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The European Union's Approach to Strategic Technology Governance: The Case of AI

Sophie Vanhoonacker^a, Thomas Christiansen^b, and Flavia Lucenti^b



^aFaculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Political Science, LUISS University, Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

Strategic technologies have gained pivotal significance in the context of a return to great power politics, and with it, questions about their governance and regulation. These global developments have particular resonance for the European Union (EU)—the world's largest trading bloc with a strong commitment to a rules-based international system and far-reaching regulatory powers over its internal market. The changing global landscape raises pertinent questions about the EU's response to these challenges. Traditionally, the EU has approached the governance of technologies from the perspective of their economic and societal impact. However, from the early 2020s onwards, in line with the broader turn towards geopoliticization, there has been an increasing recognition of the strategic and security dimensions of new technologies. This article focuses on the analysis of the EU's regulatory activity in the area of Artificial Intelligence (AI), in order to develop an understanding of the way in which the EU positions itself in this regulatory space within the evolving global context. Towards this aim, the article conceptualises possible regulatory activity along the lines of four analytical dimensions: the degree of institutionalised international cooperation, the legal character of the governance adopted, the respective roles of the public and private sectors and the relative influence of international and national interest drivers. The EU's approach to strategic technology governance is then mapped and categorised along these dimensions. Based on the findings, the article reflects on its conclusion on the EU's capacity to navigate the tensions between internal preferences, its global governance aspirations and geopolitical competition.

Introduction

Strategic technologies are increasingly at the heart of international politics. Against a background of de-globalisation, the crisis of the rules-based international order and the weakening of global governance systems, strategic technologies play a pivotal role. While previously digital technologies were hailed for their role in improving global communications and connectivity, in

CONTACT Sophie Vanhoonacker  s.vanhoonacker@maastrichtuniversity.nl  Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, Maastricht NL-6200 MD, The Netherlands

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the current era the emphasis has shifted to their geopoliticisation and their role in great power rivalry. The geopolitical dimension of technologies extends from access to critical materials and components in their manufacturing, via control over their industrial manufacturing base and algorithmic design, to the emergence of rival regulatory regimes. Beyond the civilian and commercial spheres, the military-security dimension of access to, and denial of, strategic technologies is constantly expanding. The geostrategic significance of control over such technologies is vast and rapidly evolving with the fast-moving advances in innovation and application that have occurred in recent years.

In an international system characterised by geopolitical rivalry, access to and control over, strategic technologies is becoming an essential element of great power status. Beyond the more traditional competition between leading private firms (relying to various degrees on governmental support for their commercial success), the struggle over the control of strategic technologies has re-shaped the relationship between public authorities and the private sector. Governments are increasingly recognising the importance of controlling digital infrastructure and technological resources. This shift has led to a new landscape where tech firms play a significant role in shaping geopolitical dynamics (Munoz and Weber 2026). In detail, the rise of what has been called ‘techno-nationalism’ is making the relationship between public and private actors much closer intertwined: firms in possession of strategically important technological know-how or infrastructures are no longer merely economic actors but are becoming embedded in the geopolitical strategies of rival states—the cases of Huawei, TikTok, ASML, or Starlink are powerful examples of this phenomenon. In the same vein, the regulatory activity and industrial policies of public authorities are increasingly geared towards enabling firms to aid their geopolitical objectives.

The quickly evolving role of strategic technologies in international relations raises important questions of governance, namely if and how such technologies can be effectively regulated. In this regard, complex and potentially countervailing trends can be identified, with efforts to establish global rules and multilateral agreements on certain technologies coinciding with fierce competition between both firms and states over leadership in particular sectors. While great powers, in particular the United States and China, are adopting policies to maintain or achieve global primacy in key domains and may ultimately be seeking hegemonic status, the current technological order remains rather pluralistic and characterised by fragmented leadership across sectors.

This article examines the response of the European Union (EU) against the background of these shifts in international politics and the governance of strategic technologies. The erosion of the rules-based international order is a particularly challenging issue for the EU, given its long-standing commitment to liberal values, particularly with regard to trade liberalisation, effective

multilateralism and support for global governance regimes. The EU is in any case a particular actor in the international order, devoid of the attributes of sovereign statehood yet at the same time endowed with significant law-making powers and the capacity, albeit within limitations, to project both common European values and interests internationally. It is the EU's role as both producer and beneficiary of global norms that makes it a key player also with regard to strategic technologies. The EU has spearheaded global efforts to regulate technologies such as digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI). Legislations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the AI Act, have had a major impact not only on the EU's internal market but also on the wider world, giving rise to the concept of a 'Brussels Effect' (Bradford 2023). The extraterritorial application of EU rules has long been viewed through the lens of 'Normative Power Europe' (Manners 2002), yet in the context of great power rivalry and the complexities of strategic technology governance, the EU's global role remains an open question. This article therefore aims to explore the EU's efforts to establish binding regulatory frameworks at both the European and international levels in this new and evolving landscape. Temporarily, our research zooms in on the key strategies and policy documents developed by the EU in the decade leading up to the mid-2020s—the period that also coincided with what Commission President Von der Leyen designated as a 'geopolitical' European Commission at the beginning of her first term in 2019.

