchange information on policy, regulatory and technical issues of common interest related to biotechnology products, and, in particular, information on their respective systems and processes for risk assessments for decision-making on the use of genetically modified organisms;
- (b) to promote efficient science-based approval processes for biotechnology products;
- (c) to cooperate internationally on issues related to biotechnology, such as low level presence of genetically modified organisms

The specific article below can be found in the agreements with Armenia (2016), Georgia (2014), Japan (2017), Kazakhstan (2016), Moldova (2014) and Ukraine (2014). Notable here is how these are all agreements with countries neighbouring the EU, plus Japan.

Article 68

Cooperation between the Parties in the field of agriculture and rural development shall cover, inter alia, the following areas:

(c) promoting the modernisation and the sustainability of agricultural production;

Although this should not be considered as cooperation directly increasing SA, it does likely albeit indirectly add to the EU becoming more resilient in this strategic area. Exchanging policy and regulatory issues can lead to better access to biotechnological innovations in the EU, and thus becoming less dependent on one specific country. It is, however, questionable whether this is intentional or should be seen merely as a result of general cooperation.

4.2 Securing decarbonized and affordable energy

In the 2021 strategic foresight report, the EC noted that “Securing a sufficient supply of decarbonised and affordable energy is key on the path to a greener and more digital Europe” (European Commission, 2021d, p. 9). It should be noted that the agreements in the 2010-2020 timeframe are analysed with the help of the contemporary SA paradigm. This aspect focusses heavily on reducing EU energy dependency and the geopolitical shift that it brings, due to strategic dependencies becoming less important (e.g. oil), as well as the increasing dependency on new natural resources (European Commission, 2021d, p. 9). It seems clear that trade agreements signed with countries on the European subcontinent, or bordering EU member states, are the most relevant. The EC incorporated (renewable) energy as well as raw materials for the energy transition in this strategic area. However, for clarity reasons, articles in agreements that refer to strategic resources required for the energy transition, i.e. rare earth elements (REE), are covered in section 4.4.

In 16 of the 20 agreements within the timeframe analysed in this chapter, there are several provisions relevant to this strategic area. Of these 16 agreements, five are with countries on the European subcontinent: Armenia (2017), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015), Kosovo (2016), Moldova (2014) and Ukraine (2014). The other agreements that have some mentioning of this topic are Canada (2016), Central America (2012), the Colombia-Ecuador-Peru agreement (2012), ESA countries (2017), Georgia (2014), Iraq (2012), Kazakhstan (2015), Singapore (2018), South Korea (2011) and Vietnam (2019).

Agreements that are signed with countries located on the European subcontinent, or countries that border European countries, are in general more extensive regarding energy security and energy efficiency. Generally, there are more specific objectives mentioned and there are articles that specifically work towards, for example, integration in the EU energy grid. This is cogent when one looks at the *synchronous grid of Continental Europe* as shown in figure 3. The integration of a country's energy grids into one of the regional groups (RG) is incorporated into trade agreements with several countries. For example, article 107 of the agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina states that:

Article 107

Cooperation shall focus on priority areas related to the Community acquis in the field of energy, [...] and shall be developed with a view to the gradual integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into Europe's energy markets (Stabilisation and association agreement, 2014).

Whereas integration into the European energy grid is not specifically mentioned, it is implied in this article. Similar articles are found in the agreements with Moldova (2014) in art. 76 and the agreement with Ukraine (2014) in art. 338(c), where it is specifically mentioned that cooperation should cover “progressive integration of the Ukrainian electricity network into the European electricity network.” This article should be seen merely as an aim to cooperate, whereas no obligations are mentioned. Synchronizing energy grids add first glance seems to add to SA, but it is difficult to determine to what extent it is helpful. It is clear, however, that the EU energy grid will become more resilient and have more capacity when synchronized with the grids of third countries.

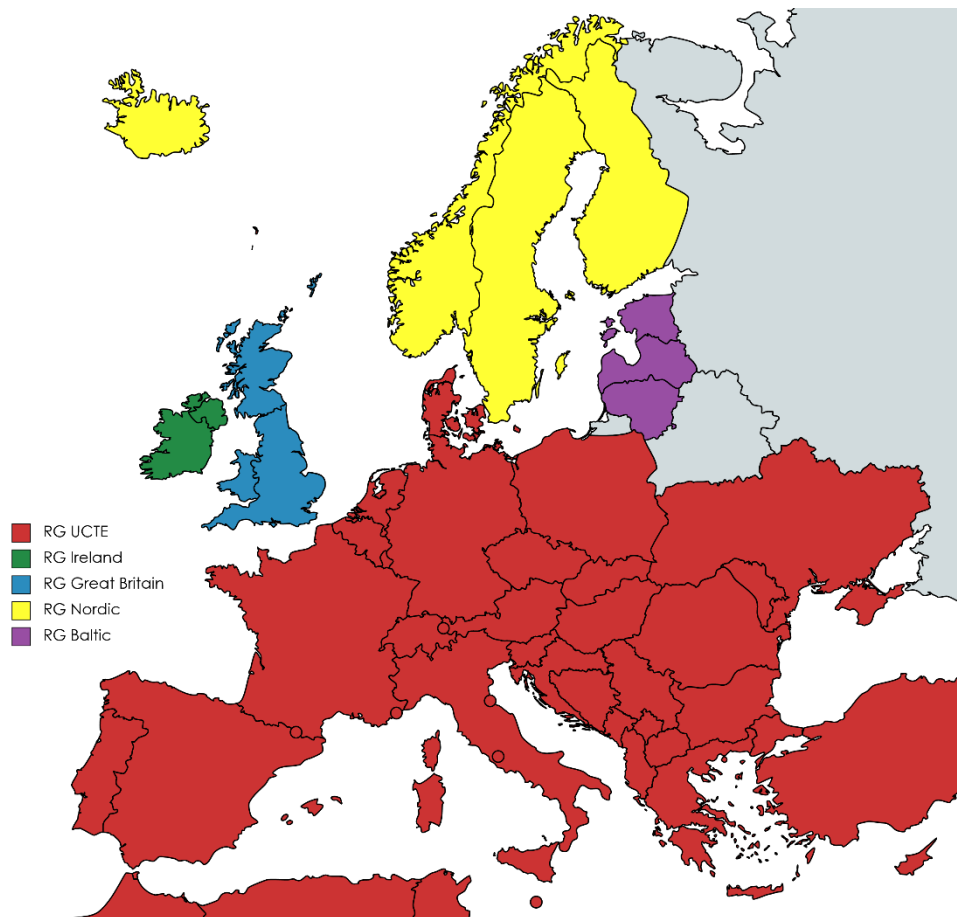


Figure 3: Overview of the Synchronous grid of Continental Europe. Figure: author, data: (ENTSO-E, 2015; ENTSOE-E, 2022)

Another aspect the EC focusses on is energy security. The International Energy Agency (IEA) defines energy security as ‘reliable, affordable access to all fuels and energy sources’ (IEA, 2023). According to Eurostat, in 2020, 57,5% of the EU’s available energy was imported (Eurostat, 2023). This also means that in case of a (global) crisis, the energy supply in Europe is uncertain, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has shown (McWilliams et al., 2023).

