

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S 'GEOPOLITICAL AWAKENING' IN THE WIDER GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT*

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Abstract: *The contemporary global geopolitical landscape presents significant challenges for the European Union, marked by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, escalating trade tensions, and uncertainties regarding future US security commitments to Europe, among other factors. This paper critically assesses the optimistic narratives surrounding European strategic autonomy, identifying key shortcomings that impede a genuine 'geopolitical awakening' of the European Union. Drawing on a framework that integrates elements of classical and post-modern geopolitics, as well as a geoeconomic approach, the analysis argues that the EU's 'geopolitical awakening' remains rhetorical mainly, as evidenced by policy documents such as the Strategic Compass and the 'Re-Arm Europe' Plan, with limited progress in operationalising its stated ambitions. The paper argues that the EU needs to address the origins of these shortcomings, many related to the Member-States of the Union, like the lack of political willingness, the failure of defence coordination, the industry competition replacing cooperation, and the lack of a more balanced development between the North and the South, a particularly vulnerable area being the South-Eastern flank.*

Keywords: *European Union, geopolitics, geo-economics, resources, strategic autonomy, Strategic Compass, Re-Arm Europe*

Rezumat: *„Trezirea geopolitică” a Uniunii Europene în contextul geopolitic global extins. Peisajul geopolitic global contemporan prezintă provocări semnificative pentru Uniunea Europeană, marcate de agresiunea Rusiei în Ucraina, tensiuni comerciale tot mai mari și incertitudini cu privire la angajamentele de securitate viitoare ale SUA față de Europa, pentru a numi doar câteva. Această lucrare evaluează critic narațiunile optimiste din*

jurul autonomiei strategice europene, identificând principalele deficiențe care împiedică o adevărată, trezire geopolitică' a Uniunii Europene. Bazându-se pe un cadru care integrează elemente de geopolitică clasică și postmodernă, precum și o abordare geoeconomică, analiza susține că ,trezirea geopolitică' a UE rămâne în mare parte retorică, așa cum rezultă din documentele de politică precum Busola Strategică și Planul ,Re-Arm Europe', cu progrese limitate în operaționalizarea ambițiilor declarate. Lucrarea susține că UE trebuie să abordeze originea acestor deficiențe, multe dintre ele fiind legate de Statele Membre ale Uniunii, precum lipsa de voință politică, eșecul coordonării în domeniul apărării, competiția din industrie care înlocuiește cooperarea și lipsa unei dezvoltări mai echilibrate între Nord și Sud, o zonă în mod special vulnerabilă fiind flancul sud-estic.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is at a critical geopolitical crossroads. Over the past decade, external shocks and internal divergences have marked the debate on the future of a united Europe from the perspective of global leadership and strategic orientation. A watershed moment was the full-scale invasion of Ukraine initiated by Vladimir Putin in February 2022, which highlighted the EU's security vulnerabilities in defence, energy, coherence, and cohesion.

At the same time, rising geopolitical competition between the United States and China, escalating trade protectionism, and the global fragmentation of supply chains have underscored the need for Europe to assert its strategic autonomy. In this context, EU policymakers have increasingly adopted geopolitical language, most notably in documents such as the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence and the European Commission's latest initiative, the *Re-Arm Europe* plan. These narratives mark a rhetorical shift away from the EU's traditional identity as a post-modern, normative power towards a more realist acknowledgement of power politics and hard security.

Despite assertive rhetoric about a "geopolitical awakening", the EU's strategic shift is not a radical departure from its traditional liberal narratives. An earnest embrace of great power politics is hindered by the EU's lack of federal unity, with Member States remaining divergent in their capabilities and priorities. As a result, concepts such as "strategic autonomy" remain contested, and tangible progress in defence and external action remains limited, with many members still heavily dependent on NATO.

This paper assesses the European Union's optimistic narratives on strategic autonomy within the current global geopolitical landscape. It identifies key shortcomings that impede a genuine "geopolitical awakening" of the EU, arguing that

this shift remains largely rhetorical rather than operational.

Using a framework that integrates classical and post-modern geopolitics with a geoeconomic approach, this analysis argues that the EU's limited progress is due to structural issues within its Member States. These issues include a lack of political will, failed defence coordination, and internal competition.