In terms of substantive focus, our investigation is concerned with the governance of what has emerged as a critical strategic technology, namely Generative AI (GenAI). In recent years, GenAI has generated increasing hype and become a prominent topic in public discourse. This surge in interest is largely due to the release of AI-powered tools, such as ChatGPT, which rocketed to widespread attention in the 2020s, triggering disruptions and revolutions across a range of sectors globally. It is a technology that the EU had already targeted for regulation from 2019 onwards, leading to the coming into force of the EU AI Act in August 2024, and it remains an ongoing issue through the process of implementation of the emerging regulatory framework.

The following section explains the evolution of the EU's approach to regulatory power, global norms and strategic technology regulation. Against this background, the article then conducts a systematic analysis of the process and the outcome (as can be determined so far) of the EU's effort to regulate AI. This analysis applies the conceptual categories developed in the introductory paper of this special issue (Christiansen, Sinkkonen, and Vanhoonacker 2026), operationalising the different parameters that determine a polity's approach to technology governance. Based on this framing, four key dimensions—the interplay of internal and external driving forces; the pattern of stakeholder involvement; the degree of international cooperation; and the legal character of the governance regime—are then examined in separate sections of the

paper. Having established through this analysis the nature of the EU's actor-ness in the area of AI regulation, the article then reflects in a concluding section whether and how the EU, in competition with other global players, has the capacity to navigate the tensions between multilateralism and geopolitical rivalry in the international system.

The European Union as a Regulatory Power

While there have always been internal differences between more 'liberal' and more 'protectionist' forces within the EU, there is a long track record of sustained commitment to the objective of an international rules-based international order—the EU's support for global governance regimes and regional cooperation initiatives in other global regions are testament to this. In a similar vein, much of the EU's external economic relations have been driven by efforts to facilitate trade liberalisation through global and regional agreements. The EU has championed the WTO, and, following its demise, has aggressively pursued comprehensive free trade agreements with key partners around the world—efforts that have continued even in the adverse climate of the 2020s that have been dominated by concerns over economic security.

More broadly, the EU's approach to international affairs has been underpinned by a deep-seated belief in the mutual reinforcement between economic exchange and political stability. This liberal conviction can be considered part of the EU's DNA, given how the centrality of market liberalisation internally has also reflected its stance on free trade globally. However, from the mid-2010s onwards, fissures in this commitment have become evident. 2016 was, in this regard, a pivotal year: while the election of Donald Trump to his first term of the US Presidency heralded a shift to a more unilateralist and transactionalist US foreign and trade policy, the UK's vote in favour of leaving the EU foreshadowed the departure of the member states that had traditionally led the liberal camp internally. 2016 also marked the year in which the EU adopted its 'Global Strategy' (EEAS 2016) emphasising—in a departure from previous priorities—concepts such as resilience and 'principled pragmatism'. There was also an indication that the EU was developing a broader understanding of security, and a subsequent pattern of linking economic, technological and security concerns to the adoption of new policies.

It was also during this period, from the late 2010s onwards, that 'strategic autonomy'—understood as a diffuse strategy to reduce reliance on others, both partners and rivals, in the provision of security and prosperity—emerged as a dominant narrative in programmatic statements by the EU (e.g., Juncos and Vanhoonacker 2024). EU leaders were at pains to emphasise that the search for any such 'autonomy' would not imply the untethering of the EU from existing alliances in particular, NATO, and indeed it was soon followed by the attempt to re-label this exercise as a 'Strategic Compass' (EEAS 2022). Yet, while

remaining elusive in terms of practical implications, the narrative on ‘strategic autonomy’ has nevertheless been maintained by European elites. It has served to communicate, both internally and externally, a European desire to stand up for its own values and interests.

Factors, such as supply chain vulnerabilities, especially *vis-à-vis* China, which were exposed by the global pandemic, the ambivalence and open threats emerging during the Trump administrations about the US commitments to its traditional allies, or the threats to energy security arising from Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine have all combined to make EU decision-makers acutely aware of the risks associated with continuing ‘business as usual’. The EU’s traditional liberal-internationalist approach, which may have functioned well in the era of globalisation, appears misplaced at a time in which security is viewed not as a collective good, but as a transactional exchange, in which interdependence can be weaponised and economic dependencies are liable to become instruments of coercion.

In line with this realisation, the 2020s have seen the EU adapt to these rapidly changing external environments, moving from being a ‘laggard’ to a ‘leader’ in adopting the policy-tools required to re-position itself in this more adversarial context (Bauerle Danzman and Meunier 2024). In the context of a new strategy for economic security, a growing number of policy initiatives designed to protect the integrity and competitiveness of the EU’s Single Market has been adopted. This includes mechanisms for the screening of inward investments and controls for exports, measures designed to level the playing field between foreign and domestic firms with regard to EU rules on emissions, public procurement, and state aid, as well as an anti-coercion instrument to combat foreign attempts to use trade towards political interference.