To increase energy security, the EU could aim to become less dependent on energy imports and generate more energy itself. Whereas this is mostly a matter of European policy, this is only captured in trade agreements with countries on the European subcontinent, for example in the Armenia agreement (2017):

Article 42(2)(b)

That cooperation shall cover, inter alia, the following areas:

- (b) the enhancement of energy security, including by stimulating the diversification of energy sources and routes

Article 338 of the Ukraine agreement (2014) is more extensive, noting that:

Article 338(c)

(c) modernisation and enhancement of existing energy infrastructures of common interests, including energy-generating capacities and the integrity, safety and security of the energy networks, and progressive integration of the Ukrainian electricity network into the European electricity network, [...] in order to diversify energy sources, suppliers, transportation routes and transport methods in an economic and environmentally sound manner (EU-Ukraine association agreement, 2014)

This article shows the importance of energy security and aims to incorporate the Ukrainian energy grid into the European energy network. As of 2022, the grids of Ukraine and Moldova synchronized with the European grid, as was aimed for in the 2014 agreement (ENTSO-E, 2022). Whether this adds to SA is difficult to verify, however, it does make the European grid more resilient, and, makes these specific countries less dependent on, in this case, Russia.

4.3. Strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge technology

“The EU’s digital sovereignty will depend on capacity to store, extract and process data, while satisfying the requirements of trust, security and fundamental rights” (European Commission, 2021d, p. 10). Although the importance of this strategic area is expressed severely, it is underrepresented in trade agreements. This is most likely because the topic gained importance quickly over the last few years, but was less of an issue in the timeframe these agreements were negotiated. This section will distinguish between three topics: data management, cutting-edge technologies and semiconductors. The latter is being analysed apart from cutting-edge technologies due to their (strategic) importance.

4.3.1. Data management

Data management is a concept with a wide variety of definitions, which mostly refer to the collection and storage of (personal) data. Although it is mentioned as one of the strategic areas, there is not much to be found in trade agreements. This strategic area is defined as “the EU should build capacities to store data and ensure access to open, secure and transparent data and high data-rated connection availability” (European Commission, 2020, p. 13). Most notions are very general and refer solely to cooperation in the area of data management, or inclusion into EU legislation. This is for example the case in the Bosnia and Herzegovina agreement (2015):

Article 79

Bosnia and Herzegovina shall harmonise its legislation concerning personal data protection with Community law and other European and international legislation on privacy upon the entry into force of this Agreement. Bosnia and Herzegovina shall establish independent supervisory bodies with sufficient financial and human resources in order to efficiently monitor and guarantee the enforcement of national personal data protection legislation. The Parties shall cooperate to achieve this goal

This specific article refers mostly to harmonizing legislation, which could be defined as normative power expressed by the EU. The lack of articles regarding data management can be explained with the help of the years in which the agreements were negotiated. For example, the association agreements with Moldova and Ukraine were drafted in 2012, whereas for the Singapore agreement, which was signed in 2018, negotiations started as early as 2010 (Vogel, 2010). The negotiations also started before the EC proposal for the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2012. This extensive regulation on data management was adopted in 2016, but trade agreements signed after the proposal do not pose any differences compared to trade agreements signed before the GDPR proposal. It can be said that data management was less of an issue in those times, which explains the lack of notions.

4.3.2. Cutting-edge technologies

The term cutting-edge technology is difficult to conceptualize and define as it is ambiguous and evolves rapidly. A general definition is that the concept “refers to technological devices, techniques or achievements that employ the most current and high-level IT developments; in other words, technology at the frontiers of knowledge” (Rouse, 2019). In the 2021 strategic foresight report, the EC refers to artificial intelligence (AI), the internet of things (IoT), and 5G and 6G as examples of cutting-edge technologies (European Commission, 2021d, p. 10). In all

20 trade agreements, there are nearly no mentions of cutting-edge technologies. In a much less specific manner, some articles refer to the implementation of new technologies, but not more than to the extent that both parties agree to not prevent market access for such technologies. Similar to data management, this can be explained because such technologies have only gained traction over the past years, and where not relevant or even non-existent at the times the selected agreements were negotiated.

4.3.3. Semiconductors

Semiconductors are sometimes referred to as the ‘new oil’ or the ‘oil of the 21st century (Fitch & Ip, 2023; Teer & Bertolini, 2023). The importance of semiconductors and the environment around them is also not unknown to the EC. They say that:

“Access to semiconductors could be compromised by limited production capacity, and shortages can heavily affect business continuity of different industries. The EU has notable strengths and is home to a crucial supplier of manufacturing equipment to all leading manufacturers, but it is lagging behind in the production of next-generation processors and advanced semiconductors” (European Commission, 2021d, p. 11).

According to the EC, the most important factor is investment. The EC refers to countries such as Japan and South Korea which are heavily boosting domestic semiconductor production. When it comes to the trade agreements within the selected timeframe, the most important countries are Japan, South Korea and Singapore. In figure 4 it is shown that South Korea and Japan account for 36% of global manufacturing capacity.

Global Manufacturing Capacity 2020

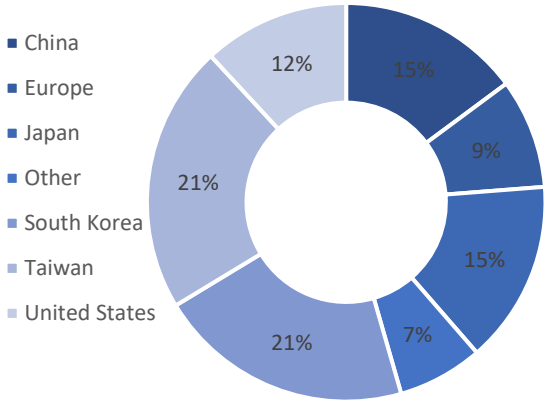


Figure 4: Global Semiconductor manufacturing capacity in 2020. Figure: author. Data: Varas et al. 2021

Despite the relatively large market shares of these countries, the only mentioning of semiconductors in all 20 trade agreements is in the appendixes that liberalize custom tariffs. All goods are listed using the Harmonized System (HS) codes for uniformity. This makes it possible to see whether there are differences between tariffs on certain products. For example, HS 8541 includes:

Semiconductor devices (for example, diodes, transistors, semiconductor-based transducers); photosensitive semiconductor devices, including photovoltaic cells whether or not assembled in modules or made up into panels; light-emitting diodes (LED), whether or not assembled with other light-emitting diodes (LED); mounted piezo-electric crystals

When the three main manufacturing countries, Japan, Singapore and South Korea, are compared, it is shown that for importing semiconductors the tariff rate is 0. This is the same in the agreements with ESA and SADC, thus is it not based on strategic partnerships with countries that produce more of these products. Similar to the two previous sections, semiconductors as a strategic asset is a relatively new phenomenon. Whereas their importance has been known for a longer time, the highly globalized and spread-out supply chain was not seen as an issue. The liberalized tariffs do not directly add to SA, but can possibly strengthen the position of the EU because trade in these products is liberalized. It is, however, not possible to compare whether trade agreements have affected the strategic position of the EU in this specific area.