In addition to these regulatory initiatives, the EU has also sought to direct significantly more funds towards investment into critical technological capacities. This has involved operations on two levels: at the member state level, rules on competition policy and state aid control have been relaxed in order to permit national, regional and local governments to provide subsidies to attract foreign and domestic investments. This has been evident, for example, in the development of a European base for the manufacturing of semiconductors. This has been part of a wider transformation of industrial policy in the EU, which facilitates a more interventionist approach after decades of neoliberal attitudes towards macroeconomic policy (McNamara 2024). The EU has also made unprecedented amounts of public funding available, not least through the €750bn Resilience and Recovery Fund, which had ‘digital transformation’ as one of its key priorities. In addition, several other programmes have been launched to provide funding to enhance a European capability in areas, such as quantum computing or ‘AI factories’. In this more threatening international environment, the governance of strategic technologies (as defined elsewhere,

see introduction to this special issue; see also Al Rodham 2011), plays a critical role. Control over strategic technologies has come to be regarded not only as crucial in terms of the ongoing search for global powers for prominence at the international level but also as key elements with regard to military security, economic competitiveness and even cultural and normative influences. Those who succeed to gain the upper hand in the development, application and regulation of strategic technologies are seen indeed as having the best chance to dominate also in the arena of international politics (Kriekemans 2022).

Against this premise, this article studies the EU's global positioning on emerging technologies. The EU, traditionally regarded as a champion of international governance and effective multilateralism, is being severely challenged by the surge in innovation and development of such strategic technologies in two ways. First, there is the widespread diagnosis that the EU is a relatively weak player in this domain, with few leading companies at the national or continental level, but also in terms of firms managing the design and manufacture of such technologies (Demarais 2024). This amounts to a recognition that Europe—the EU, its member states and the wider European economy—is in the process of losing the competitive game in this critical aspect of international politics. Second, the EU's industrial weakness is compounded by the absence of any meaningful efforts at *global* governance of these technologies which, from a European view, carry with them significant societal risks. In the context of a largely voluntary and non-binding approaches to international regulation of strategic technologies, the EU finds confronted by the need to establish distinct rules for its Single Market, creating regulatory burdens for European manufacturers and providers that potentially further damage their competitive position globally.

This perception of a Europe that is threatened by a mutually reinforcing dynamic of low economic competitiveness and high regulatory burden has arguably become a dominant discourse in the mid-2020s. It is, however, reductive, in that it underplays the above-mentioned major steps the EU has been taking in terms of both regulatory activity and public investments, also and specifically with regard to strategic technologies. This includes the 'Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform' (STEP [n.d.](#)) aimed at channelling existing EU funding programmes towards technologies that contribute to plans for green and digital transition. While these actions constitute significant injections of public funding into the development of distinctly European tech capabilities, a greater and unresolved issue remains the lack of private investors and hedge funds to rival such opportunities available in the US and elsewhere. More important, arguably, are the range of legislative acts that have been adopted by the EU covering a range of aspects in the field of new technologies. Key developments here are the adoption of the Digital Markets Act (DMA) (2022), the Digital Services Act (DSA) (2022), the Chips Act (2023) and the AI Act (2024), which set standards in terms of transparency,

privacy, market access, consumer and environmental protection, interoperability and other core principles in the European context. These legislative initiatives have permitted the EU not only to regulate its Internal Market—and with it the global firms operating in it—but they will arguably also allow the EU to become a more influential voice in the debate about the global governance of strategic technologies.

Conceptual Framing, Methods and Data Collection

The study of processes that establish rules and frameworks governing the functioning of emerging, novel and potentially strategic technologies is essential in view of the pressing societal concerns with regards to their economic, social, cultural and security impact. For the EU, an early move to regulate digital technologies and artificial intelligence platforms offers an opportunity to play a leading role in the setting of global standards, or at least to project particular norms towards other actors that are also in the process of developing their own rulebooks (e.g., Lucenti et al. 2026). With the EU's traditional focus on risk-regulation, consumer protection and concerns over data privacy, the ability to influence emerging global norms in this way would be consistent with its identity as a liberal normative power (Heidebrecht 2024; Wagner 2017).

However, competing regulatory models are likely to arise as well, supported by other actors that are equally seeking to project their respective normative frameworks in order to influence this emerging field and the international order more widely. This is, for example, the case with China and Russia. Both countries are promoting the regulation of strategic technologies within regional and international organisations that favour national sovereignty over respect for human rights and non-interference (Chen and Gao 2024; Flonk 2021; Lucenti and Saari 2025; Zhang 2025). Against this backdrop, Bradford (2023) has pointed to the differences between the EU, China and the US, categorising the EU as a 'rights-driven model' which prioritises concerns such as ethical considerations, civil rights and data protection; China as a 'state-driven model', where the government plays a central role in guiding technological development and regulation; and the US as a 'market-driven model', where technological innovation is largely driven by private-sector dynamics with minimal government intervention. This categorisation highlights how different actors' identities and interests shape governance strategies, with each player seeking to embed its own values and strategic aims into an emerging landscape for technological global governance (Mokry and Gurol 2024).