4.4. Securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials

The supply of raw materials is essential for the energy transition, as well as for other strategic areas such as the manufacturing of semiconductors and the production of cutting-edge technologies. In a study for the EC in 2020, a list of 30 critical raw materials (CRMs) was drawn up (Blengini et al., 2020). This list can be found in Appendix 2. Of these 30 CRMs, China was the main supplier for at least 18 of them, as shown in Figure 5.

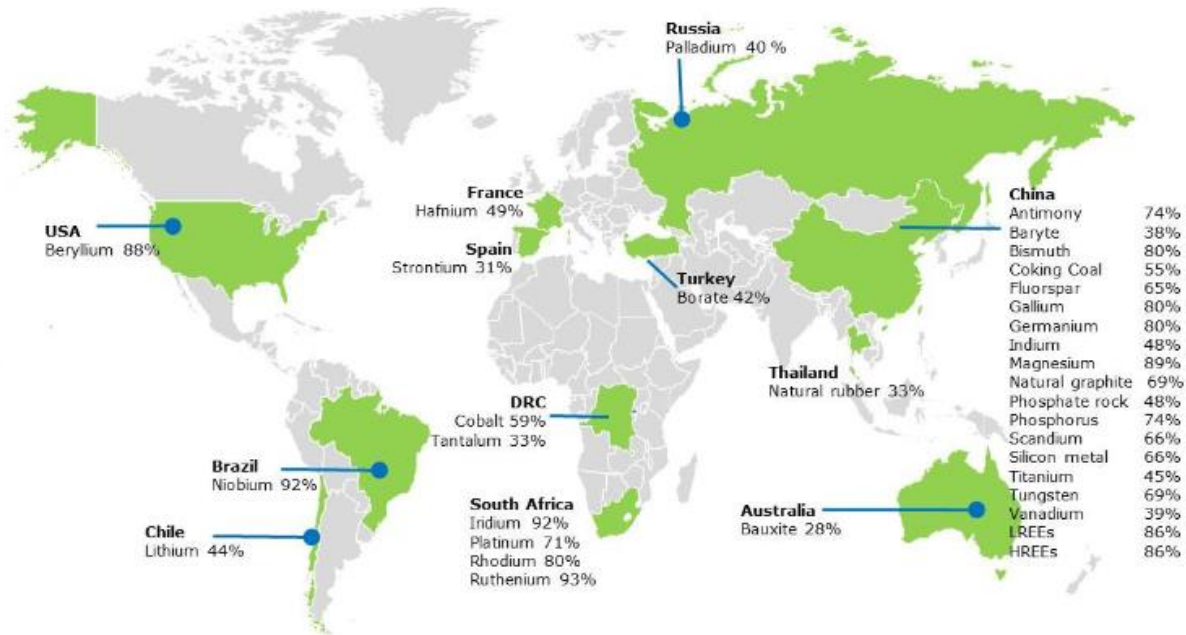


Figure 5: Countries accounting for the largest share of global CRM supply. Source: Blengini et al., 2020

Because these CRMs are important for the EU's future ambitions regarding green energy, technological innovation and the production of semiconductors, it is required to diversify the supply chain to prevent becoming too dependent on a handful of countries. Trade agreements can – in theory – be utilized as an instrument to diversify the supply chain. In several agreements, a general passage about mining and raw materials is included. For example, the agreement with Armenia (2017) art. 76:

Article 76

The Parties shall develop and strengthen their cooperation in the areas of mining and the production of raw materials, with the objectives of promoting mutual understanding, improving the business environment, exchanging information and cooperating on non-energy issues relating in particular to the mining of metallic ores and industrial minerals

This article is similar to art. 66 of the agreement with Central American countries (2012), art. 314 of the Georgia agreement (2014), art. 218 of the Kazakhstan agreement (2015) and art. 65 of the Moldova agreement (2014). The other articles that are related to mining or CRMs are focused solely on cooperation, for example, art. 77 of the Armenia agreement (2017) which highlights that:

Article 77

The Parties shall cooperate in order to:

- (a) exchange information on the developments in their mining and raw-material sectors;
- (b) exchange information on matters related to trade in raw materials with the aim of promoting bilateral exchanges;
- (c) exchange information and best practices in relation to the sustainable development of the mining industries; and
- (d) exchange information and best practices in relation to training, skills and safety in the mining industries

None of the agreements has articles about critical raw materials or similar terms. More specifically, the only way some of the raw materials are accounted for in trade agreements is in the appendixes where tariff rates are established. It shows that the trade in CRMs is liberalized by reducing tariffs, but most of the countries involved do not possess large quantities of CRMs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the supply of CRMs is not specifically included in the trade agreements within this timeframe. As with the previous paragraphs, the reason for this could be that the supply of these materials has seen an increase over the past few years, and CRMs that are now considered critical did not have this status years ago. The shift to renewable energy sources is fairly recent, and the demand for materials required has changed and increased severely in recent years.

4.5. Building a resilient and future-proof economics and financial system

A resilient and stable economy is crucial for the EU to tackle its long-term challenges. To achieve this, the EU must enhance the resilience and growth potential of its economy by addressing vulnerabilities, facilitating ongoing transitions, and preparing for future shocks. This requires solid economic fundamentals, productivity improvements, increased investments, and necessary reforms, along with favourable financing conditions for the public and private sectors (European Commission, 2021d).

Removing obstacles to market integration and implementing Capital Markets Union and Banking Union is essential to diversify funding sources, strengthen domestic financial markets, and address supervisory arbitrage. This strategic area is more difficult to cover in trade agreements. It shows that mostly the agreements signed with countries on the European subcontinent have paragraphs related to this subject. Most of the articles again are phrased generally, for example, art. 61 of the Armenia agreement (2017), article 221 of the Kazakhstan agreement (2015), art. 58 of the Moldova agreement (2014) and art. 383 of the Ukraine agreement (2014) are identical:

Article 383

Cooperation in the areas of banking, insurance and other financial services

The Parties agree on the importance of effective legislation and practices and to cooperate in the area of financial services with the objectives of:

- (a) improving the regulation of financial services;
- (b) ensuring effective and adequate protection of investors and consumers of financial services;
- (c) contributing to the stability and integrity of the global financial system;
- (d) promoting cooperation between different actors of the financial system, including regulators and supervisors (EU-Ukraine association agreement, 2014)

Most articles that are relevant for this area, seem to add to the theory of NPE. The agreements highlight the aim to cooperate on legislation and the importance of cooperation. Besides the more generic articles about cooperation in the financial sector, the EC also emphasizes the importance “to continue to be on the global forefront in the fight against money laundering and terrorist financing and ensure appropriate safeguards against these illicit purposes” (European Commission, 2021d, p. 14). An article about this can be found in art. 18:

Article 18

1. The Parties shall cooperate in order to prevent the use of their financial and relevant non-financial systems for the laundering of the proceeds of criminal activities in general and drug offences in particular, as well as for the purpose of terrorism financing. That cooperation extends to the recovery of assets or funds derived from the proceeds of crime.