The existence of competing regulatory models further demonstrates that technologies are not neutral tools but are instead inherently political. They embed the identity, values and interests of dominant actors (Bode and Huelss 2024; Musiani 2022) while simultaneously creating opportunities to contest

existing rules (e.g., de Souza and Taylor 2025; Hall 2019). Adopting a normative and socio-political approach, our article explores how the EU is responding to the geopolitical race towards innovation, whilst remaining congruent with its traditional liberal-inspired role as a norm entrepreneur. Nonetheless, even if the argument that the EU's approach to regulating strategic technologies reflects a particular *normative foundation* is well-established (e.g., Cantero Gamito and Marsden 2024; Coletti, Ducci, and Moro 2025), less attention has been paid to the questions about the *process* through which the EU realises this regulatory effort, and the actual *outcome* in terms of the emerging governance model. While some notable exceptions exist (e.g., Gao 2025), the IR literature has yet to systematically examine these dynamics. This article addresses this gap by mapping the EU's approach to strategic technology governance along the aforementioned four dimensions.

The first two of these dimensions—i.e., the interplay of internal and external driving forces and the pattern of stakeholder involvement—following the conceptual discussion on the instructions to this special issue—serve to identify key aspects of the regulatory process and assess which actors are involved and what interests drive it. The latter two—i.e., the degree of international cooperation and the legal character of the governance regime—by contrast, serve to categorise the outcome of the regulatory effort in terms of the kind of normative regime that emerges from such a process. It will serve to briefly set out below the four analytical dimensions arising from this conceptualisation.

First, the degree of involvement of private actors in the regulatory activity can also be understood in terms of cooperation between public authorities and stakeholders—which include both providers and consumers of strategic technologies. Regulation can hence be an exclusively statistical affair, with governments imposing sets of rules on market operators, or alternatively, the private sector can be significant, even predominantly, involved in the setting of rules—or, as may be the case, the decision not to develop such rules. There are various ways in which public-private cooperation can function in this regard, from informal lobbying via stakeholder consultations through public hearings, inclusion in expert advisory groups and the like, to the incorporation of private actors in the standard-setting process.

Second, we follow the distinction between the driving force for regulatory activity originating within a given polity, or else coming from an external environment. In the case of the former, authorities respond to domestic demand for or against the regulation of strategic technologies, whether this is communicated through the channels of representative democracy or more populist avenues of public discourse and debate. In the case of the latter, the pressure for tech regulation comes from the perception that there are external risks, such as geopolitical rivalry, outside interference in the political process, cyber-attacks, or vulnerabilities in the supply chains of critical technologies. Also, in this dimension, we can imagine positions at either end of the scale as

well as intermediate positions that indicate a combination of internal and external driving forces.

Third, we assess the degree of multilateralism that is being adopted by global powers in addressing functional needs for technological regulation, stretching from effective multilateralism at one end of the scale—the ambition to set standards internationally through global governance regimes—to unilateralism at the other end. In between these extremes are various other possible arrangements, such as bilateralism, minilateralism or flexilateralism, with distinctions depending both on the number of actors involved in the cooperative effort and the strength of the institutional frameworks that are being utilised or constructed.

Fourth, the bindingness of regulation, meaning the degree to which governments are willing and able to establish and enforce legally binding rules as part of the regulatory effort. Here, the distinction is effectively between formal laws, backed up by effective sanction regimes, enforcement mechanisms and adjudication bodies, and by contrast the absence of any binding rules or compliance regime. Intermediate efforts involve soft law instruments, peer review and peer pressure mechanisms, codes of conduct, voluntary agreements, the reliance on self-regulation by market operators and similar arrangements that have a degree of impact without being formally binding.

The four-dimensional framework serves as a lens through which we analyse primary sources— official documents as well as relevant policy papers and the existing secondary literature. Key primary sources mainly include key strategies and policy documents, such as the European Commission’s legislative proposals and White Papers, relevant European Council and Council documents, European Parliament resolutions and reports, and speeches by prominent political leaders, such as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French President Emmanuel Macron. These sources provide valuable insights into the EU’s policymaking priorities, stakeholder involvement and decision-making processes. In conjunction with these primary materials, we incorporate findings from the secondary literature, which help frame the EU’s governance strategies within broader theoretical and empirical discussions. Information obtained from these documentary sources was triangulated through a number of interviews with public officials and industry experts.¹ Together, this variety of primary sources facilitated a nuanced assessment of the EU’s approach to the governance of AI and its evolving role in global regulatory frameworks.

Internal and External Driving Forces

When analysing the AI Act and other relevant documents and speeches, it was evident that internal drivers were initially driving the desire to regulate this technology. The legislative act itself identifies as its two central objectives an

improved functioning of the internal market as well as the development of ‘a human centric and trustworthy AI’. While supportive of the innovative opportunities of the new technology, the AI Act puts much emphasis on the protection of EU citizens against the potentially harmful effects of technology on health, safety and fundamental rights (European Parliament and Council 2024). This is in line with the earlier statements made by the European Commission in its White Paper of 2020, which called for ‘a regulatory and investment-oriented approach with the twin objective of promoting the uptake of AI and of addressing the risks associated with certain uses of this new technology through the creation of an ecosystem of trust based on norms and principles protecting human rights and consumer rights’ (European Commission 2020). In light of the above objectives, it is not surprising that also the current Act’s provisions on governance are mainly confined to the EU. The relevant Chapter 7 provides for the creation of an AI office based at the European Commission (Art. 64) and a European AI Board composed of one representative per member state. The latter assists the Commission and the member states in the consistent and effective applications of the regulation (Art. 66). In addition, each country is expected to establish a national notifying authority and a market surveillance authority (Art. 70).