2. Cooperation in this area shall allow for exchanges of relevant information within the framework of the Parties' respective legislation and relevant international instruments as well as the adoption of appropriate standards to prevent and combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism equivalent to those adopted by relevant international bodies active in this area, such as the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, 2017)

Similar articles can be found in art. 82 of the Bosnia and Herzegovina agreement (2015), art. 19 of the Georgia agreement (2014), art. 89 of the Kosovo agreement (2016), art. 18 of the Moldova agreement (2014) and art. 20 of the Ukraine agreement (2014). Therefore, this article seems to be standard for association agreements with countries on the European subcontinent. In other agreements, the only notion is about combatting terrorism by preventing money laundering. The articles mentioned in trade agreements do mostly add to the capability of the EU to shape international standards and strengthen its influence in this strategic area, however, it is doubtful whether this should be defined as solely a form of NPE, or that it would somehow add to SA. An argument that it would add to more SA could be that a strong financial system with countries inside and outside the EU does increase resilience.

4.6. Preliminary conclusion

The analysis in Chapter 4 aimed to answer the sub-question '*how have the European institutions presented European interests in trade agreements that were concluded between 2010 and 2020?*' Based on this analysis, some articles refer to the five strategic areas as defined in chapter 3, but these articles are often generic and do not impose obligations or concrete objectives. Although this touches upon relevant topics, it seems that European institutions have not directly put their interests regarding SA into trade agreements signed between 2010 and 2020. Although, there are articles that touch upon some of the strategic areas as defined in section 3.2 and can add to the resilience of the EU. What can be said, is that trade agreements confirm existing theories such as NPE and MPE, but the theories have no effective means to achieve SA. Firstly, especially the AAs, are drawn up in a way that a third country is integrated more into the

European political and economic system. The EU's principles, norms and values are used as an instrument to further enclose third countries in the European systems and can be related to the five core norms as defined by Manners (2002): peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights. In this context, it can be said that trade agreements are a useful instrument to enable the EU to act both as a normative power and as a market power. Furthermore, it can also be concluded that association agreements have a broader purpose than just facilitating trade, but aim to strengthen cooperation in different areas.

Besides the aspect of NPE, trade agreements also strengthen the EU as a market power. Especially the EPAs and FTAs focus on opening up markets both ways. The EU does this successfully in a way that it harmonizes tariffs and quotas and thus creates a level playing field for many countries, which is also how it is defined in the CCP. With the importance of the single market, it can successfully use trade agreements as an instrument to propagate its market power. Although MPE does not directly add to the strategy to become more strategically autonomous, utilizing market power is a powerful instrument and, when executed correctly, could be used for SA. This does not directly become clear from the trade agreement, however. The most important reason is that in the selected timeframe, 2010 to 2020, the (geo)political context was different. The process of negotiating agreements takes time, and in this timeframe, there were fewer threats to supply chains and the global (political) order was rather stable. With the changing political environment, these issues have become more pressing and, likely, will keep gaining importance in the coming years. The following chapter aims to identify whether the SA approach can be more clearly identified in recent trade policy development. This will be done by analysing trade agreements signed after 2020, as well as other relevant documents regarding trade policy.

5. Strategic autonomy in (trade) policy since 2020

In an era marked by geopolitical shifts and global uncertainties, the EC aims to become (more) strategic autonomous. As it seeks to strengthen its position as a global actor, trade policy development has become a crucial instrument in realizing these objectives. This chapter aims to analyse the interplay between the ECs SA approach and recent trade policy developments. By examining the key initiatives, agreements, and trade negotiations undertaken by the EC, this chapter aims to answer the last sub-question: *How can the strategic autonomy approach of the European Commission be identified in recent trade policy development?*

The chapter is divided into two sections. First, trade agreements of which the negotiations were finished since 2020, but are not yet signed or ratified, will be analysed in the same way as in Chapter 4. An overview of these trade agreements can be found in Appendix 3. Secondly, it will focus on specific key initiatives and trade negotiations that are relevant for one of the five strategic areas as defined in Chapter 3.

5.1. Trade agreements

This section will focus on trade agreements that have been finalized since 2020. Based on EC documents, this will include five agreements: the updated agreement with Chile (2022), the comprehensive agreement on investment with China (2020), the updated FTA with Mexico (2020), the FTA with New Zealand (2022) and the trade and cooperation agreement with the UK (2020). It is important to note that none of these agreements have been signed or ratified as of the moment of writing. Therefore, changes may occur in the future and not all official texts may be publicly available.

5.1.1. Ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems

In the five selected trade agreements, there are close to no sections about resilient health and food systems. The notable exceptions are the agreement with the UK (2020) and Chile (2022), where a fairly generic article about sustainable food systems can be found:

Article 86

Each Party shall encourage its food safety, animal and plant health services to cooperate with their counterparts in the other Party with the aim of promoting sustainable food production methods and food systems

This article establishes cooperation between the two parties when it comes to food safety and production, but includes no specific obligations or rights. Compared to art. 86 of the UK

agreement, little more can be found in the agreement with Chile (2022). In this agreement, resilient food systems are specifically mentioned:

Article 1*

1. The Parties, recognising the importance of strengthening policies and defining programmes that contribute to the development of sustainable, inclusive, healthy and resilient food systems, agree to establish close cooperation to jointly engage in the transition towards sustainable food systems

** The number of the article has yet to be defined, it is mentioned as art. 1 in the chapter for the preliminary text of the agreement.*

This article aims to increase the resilience of health systems in the EU and Chile by cooperating, but there are no specific obligations. Of all the agreements analysed thus far, this is the only mention of resilient food systems. It is important to note that all the agreements that concluded negotiations since 2020 are not yet fully publicly available and can be adjusted in later stages. The available texts are proposals from the EC and are not legally binding until both parties sign the text. Therefore, there may be sections regarding health- and food systems in later stages. However, it seems clear that in the FTAs this topic is not as important, whereas it is mentioned in the AA, which extends beyond trade only as was mentioned in section 2.1.1.

5.1.2. Securing decarbonized and affordable energy

The supply of green energy has been on top of the agenda of the EC since the signing of the Paris agreement in 2015. In Chapter 4, it became clear that the EU is partnering up with neighbouring countries to further diversify and extend its energy production. This paragraph aims to analyse how this is incorporated into trade agreements that are finalized since 2020.

In the agreements with Chile (2022) and Mexico (2020), there are articles about energy pricing. Both articles state:

Article 5*

A Party shall not impose a higher price for exports of energy goods or raw materials to the other Party than the price charged for such goods when destined for the domestic market, by means of any measure such as licenses or minimum price requirements

** The number of the article has yet to be defined, it is mentioned as art. 5 in the chapter for the preliminary text of the agreement.*

Albeit defined generally, the EU needs to have access to energy goods and raw materials on a large scale. This article clearly defines the obligation that both parties shall not impose higher prices. As one of the main exporting countries for Lithium, the trade agreement with Chile was considered a milestone. Commissioner Dombrovskis said that: “It also very much reflects our

shared strategic interest in terms of cooperating in areas like clean energy and raw materials, which will be vital for our future economic resilience.” Furthermore, the agreement allows Chile to sell lithium and copper at lower prices for EU companies making use of Chilean processing, which directly adds to the strategic flexibility of the EU (Aarup & Moens, 2022).