It would, however, be erroneous to see the AI Act merely as an internal instrument to address a domestic EU challenge. The new legislation undeniably also serves broader international aspirations. By being the first to adopt an elaborate legal framework, the EU did not hide its ambition to be ‘a global leader in the development of a secure, trustworthy and ethical AI’ (European Commission 2020; European Parliament and Council 2024). The new legislation undeniably also serves broader international aspirations. By being the first to adopt a dedicated legal framework, the EU declared its ambition to be ‘a global leader in the development of a secure, trustworthy and ethical AI’ (European Commission 2020; European Parliament and Council 2024).

However, the EU’s normative efforts to develop AI regulation have been significantly shaped by external influences, in particular, the competing approaches of the US and China. On the one side, the US, which prioritises innovation and technological competitiveness in the private sector, also prefers less regulation than strict oversight at the international level. Whereas under the Biden administration there was something of a domestic debate about the degree to which the US ought to engage with international efforts to regulate technology (Haar and Sinkkonen 2026), the second Trump administration has been unequivocal in its opposition to international or foreign rules, framing the EU’s digital policy as a hostile act towards US firms and as a threat to free speech (Vanhoonacker and Haar 2026)). Later, the US administration went as far as threatening punitive tariffs in response to EU tech regulations, linking the issue to its NATO security guarantees and sanctioning former EU Industry Commissioner Thierry Breton (Hernandez-Morales 2025).

In the face of sustained pressure from across the Atlantic, and increasingly cautious voices also from within, the EU has sought to strike a balance between maintaining regulatory autonomy and ensuring that its AI framework does not put European companies at a competitive disadvantage to their US counterparts. This challenge can be seen in the EU's increasing attempts to avoid regulatory overreach that could stifle innovation, while at the same time respecting fundamental EU values, including ethical considerations—in terms of, to name a few, privacy and data protection, transparency and bias and discrimination—which led indeed the European institutions to draft norms and guidelines.

On the other side, China presents a very different model, largely using AI also for state surveillance and social control, which is implemented by actively exporting such AI-driven technologies to other countries, particularly in the Global South. The normalization of AI-driven surveillance that China attempts to achieve has raised concerns in the EU about the geopolitical and ethical implications of AI regulation. It was largely in response to the potential misuse of this technology that the EU strengthened its rights-based approach, emphasising AI transparency, accountability, and safeguards against authoritarian abuse.

The EU's recent AI regulatory efforts can be seen in the context of such opposing approaches to tech regulation and have consequently been shaped by a strategic positioning between these two dominant AI models. External pressures have further reinforced the EU's commitment to avoid overregulation while integrating democratic principles and human rights protections into its AI legislation. In other words, even though the Act, was in the first place driven by domestic concerns, it also was seen as an instrument to better position the EU internationally and handle the competing approaches by key international players as the US and China.

Patterns of Stakeholder Involvement

A second factor determining the nature of the regulatory process is the degree to which different stakeholders were involved. The AI Act, as an EU-level regulation, required the European Commission to draft the legislative proposal, while the Council of Ministers—representing the national governments—and the European Parliament—composed of directly elected representatives of the EU citizens—ultimately adopted the act jointly as co-legislators. However, prior to and during legislative passage, as is customary in EU law-making, there was extensive consultation by a wide variety of interested parties. As a matter of fact, this involvement of so-called 'stakeholders' was especially pronounced in this instance. Seeing the complexity and novelty of the topic, the Commission asked for input from a specially created High-Level Expert Group on AI (HLEG), composed of 52 experts

(European Parliament and Council 2024). In 2018–19, they advised the Commission on ethical guidelines and their implementation, policy and investment issues, and provided sectoral considerations. They also worked closely with the so-called AI alliance, another Commission initiative, regularly bringing together citizens, civil society, experts, business and academia. The Commission collected its input through four European AI Alliance Assemblies (June 2019; October 2020; September 2021; November 2023). HLEG was providing input for key documents, such as the Commission Communication on Building Trust in Human-Centred AI (2019), its White Paper on AI (2021) and its 2021 Coordinated Plan on AI (European Commission 2021).

Following the publication of its White Paper (European Commission 2021), different stakeholders were invited to participate in an online public consultation for a period of almost 4 months. The results of this input by representatives of both the public and private sector, NGOs, academics and citizens were summarised on the Commission website. In addition, there were also stakeholder workshops and other events. The online consultation incited 1215 contributions, of which almost 30% came from businesses, 33% from individuals—mainly from the EU—and 13% from civil society. Within the private sector contributions, almost 60% came from business associations. Up to 84% of the business replies came from firms within the EU (European Commission 2021).