When it comes to renewable energy, the investment agreement with China has one relevant article:

Article 6*

(b) promote and facilitate investment of relevance for climate change mitigation and adaptation; including investment concerning climate friendly goods and services, such as renewable energy, low-carbon technologies and energy efficient products and services, and by adopting policy frameworks conducive to deployment of climate-friendly technologies

** The number of the article has yet to be defined, it is mentioned as art. 6 in the chapter for the preliminary text of the agreement.*

Although it is about promoting investment, thus no specific obligations, it is important that the EU work together with third parties to promote climate-friendly technologies. It is questionable whether this directly adds to SA, but adopting policy frameworks can be considered a form of NPE, whereas the EU will likely be able to anchor parts of its own policies into this framework.

5.1.3. Strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge technology

The importance of this strategic area is expressed severely, but it is underrepresented in trade agreements. This is most likely because the topic gained importance quickly over the last few years, but was not much of an issue in the timeframe these agreements were negotiated. Although the agreements were finished after 2020, negotiations often started way earlier, for example, the first negotiations with China started in 2013.

As discussed in section 4.3., there are not many relevant publications on this topic. Of the trade agreements that fall within this selection, only two have articles relevant to this area. These are the agreements with New Zealand (2022) and the UK (2020). Both agreements refer solely to the storage and protection of personal data. It is mentioned that:

Article 6*

1. Each Party recognises that the protection of personal data and privacy is a fundamental right and that high standards in this regard contribute to trust in the digital economy and to the development of trade.
2. Each Party may adopt and maintain the safeguards it deems appropriate to ensure the protection of personal data and privacy, including through the adoption and application of rules for the cross-border transfer of personal data. Nothing in this agreement shall affect the protection of personal data and privacy afforded by the Parties' respective safeguards

** The number of the article has yet to be defined, it is mentioned as art. 6 in the chapter for the preliminary text of the agreement.*

ARTICLE 202

1. Each Party recognises that individuals have a right to the protection of personal data and privacy and that high standards in this regard contribute to trust in the digital economy and to the development of trade.
2. Nothing in this Agreement shall prevent a Party from adopting or maintaining measures on the protection of personal data and privacy, including with respect to cross-border data transfers, provided that the law of the Party provides for instruments enabling transfers under conditions of general application 1 for the protection of the data transferred

Both articles do show that data protection is a fundamental EU right, and both member states and third countries have the obligation to honour these rights. Similarly to the trade agreements concluded between 2010-2020, relevant articles are scarce. Whether this has to do with the timeframe of the negotiations and shifting priorities is difficult to determine, but not unlikely. Additionally, in neither of the agreements is any mention of semiconductors or cutting-edge technologies, which is surprising whereas China is one of the main countries in the semiconductor supply chain.

5.1.4. Securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials

Although this area is considered strategically important, none of the agreements have any articles related to this field, besides the articles mentioned in section 5.1.2. Whereas China is the main supplier of raw materials, the investment agreement with China has no mention of this area (Hijazi & Kennedy, 2021). While this may seem odd, a logical explanation could be that the investment agreement is negotiated in more general terms. In the factsheet concerning this agreement, it is summarized as follows:

The text contains obligations on Market Access, National Treatment and Most-Favoured-Nation Treatment as well as a list of prohibited Performance Requirements (i.e. conditions to investment that the Parties cannot impose, such as local content requirements, technology transfers requirements, or R&D targets. It also contains commitments (not to impose nationality requirements) as regards Senior Management and Board of Directors (Eu-China investment agreement, 2020).

This means that the agreement established a framework for market access and trade liberalization in general, but does not go deeper into the specific areas. It can be argued that this is also a form of MPE, whereas the EU grants market access in exchange for economic reforms and trade rules. Although the trade agreements lack any representation of the supply of CRMs, other initiatives focus on this strategic area. These will be discussed in section 5.2.4.

5.1.5. Building a resilient and future-proof economics and financial system

Similar to the previous strategic areas, there is a lack of references regarding this area. The only mention is about trade liberalization in general, both in the China and the UK agreement, but do not pose any obligations. The first states that:

Article 6*

Each Party shall allow, with regard to transactions on the capital and financial account of the balance of payments, the free movement of capital² for the purpose of liberalisation of investment as provided for in Section [Investment Liberalisation] (Eu-China investment agreement, 2020).

* The number of the article has yet to be defined, it is mentioned as art. 6 in the chapter for the preliminary text of the agreement.

It should be noted that besides being generally formulated, it is also not the final version of this article. Therefore, no conclusions should be drawn based on this. Similarly, the UK agreement states:

Article 215

1. Each Party shall allow, with regard to transactions on the capital and financial account of the balance of payments, the free movement of capital for the purpose of liberalisation of investment and other transactions as provided for in Title II of this Heading (Trade and cooperation agreement, 2020).

The key factor in this article is trade liberalization, as is intended in trade agreements following the CCP. It is, however, remarkable that the UK agreement has no mention of resilient and future-proof financial systems, as it is one of the world's most developed financial centres (Thomas. 2023). According to a briefing for the UK Parliament

“the rules on financial services in the TCA provide for greater access between the UK and EU in financial services than would have applied under a no-deal scenario. However, access still falls far short of what businesses had as part of the European single market” (Shalchi, 2021).

Although British firms still have access to the EU market, it can be said that European financial institutions have a more favourable position in the EU market. Again, this article does not pose any obligations towards both parties but should be considered merely as a statement.

5.2. Key initiatives, policies and measures

Besides trade agreements, the EC has several other methods which it can utilize to pursue SA. This section will look at official (key) initiatives, bilateral agreements, trade negotiations, etcetera to explore how the SA approach can be identified in recent trade policy. It will again focus on the five strategic areas as defined in Chapter 3, although the order will be different for clarity reasons.

5.2.1 Securing decarbonized and affordable energy

“Today is the start of a journey. But this is Europe's ‘man on the moon’ moment. The European Green Deal is very ambitious, but it will also be very careful in assessing the impact and every single step we are taking” (Von der Leyen, 2019). These words by EC President Ursula von der Leyen revealed one of the most comprehensive policy initiatives by the incumbent EC. Whereas this set of policies is complex and includes many other (proposed) initiatives, such as the farm-

to-fork strategy and REPowerEU, and the EU pharmaceutical strategy, the core of the Green Deal is to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (European Commission, 2020a)

The Green Deal at first glance does not look like trade policy or commercial policy, but due to its sheer size and comprehensive policies, there are elements of trade policy found within the initiative. For example, the three key principles for clean energy. The first principle is to “Prioritise energy efficiency and develop a power sector based largely on renewable sources” (Directorate-General for Climate Action, 2023). A power sector based on renewable sources means that the energy has to be generated on the European continent, and thus that the EU is less dependent on third countries for their energy supply. The approach of the European Union (EU) is manifested in its pursuit of economic capacity to effectively implement the Green Deal policy objectives and foster international partnerships with a unified, EU-wide voice. This SA approach aims to ensure that the EU can independently shape its economic and trade policies, reducing dependency on external actors and asserting its position as a global player (Wirthwein Vega, 2022). This approach also covers the second and third principles, secure and affordable EU energy supply and a fully integrated, interconnected and digitalized EU energy market.

Another essential measure where SA is persuaded is REPowerEU. This policy was proposed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and aims to decrease the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels (European Commission, 2022c). Although this is not pure trade policy, several elements in the policy can be defined (partly) as trade policy. For example, diversifying the energy supply includes establishing agreements with other third countries for pipeline imports and investing in the common purchase of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), which requires cooperation with third countries in the form of market access, trade liberalization and reducing trade barriers (European Commission, 2022c).

The third set of policy measures that were introduced to become more strategically autonomous, is the proposed net-zero industry act (NZIA). Whereas this set of policies builds upon measures laid out in the Green Deal, its objectives are more specific. In the official proposal, it was stated that:

The proposed measures will also contribute to the EU's resilience and open strategic autonomy by ensuring the security of supply of key energy-related technologies, which is crucial both for supporting the development of other sectors of the economy and for public order and security (European Commission, 2023d, p. 3).

This is a clear example of how the concept of strategic autonomy is incorporated into EU policies. Although the NZIA is not pure trade policy, there are measures and initiatives in the set of policies that can be defined as trade policy. At the moment of writing, the NZIA is currently merely a proposal to implement regulations and policies in the future, but it does include instruments such as the InvestEU programme and the Innovation Fund. It cannot be determined yet how effective this is or what other instruments will be implemented under this proposal.

5.2.2 Ensuring sustainable and resilient health and food systems

The focus on building resilient health and food systems has gained prominence, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. This paragraph offers an analysis of recent trade (related) policy developments in this strategic area. By examining key initiatives and bilateral agreements, it aims to unravel the interplay between trade policies and the pursuit of sustainable and resilient health and food systems.

The first initiative in this area where the EC demonstrated the necessity for more autonomy, is “A pharmaceutical strategy for Europe,” adopted on November 25, 2020, and updated on April 26, 2023 (European Commission, 2020d; European Commission, 2023e). This initiative aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Make sure all patients across the EU have timely and equitable access to safe, effective, and affordable medicines
- Enhance the security of supply and ensure medicines are available to patients, regardless of where they live in the EU
- Continue to offer an attractive and innovation-friendly environment for research, development, and production of medicines in Europe
- Make medicines more environmentally sustainable
- Address antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and the presence of pharmaceuticals in the environment through a One Health approach.

With the EU being highly dependent on third countries for the supply of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), 80% of the imported API volume comes from five countries, where China accounts for 45% of the volume. The EC aims to gain a better understanding of the supply chain vulnerabilities and to take measures to strengthen supply chain resilience in the EU (European Commission, 2021a). In the pharmaceutical strategy for Europe, there are specific ‘flagship initiatives on open strategic autonomy.’ These initiatives provide a basis for future policy, which

theoretically could be implemented in future trade agreements. For example, one of the initiatives states to:

Follow up on the European Council request for open strategic autonomy and launch a structured dialogue with and between the actors in the pharmaceuticals manufacturing value chain and public authorities to identify vulnerabilities in the global supply chain of critical medicines, raw pharmaceutical materials, intermediates and active pharmaceutical substances in order to formulate policy (European Commission, 2020e, p. 18).

Such initiatives are not only important due to the basis for future policy they provide but also show that the EC is working on implementing SA in their policies. More specifically, the report notes that:

Building up EU's open strategic autonomy in the area of medicines requires actions to identify strategic dependencies in health, and to propose measures to reduce them, possibly including by diversifying production and supply chains, ensuring strategic stockpiling, as well as fostering production and investment in Europe.

This paragraph paves the road for future negotiations with third countries, whether it will be a trade agreement or other bilateral agreement, to make clear agreements about this strategic area.

For resilient food systems, a similar initiative was launched in 2020, called the 'Farm-to-Fork strategy. This initiative includes a proposal for a framework for sustainable food systems, as well as plans for ensuring food supply and security. This is, for example, clearly captured in the following initiative:

preserving the affordability of food, while generating fairer economic returns in the supply chain, so that ultimately the most sustainable food also becomes the most affordable, fostering the competitiveness of the EU supply sector, promoting fair trade, creating new business opportunities, while ensuring integrity of the single market and occupational health and safety (European Commission, 2020c, p. 4).

According to the EC, the role of the EU is mostly a normative one. They say that "the EU can play a key role in setting global standards with this strategy," which reaffirms that SA is high on the EC's agenda, but execution is different than other policies (European Commission, 2020c, p. 4). Although the farm-to-fork strategy mostly focuses on expanding and increasing the food systems in the EU, it will also affect third countries that rely on either EU exports or EU market access. Whereas this initiative in itself is important, it is part of the aforementioned

comprehensive European Green Deal. Because the Green Deal and the other initiatives that fall under the Green Deal are drawn up since 2020, most of them consist solely of proposals and initiatives. Because the proposals have to be worked out before they can become legislation or policy, it will take time to process all these initiatives. It is therefore difficult to determine whether the initiatives are successful and will lead to the intended results.

5.2.3. Strengthening capacity in data management, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge technology

Whereas this strategic area was underrepresented in trade agreements, there have been other initiatives to become more strategically autonomous in this sector. This paragraph will discuss two key policies: the policies from the “Europe fit for the digital age” initiative and the EU chips act.

The “Europe fit for the digital age” initiative is a set of policies that aim to make the digital transformation work for people and businesses, while also achieving the Green Deal target of climate neutrality in 2050. It includes legislation, such as the harmonised EU patent rules, regulation, for example, the data act and the digital services act, as well as non-binding communication, such as the communication on an EU cyber defence policy. At first glance, it seems like a text-book example of NPE, whereas the EC is determined to: “make this Europe's “Digital Decade”. Europe must now strengthen its digital sovereignty and set standards, rather than following those of others – with a clear focus on data, technology, and infrastructure” (European Commission, 2020b). This set of policies includes initiatives to become more autonomous in the digital domain.

The first policy that entails more SA is the Cybersecurity Strategy. This “aims to build resilience to cyber threats and ensure citizens and businesses benefit from trustworthy digital technologies” (European Commission, 2023f). The strategy includes directives such as NIS 2 and the Critical Entities Resilience directive, which both have to be implemented by member states in October 2024. Furthermore, it specifically describes how the EU can become more technologically sovereign and is part of the European Council Strategic Agenda 2019-2024. Whereas this is again not purely trade policy, the initiatives will be incorporated into future trade policy and shape the way how agreements are drawn up in the future. An example of this is that the EU pursues leadership in cutting-edge technologies such as 6G and cloud computing. Knowing that it needs third countries for the supply of certain materials or components, the cybersecurity act ensures that “public sector intervention should rely on the tools provided by the EU public procurement regulatory framework [...],” a framework that is included in most trade agreements. In this way, the EU expresses its normative power and still builds on its own

goal of SA (European Commission, 2023g, p. 11). Similarly, the proposed European Data Act aims to make the EU a leader in the data-driven society. Although not pure trade policy, such initiatives will likely affect future trade policy and trade agreements. It should be noted that the initiative has not been adopted as of now and thus has no measurable effects thus far.

Another initiative that is more trade policy focused is the European Chips Act. It was announced as an initiative to “bolster Europe’s competitiveness and resilience in semiconductor technologies and applications, and help achieve both the digital and green transition. It will do this by strengthening Europe’s technological leadership in the field.” Specific trade policy-related proposals include state aid exemption, an investor-friendly framework to increase European manufacturing and building international partnerships with like-minded countries (European Commission, 2022b). The European Chips Act was adopted by the Parliament and the member states in 2023, paving the way for formal adoption (Bertuzzi, 2023).