As was to be expected, the adoption of the Act was accompanied by frantic lobbying activities. Based on a study of the agendas of Commission cabinets and Members of the European Parliament, Bonnamy (2025) identified 427 entities lobbying on the AI Act in the period 2020–24 with 1111 meetings between representatives of the two institutions and lobbyists. On the basis of a network analysis, she shows that when it comes to non-EU players, the big US tech companies are clearly the dominant players, while China remains rather marginal. Tech companies were, in the first place, concerned about the negative impact on the EU's innovation capacity. In an open letter to the Commission, EP and Council in June 2023, 150 businesses—including players like Airbus, the Renault Group and Siemens, as well as start-ups—expressed their concerns about the heavy regulation of the foundation models of generative AI and its negative impact on the EU's competitiveness (Open letter 2023). Until the last moment, corporate lobbying remained very intense. Tech giants, such as Google and Microsoft, as well European firms, such as Mistral AI (France) and Aleph Alpha (Germany), with the support of their governments, successfully lobbied to guarantee that 'general-purpose AI' would to a large extent remain exempted from human rights checks and other safeguards (Corporate Europe Observatory 2024). They, however, could not prevent the EU opting for a binding regulatory framework to be respected by any operator of AI systems in the Union.

In light of the historical importance of the Act, the European Commission clearly went out of its way to collect input from a broad variety of stakeholders. In addition to the regular consultation process, it also relied on the work of a newly created High-Level Expert Group, which in turn also involved a broader audience in its activities.

The Degree of International Cooperation

The AI Act can be seen as an initiative aimed at creating a safe environment for the use of AI in the EU, reflecting the Union's need to establish rules for its internal market. While this unilateral move does not necessarily represent a departure from the EU's traditional commitment to multilateralism, it does illustrate how the EU is taking proactive steps in response to emerging technological challenges. In the context of the wider geopolitical turn, it is another example of the EU acting as an 'institutional innovator' (Bauerle Danzman and Meunier 2024) through independent policy action in the context of its 'geopolitical turn'.

However, from another perspective, the EU's regulatory activity in this field can also be seen as a first step towards the development of governance mechanisms at the international level, and the pronouncements of the EU institutions certainly emphasise this ambition (European Commission 2022a; European Council 2020; European Parliament 2022; European Parliament and Council 2024). The EU has tried to realise these ambitions in two ways. Firstly, it aims, as in the earlier successful case of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), to again export its regulatory model and realise the so-called Brussels effect (Bradford 2023). In the absence of European big tech companies, it hereby relies on a strategy of exploiting its large internal market and reputation as an experienced regulator to influence the practices of foreign tech corporations as well as governance rules in third countries and internationally. In 2022, the European Commission had presented a communication pleading for the strategic use of the European standardisation system in the 'the global race for digital leadership' (European Commission 2022a). Concerned that the EU is sometimes too slow and not strategic enough, the paper proposes a whole range of measures aimed at better leveraging the EU standardisation system while at the same time strengthening 'the EU's voice in global standardisation' (European Commission 2022a). Upon the presentation of the Commission Communication, the Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton (2019--24) had been explicit about the EU's aspirations: 'Technical standards are of strategic importance, Europe's technological sovereignty, ability to reduce dependencies and protection of EU values will rely on our ability to be a global standard-setter' (European Commission 2022b).

Secondly, the EU has—in parallel to trying to export its own regulatory model—also participated in the first international initiatives for the responsible use of AI. More specifically, in the period 2022–24, the European Commission and the EU member states played an active role in the drafting of the ‘Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, which was negotiated under the aegis of the Council of Europe (CoE) and eventually adopted in May 2024. Besides the 46 CoE member states, another 11 non-European countries, including the US, Australia, Canada and Japan, were involved. The European Commission sought to ensure that the CoE Convention would be compatible with the EU’s own AI Act and played an active role in preventing the scope of this legally binding Convention from remaining confined only to the public sector by excluding private firms from its provisions (Bertozzi 2024; Hoch 2025). Although questions remain about the impact and in particular the enforcement of this Convention, its negotiation constitutes a good illustration of the EU’s continuing attempts to upload its norms and values to other international institutions (Jacoby and Meunier 2010).

Another example of this effort is provided by the European Commission’s active participation in the development of the OECD’s principles of ethical and trustworthy AI (European Commission 2020) and contributions to debates in the UN and the G7 contexts. Since 2020, the European Commission has collaborated with the OECD on the establishment of an AI Policy Observatory, tasked with the monitoring and analysis of global AI developments. This includes *inter alia*, the compilation of a database of national AI strategies and policies, as well as AI watch reports and aims to stimulate the sharing of data.² The approach of both organisations is, however, different: while the EU opts for a regulatory approach, the OECD—not surprisingly—only formulates recommendations. This support for other multilateral initiatives in the field of AI is in line with the ‘Joint Communication on the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism’, which explicitly calls on the Union to take the lead in ‘the development of new global norms, international standards and cooperation frameworks in areas, such as digital, including AI and other new technologies (European Commission and HRVP 2021).

At the same time, there have in the period 2020–25 also been a series of bilateral initiatives, the most prominent of which has been the cooperation with the US. AI regulation is an important topic within the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), a forum established in mid-2021 to coordinate and cooperate on trade and technological issues. In that framework, it was for instance agreed that the Commission’s AI Office, established under the AI Act and the US’s AI Safety Institute, would cooperate on the development of instruments to evaluate AI models (Greenacre 2024). The Joint Statement, adopted on the occasion of the sixth ministerial conference (4–5 April 2024),

explicitly mentions that the TTC will be used ‘to advance the governance of critical and emerging technologies, such as AI, . . . , including by supporting the development of rights-respecting international technical standards, codes of conduct, principles and guidance’ (Joint Statement, 2024). It also reaffirmed both partners’ commitment to a risk-based approach and further updated a list of joint definitions of key terms through developments. The earlier mentioned hostility of the second Trump administration towards regulation has, however, put an end to this cooperation.

The Commission’s occasional efforts to engage with China have not been very conclusive, even though regular meetings to discuss digital policy and regulatory activity take place in the context of the EU’s strategic partnership with China. AI was on the agenda, for example, at the 2nd High-Level Digital Dialogue between the EU and China, but the Commission’s stressing ‘the importance of an ethical use of this technology in full respect of universal human rights’ must have been a one-sided affair, even if on that occasion an ‘Action Plan on the safety of products sold online’ was reached between the two sides (European Commission 2023).

In a way, the modest results from the EU’s bilateral dialogues with the US and China are symptomatic of the wider challenge of approaching the governance of AI and other strategic technologies multilaterally. Notwithstanding the EU’s commitment to contribute to effective global rules on the development and use of AI, and the opposition of other key players and the international community more generally to match these commitments, the EU faces the dilemma of either acting unilaterally—with the normative damage and economic cost that comes with that course of action—or else leaving EU citizens and firms unprotected from the risks that it considers inherent in these technologies. The result is a balancing act which sees the EU adopting firmer rules unilaterally in the hope that other jurisdictions will follow suit that firms adopt European standards globally through the ‘Brussels effect’, and that, in due course, international agreements match the EU’s level of regulatory ambition.

The Legal Character of the EU’s AI Governance Regime

The discussion so far demonstrates that the EU’s regulatory efforts have been ambitious and are, as previously explained, very much rights-driven (Bradford 2023). The choice to opt for legally binding provisions—rather than, say, voluntary agreements, guidelines or ‘codes of conduct’—not only applies to AI but to a range of other aspects of regulation of strategic technologies, including digital policy, cybersecurity and data safety, to mention a few. In the European Commission’s ‘Political Guidelines’ for her first term (2019--2024), President Von der Leyen had committed to ‘put forward legislation for a coordinated European approach on the human and ethical implications of

Artificial Intelligence’ within the first 100 days in office (Von der Leyen 2019). The need for such regulation was fully supported by the German Chancellor Merkel (June 2019), who encouraged the new Commission to develop a ‘regulation similar to the General Data Protection Regulation that makes it clear that artificial intelligence serves humanity’. Also, Macron, in his landmark Sorbonne speech of 2017, had pleaded for ‘a Europe of innovation and regulation adapted to the digital world’ (Macron 2017).

In comparison to such high-level political declarations, experts and stakeholders were more cautious. While strongly recommending the development of rules protecting citizens against mass surveillance and scoring, an advisory group with representatives from industry, civil society and academia also warned against ‘unnecessarily prescriptive regulation’ (Delcker 2019). Also, the earlier mentioned ‘Open Letter’ of several representatives of the corporate sector (2023) illustrated well the concerns about the effects of ‘overregulation’. The tenor of this kind of advocacy was to urge EU policy-makers to strike the right balance between advancing citizen rights and consumer protection on the one side and avoiding excessive limits on technological innovation. Beyond support for the EU’s risk-based approach, there was also the message that ‘not all risks are equal’ and that the primary focus ought to be on serious risks.

The EU’s emphasis on binding regulation contrasts sharply with the US approach, where the belief in a self-regulatory model for companies predominates (Bradford 2023). Although President Biden’s Executive Order (EO) on the ‘Safe, Secure and Trustworthy Development and Use of AI’ (The White House 2023) was an important step towards the establishment of safety and security standards, the US regulatory landscape remained a patchwork of many different laws and non-binding guidelines both at the federal and state level. The second Trump administration revoked Biden’s Executive Order and replaced it with a new AI action plan (The White House 2025). One of the pillars of the policy is to develop a federal AI framework allowing to replace the more strict regulations at the state level. It even foresees the creation of a litigation task force at the Department of Justice that could challenge too restrictive state laws.

When justifying its choice in favour of a directly applicable ‘regulation’—rather than a ‘directive’ which would require transposition into national law by member state parliaments—as the legal instrument for the Act, the Commission emphasised the need for its uniform application and the prevention of legal fragmentation in the Single Market (European Commission 2021). When developers of an AI system infringe the rules, penalties will be imposed. Member states must notify the European Commission about the rules on penalties that will be applied and are responsible for their implementation (Art. 71, AI Act). In case of infringements by Union institutions, agencies, or bodies falling within the scope of the Act, the European Data

Protection Supervisor is responsible for imposing administrative fines. The level of the fines depends on the nature, gravity and duration of the infringement, as well as on the willingness of the infringing party to cooperate with the Supervisor to address the situation (Art. 72, AI Act). Also, in contrast to the implementation of the GDPR that relies on national authorities, the enforcement of the AI Act is more centralised and requires the creation of a dedicated AI Office within the Commission.