The state aid exemption is a clear example of how trade policy is involved in the chips act. In the legal documents, it is laid out as:

The Regulation provides for a procedural framework to facilitate combined funding from Member States, investment without prejudice with State aid rules, the Union budget and private investment. This will take the form of a new instrument with legal personality, the European Chips Infrastructure Consortium (‘ECIC’), which can be used by legal entities to structure their collaborative work within a consortium, on a voluntary basis. In addition, Section 1 sets up a mechanism for establishing a European network of Competence Centres for the purpose of implementing actions on competence centres and skills under the Chips for Europe Initiative (European Commission, 2022c, p. 17).

In other words, it is allowed for member states and the EU to grant state aid if it adds to the ultimate objectives as laid out in this act. As of June 2023, state aid was allowed for the building of new factories in France by US chipmaker GlobalFoundries (Yun Chee, 2023). This example shows that initiatives such as the chips act can change the way trade policy is developing because of the SA aims of the EC.

Lastly, it is notable that the EU has been updating existing trade agreements with digital partnerships. The EU has signed digital partnerships with Japan, Singapore and South Korea, deepening their cooperation in the digital domain (European Commission, 2023a). About the Singapore partnership, Trade Commissioner Dombrovskis said that “[...] our new Digital Partnership will facilitate reciprocal trade and e-commerce, a vital sector of our economies.

These Principles will help to pave the way towards further engagement on digital trade, including at the WTO level” showing that trade policy is evolving around the new era, even when there is already a trade agreement in place (Dombrovskis, 2023).

5.2.4. Securing and diversifying supply of critical raw materials

The ECs proposal for the Critical Raw Materials Act has triggered significant changes in trade policy. The regulation to establish a framework ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical materials was proposed on March 16, 2023, and awaits further discussion. The initiative aims to address the EUs vulnerability to supply disruptions of critical raw materials, which are essential for various industries such as technology, energy, and automotive sectors. By identifying and designating specific raw materials as critical, the EU seeks to enhance its security of supply and reduce dependence on external sources. The legal documents contain a paragraph where it states that:

In terms of international instruments, this proposal is consistent with:

the EU's international trade obligations and the EU common commercial policy. The Communication attached to this regulation includes measures to strengthen and diversify the EU's external supply of CRMs from international sources without undermining trade rules and international competition (European Commission, 2023c, p. 5).

This paragraph is important because it specifically mentions that the policy is consistent with the common commercial policy. The initiative ultimately aims to diversify supply chains and ensure supply in Europe, it does so by aiming for:

- At least 10% of the EU's annual consumption for extraction,
- At least 40% of the EU's annual consumption for processing,
- At least 15% of the EU's annual consumption for recycling,
- Not more than 65% of the Union's annual consumption of each strategic raw material at any relevant stage of processing from a single third country (European Commission, 2023c).

For this research, especially the latter initiative is important. This is mainly because trade agreements can help with diversifying the supply of CRMs. To ensure diversification, the EU has signed bilateral partnerships with third countries aiming to ensure the supply of CRMs. It has done so with Canada, Ukraine, Namibia and Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2021b;

European Commission, 2021c; European Commission, 2022d; European Commission, 2022e). These agreements are all part of the new trade strategy as proposed by the EC, the Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy (OSA), which aims to establish a new consensus for trade policy based on openness, sustainability and “assertiveness. It reinforces the EU's position as a global champion of open, rules-based trade that is fair and sustainable” (European Commission, 2021; Eliasson & Garcia-Duran, 2023).

These strategic partnerships are an important part of the updated OSA policy in which the focus is more on becoming more resilient and autonomous. Bilateral strategic partnerships are more flexible and specific than trade agreements, and thus help to focus on one specific strategic area. It is interesting to note, similar to the digital strategic partnerships, that all are with countries that already have a trade agreement in place.

5.2.5. Building a resilient and future-proof economics and financial system

The last strategic area is more difficult to address in recent trade policy. There have been many initiatives to further strengthen the European financial system, but most of them consist of legislation instead of trade policy. Furthermore, it seems that this strategic area mostly contains policy that supports other initiatives. Financial policy generally does not overlap with trade policy. Two of the initiatives that support the aim of SA as well as support recent trade policy developments are the banking union and capital markets union. Both initiatives were implemented before 2020 and therefore do not represent the SA views of the EC.

5.3. Preliminary conclusion

This chapter has aimed to answer the last sub-question: *How can the strategic autonomy approach of the European Commission be identified in recent trade policy development?* The analysis has shown that trade agreements finished after 2020 had no specific mention of SA, similar to the trade agreements signed between 2010 and 2020. Most likely, this is due to negotiations all taking place during the same period. During this period, there was no need to think or talk about SA. This changed when the Von der Leyen Commission took office in 2019. Several events after their inauguration required a policy change within the EC.

The change of view becomes clear in the official policies published since 2020. There are several examples of initiatives, policies and acts where the SA approach is visible. The five strategic areas as determined in the *2021 Strategic Foresight Report* can all be linked to certain policies with one overarching key initiative: the European Green Deal. This comprehensive set of initiatives has an ultimate goal for Europe to become the first carbon-neutral continent in

2050, but it includes more than 50 other policy proposals in different areas. Some proposals that fall under the umbrella of the Green Deal are a new European Industrial Strategy, of which the Action Plan on Raw Materials and the EU pharmaceutical strategy were part. Both initiatives have strong SA aspects and aim for the EU to become more independent when it comes to the supply and production of respectively CRMs and APIs. In 2022, the REPowerEU plan was published after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This policy aimed to become less dependent on Russian energy by increasing the share of renewable energy produced in Europe, again, with the aim to become more SA.

Finally, the *New Industrial Strategy for Europe* recommended the EC secured more critical supplies with the help of Strategic Partnership Agreements. Different from trade agreements, strategic partnership agreements focus on a specific (strategic) area, for example, raw materials. This enables the EC to be more flexible in partnering with third countries, as well as quickly adapt to changing circumstances. In conclusion, it can be said that with the appointment of the Von der Leyen Commission in 2019, the SA approach became visible in official EU policy. Mostly by key initiatives that cover vast amounts of policy and in this way change (future) trade policy. These policies are likely to be negotiated within future trade agreements to ensure the EU reaches its objectives.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The research conducted for this master thesis has aimed to answer the question: *To what extent can EU trade agreements be an instrument to attain the strategic autonomy goals set out by the European Commission?* The analysis has shown that trade agreements can – to some extent – be used as an instrument to pursue the SA goals from the EC, although it is not the most effective instrument. By first exploring whether there is coherence between institutional and academic definitions of the SA concept, it becomes clear that many different definitions exist, albeit with a similar tendency. The academic debate focuses more on security and defence policy, as this is the area where the concept originated from. The academic debate evolved to incorporate more policy areas, in line with the developments of EU policy.