Although the EU has clearly opted for a highly formalised form of governance, grounded in rules that are legally enforceable for any provider of AI systems on its territory, there are nonetheless concerns about its capacity to implement the Act. As the enforcement of the new policy partially falls under the responsibility of the Commission, and to some extent, under national authorities, it is feared that this is a recipe for inconsistent implementation. These concerns have been further fuelled by the relatively poor implementation of the GDPR legislation (Meyers 2024). Beyond that, the full enforcement of the AI Act's rules and penalties is also in doubt in the context of the wider approach towards 'de-regulation' adopted by the Commission under Von der Leyen's second term. One powerful piece of evidence in this regard is the fact that the Draft AI Liability Act, which was intended to specify how contraventions of the AI Act could be held accountable, was removed from the Commission's 2025 work programme and most likely shelved for good.

In sum, while the EU's approach to AI regulation has adopted the world's most far-reaching and legally binding rules, the question remains whether the original intentions will be carried through in practice, in the face of threats of retribution from the US, a weakening approach to regulation in Europe more generally and the unlikely adoption of binding global rules in this domain.

Concluding Remarks

In the above analysis of the EU's regulatory approach to AI, we demonstrated how the EU has positioned itself in a particular manner in the governance of strategic technologies. It has adopted a largely unilateral approach to develop a binding legal framework, backed by a potentially powerful enforcement mechanism, following a wide-ranging process of public consultation and a shift from focusing on domestic concerns, such as privacy protection, to increasingly external processes arising from the geopoliticisation of EU decision-making. There appears to be a growing recognition that the EU needs to firmly regulate AI technologies not only in order to address concerns about rights, human dignity and the integrity of its political process but also in order to respond to the dynamics of a multipolar world. Against a backdrop of geopolitical rivalry with other powers and potential threats to the EU's democratic norms, economic security, or societal cohesion arising from AI tools that may be at their disposal, the EU has opted for a particular approach to tech

regulation. Rather than taking the time to accept the compromises that a more multilateral approach would imply, it is forging ahead with a fairly far-reaching and ambitious regulatory agenda.

This approach, while privileging risk management within the European market and society, can be expected to complicate subsequent global efforts to regulate AI, given that it ‘locks in’ the EU towards a high regulatory threshold that other powers may consider undesirable or impossible to achieve. Then again, the aforementioned ‘Brussels effect’ of globalising European norms through its market power may also become a factor here—we have already seen how operators seeking access to the Single Market have started to discriminate between the EU and the rest of the world. It remains to be seen whether maintaining dual standards will be more costly for such firms in the long run. In addition, the EU continues its efforts to export its own standards through active participation in multilateral fora like the OECD, the UN and the G7 where AI is also on the agenda.

It is difficult to see regulatory authorities, even as significant as the EU, maintaining the upper hand in the face of the fierce competition that has emerged not only with regard to the development of LLMs and GenAI platforms but also in the subsequent stage of industrial, administrative and even artistic applications. The combination of the enormous financial resources available to Big Tech, the deep-seated objections of the Trump 2.0 administration to any form of international regulation of these technologies, and the concerns over competitiveness that have become dominant also in Europe—these are all factors that diminish the prospects of a ‘Brussels Effect’ with respect to AI regulation.

However, making judgements as to whether the EU’s approach is genuinely unique, potentially incompatible with those of other global powers and whether it is ultimately successful or deemed to fail depends on the comparative study of these rival approaches, something which is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, we observed how the interaction with the US and China, two major players in the field of AI, affect the processes that are guiding the EU regulatory effort, allowing us to get a better sense of the prospects for global governance of strategic technologies.

In the final analysis, a more comprehensive understanding of the EU’s approach to AI regulation and its positioning in the global context would require a broader research agenda. This ought to involve a comparative study of the regulatory strategies of other global players, such as the US and China, but also India, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, alongside those of the EU. Such a comparative perspective on regulatory strategies for AI globally will then allow the determination of whether rival models are emerging or whether, by contrast, the field is characterised by policy learning, norms export, or regulatory isomorphism. Developing in such a way a deeper understanding of the potential

diffusion of the EU's governance models will be essential in order to assess the validity of the 'Brussels Effect' concept going forward, and the future prospects more generally for any transnational or multilateral governance of strategic technology.

Notes

1. The authors conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with policy-makers in the EU institutions, including with two officials in the European Parliament's Research Service, with one senior official in the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG Connect), and a senior official in the European External Action Service's Unit for Digital diplomacy. The authors also benefitted from participation in stakeholder meetings organised by the European Council for Foreign Relations and from the primary research conducted by other researchers within the Horizon project REMIT. With regard to the latter, the authors have been able to rely on data published in the report by Redeker et al. (2026) which *inter alia* includes detailed research on the genesis of the EU AI Act.
2. For the website of the OECD AI Policy Observatory, see: <https://oecd.ai/en/>.

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