The institutional definition is primarily shaped by the Von der Leyen Commission from 2020 onwards. Where the concept derives from purely defensive capabilities, the EC broadened the concept and in 2020 defined it as “Europe’s strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas” (European Commission, 2020). However, there is less

understanding when it comes to reducing dependence in the area of security. The EU is largely dependent on the US for military capabilities, albeit via NATO, which means there can be no autonomous decision-making in this domain. Neither is there coherence among member states whether this dependency should change in the future. This shows that the understanding of the concept is ever-evolving and ambiguous, resulting in no clear definition. For a concept for this research, a definition that emphasizes the importance of reducing dependency but allowing collaboration was chosen: *“the capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries – in strategically important policy areas.”*

Chapter 4, addressing the third sub-question, aims to answer the question of whether European institutions have incorporated their SA objectives into trade agreements that were signed between 2010 and 2020. The analysis revealed that these interests were not represented in trade agreements. Although several articles touched upon the strategic areas as defined in chapter 3, there is a lack of specific directions or obligations for both parties. It becomes clear that trade agreements are drawn up in a bilateral or multilateral way, thus benefiting both parties evenly.

Chapter 5 therefore analysed whether trade agreements concluded after 2020 and other trade policies changed the SA interests of EU institutions. Contrary to trade agreements, policies and measures adopted since 2020 show a clear increase in the SA approach, with the European Green Deal at the centre. This set of initiatives aims for Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, and is so comprehensive that all five strategic areas as identified in chapter 3 and discussed in chapter 5, are covered under this initiative. There has been a shift to the EU focusing more on critical supply chains, reshoring and protectionism and thus being able to rely less on third parties. This is seen in initiatives such as the chips act, the raw materials act and the REPowerEU plan. Simultaneously, the EU has signed strategic partnership agreements with third countries to account for a steady supply, as the analysis in chapter 5 revealed. A good example is the strategic partnership agreement with Singapore, touching upon digital transformation and cutting-edge technologies. At first glance, this approach seems to be successful, but since the agreements are recently signed, future research will have to assess whether this can be empirically proven.

When looking at the SA definition, it is questionable whether it is a realistic objective for the EU to act without being dependent on other countries. The main question that arises in the debate is whether the EU can become truly autonomous. The general tendency is that – according to the literal definition of autonomy – this is not possible. The EU will always be, to some extent, dependent on third countries for resources and will therefore rely on third countries

in their decision-making. The analysis in chapter 4 showed that the EU depends on China for 60% of its CRM supply and that in 2020 57,5% of the available energy in the EU was imported from outside the EU. This confirms that in practice it is not possible to become fully autonomous in all strategic areas as they are defined in chapter 3.

Whereas all trade agreements aim to strengthen trade by reducing tariffs, quotas, gaining market access etcetera, it can be concluded that the EU institutions did not represent their SA interests in the trade agreements. The absence of SA interests can be linked to the timeframe in which the agreements are negotiated. When looking at existing literature, the debate has evolved from SA in a pure, military context to a more ambiguous and broad concept. This is shown by Hoffmeister (2023), who divided the debate into three waves: the foreign policy wave (2013-2016), the economic policy wave (2016-2021), and the combined foreign and economic policy wave (2022-). It can be argued that these three waves overlap with the international relations theories that describe what power the EU is.

The first wave, the foreign policy wave, started in 2013. This wave shows an overlap with the NPE theory of Manners (2002). During the period of the first foreign policy wave, the EU signed AAs with several former Soviet countries such as Georgia (2014), Moldova (2014), Ukraine (2014), Kazakhstan (2015) and Armenia (2017). As shown in the analysis in chapter 4, the AAs extend beyond trade and aim to incorporate the third countries more into the EU's political and economic system. This shows that the EU, during this timeframe, invested in normative power.

The second wave extends from 2016 to 2021 and is described by Hoffmeister (2023) as the economic policy wave. With the election of US President Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum in 2016, the EU focused heavily on utilizing its market power to strengthen its economy. This overlaps with the MPE theory of Damro (2012). Of the 25 trade agreements signed or concluded since 2010, eleven are signed during the economic policy wave. Since the inauguration of the Von der Leyen Commission in 2019, trade policy has evolved more rapidly, also including stricter regulations for foreign investment. However, the EC had to adapt to current events. This adaption is shown in the last wave, the combined foreign and economic policy wave, starting in 2022 (Hoffmeister, 2023). The Von der Leyen Commission, positioning itself as 'a Geopolitical Commission,' faced crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This overlaps with the CPE theory, which looks beyond NPE and MPE to see where Europe needs to go to become a more capable actor (Laffan, 2023). This is seen under the Von der Leyen Commission, where the three main aspects of CPE can be

identified. Leadership and framing have played a role in both the pandemic as well as the Ukraine war. The EC identified the path they thought was best, mobilizing institutional capacity and innovating the policy toolkit.

In conclusion, it seems that trade agreements have not been the right instrument to attain more SA. The goals set out by the EC are clear, but can better be persuaded by implementing specific key initiatives, such as the Green Deal. Trade agreements aim to benefit both parties equally and take years to negotiate, and thus are not flexible enough to keep up with international developments. Furthermore, multilateral agreements prevent one-sided changes, making it an instrument that helps promote norms and values, but less to attain more SA. Taking into account the quickly changing political environment, the EC should pursue different instruments to reach their SA objectives. Policies and measures such as the Green Deal can adapt more quickly and leave room for necessary change when required while focusing on specific areas. It is possible to incorporate similar policies into trade agreements in the future, but on short notice, the EU should focus on key initiatives to increase SA and use trade agreements as intended: to liberalize trade.

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Appendix 1 – Overview of trade agreements ratified between 2010-2020

COUNTRY	TYPE OF AGREEMENT	SIGNED
Armenia	EPA	24-11-2017
Bosnia and Herzegovina	AA	30-6-2015
Canada	FTA	30-11-2016
Central America	AA	29-6-2012
Colombia, Ecuador, Peru	FTA	26-6-2012
ESA	EPA	28-7-2017
Georgia	AA	27-6-2014
Ghana	EPA	28-7-2016
Iraq	AA	31-7-2012
Japan	EPA	17-7-2018
Kazakhstan	EPA	26-10-2015
Kosovo	AA	27-10-2015
Moldova	AA	27-6-2014
Pacific	EPA	19-1-2011
Singapore	FTA	19-10-2018
SADC	EPA	10-6-2016
South Korea	FTA	6-10-2010
Ukraine	AA	27-6-2014
Vietnam	FTA	30-6-2019

Appendix 2 – List of critical raw materials as defined by the EC

Antimony	Gallium	Natural rubber	Titanium
Bauxite	Germanium	Niobium	Tungsten
Baryte	Hafnium	PGMs	Vanadium
Beryllium	HREEs	Phosphate rock	
Bismuth	LREEs	Phosphorus	
Borate	Indium	Scandium	
Cobalt	Lithium	Silicon metal	
Cooking coal	Magnesium	Strontium	
Fluorspar	Natural Graphite	Tantalum	

Appendix 3 – Overview of trade agreements finished since 2020

COUNTRY	TYPE OF AGREEMENT	NEGOTIATIONS CONCLUDED	SIGNED
Chile	Updated AA	9-12-2022	
China	Investment agreement	30-12-2020	
Mexico	Updated FTA	28-04-2020	
New Zealand	FTA	30-6-2022	
United Kingdom	Trade and cooperation agreement		30-12-2020