The paper situates the discussion within the context of a visible return to power politics and a new phase of imperial geopolitics. It links Russia's aggression in Ukraine to its historical geopolitical mindset and a perceived Western naivete. It also highlights the growing geo-economics of resources, which is increasingly defining geopolitical competition in the 21st century. Finally, the paper critically evaluates key initiatives of the European Union, such as the Strategic Compass and the Re-Arm Europe Plan. It offers recommendations to enhance the Union's strategic autonomy in practice.

THE RESURGENCE OF GEOPOLITICS AND RESOURCE COMPETITION

Classical geopolitics and the Great Powers' game

Napoleon said that "the policy of a state lies in its geography". Nicholas Spykman warned that US national security once overlooked geography's role.¹ The idea is simple: ignore geography at your own risk. Robert D. Kaplan echoes this, saying geography largely drives events, even more so today.² While some reject geographical determinism in a complex world, few can deny that geopolitics matters – because we believe it does.

After the Cold War, geopolitics fell out of favour among International Relations scholars, who embraced geo-economics and believed globalisation would foster cooperation. This view aligned with Western dominance, as liberal values seemed to be spreading globally. Francis Fukuyama famously declared liberalism's victory in *The End of History*, though he warned that this might lead to

¹ Francis P. Sempa, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition: The Geopolitical Realism of Nicholas Spykman", in Nicholas J. Spykman with Introduction by Francis P. Sempa, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 12. See also Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1942; Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1944.

² Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, in "Foreign Policy", May/June 2009, no. 172, p. 96.

stagnation or what he termed “boredom”.³ He was right – history continued, shaped by geography repackaged through modern changes. Geopolitical rivalry between the West and East persists.

Geopolitics connects geography with international power dynamics, showing how territorial factors shape foreign policy and global influence. Spykman emphasised geography’s permanence compared to the fluid nature of politics and economics. A country’s size and location offer strategic advantages, especially when paired with strong governance. While location is fixed, its importance shifts with changes in global power centres, technology, and infrastructure.⁴

Geopolitics is making a comeback as revisionist powers challenge the liberal international order (L.I.O.) that has favoured the West since the Cold War. The US acted as a benign hegemon during a largely unipolar era.⁵ But in the post-pandemic world, the balance appears to be shifting toward illiberal, autocratic, or authoritarian regimes like China, Russia, and others, signalling a potential decline of Western dominance.⁶

The international system built on multilateralism, law, and liberal values is unravelling. Institutions like the UN and EU face growing challenges as global politics shift toward raw power struggles, exemplified by conflicts like Russia’s war in Ukraine. In this uncertain world, geography – humanity’s most stable variable – may be key to survival, as power politics once again define international relations.

While globalisation and geo-economics once seemed to promise peace, recent events show that classical geopolitics still dominates. Putin’s invasion of Ukraine reflects traditional power dynamics, rooted in Russia’s imperial legacy and ideologies. The classical triad developed by Count Sergey Uvarov in the 19th century, known as the “official nationality” doctrine⁷ (Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality) or Stalin’s security triad (land-people-souls⁸), may still be glimpsed in the new

³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History*, in “The National Interest”, 1989, no. 16, p. 18.

⁴ Nicholas Spykman quoted by Jaehan Park, *Rethinking Geopolitics: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft*, in “Texas National Security Review”, 2023, Vol 6, Issue 4, p. 87.

⁵ In his article *The Unipolar Moment* published in “Foreign Affairs”, 1990, Vol. 70, no. 1, *America and the World 1990/91 (1990/1991)*, p. 23-33, Charles Krauthammer noticed that the other powers accepted the American leadership because the United States did not behave like the previous hegemons, but as a benign one.

⁶ Dacian Duna, *Leaders, States, and the war in Ukraine: back to the old school of realism?* in “Analele Universității din Oradea”, Seria Relații Internaționale și Studii Europene, 2023, TOM XV, p. 41.

⁷ Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, Ithaca – London, Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 45.

⁸ Laurențiu Constantiniu, *Uniunea sovietică între obsesia securității și insecurității* [The

concept of *Russkiy Mir* (*The Russian World*), linked to the new imperial ambitions of Russia.⁹ These ideas, influenced by thinkers such as Alexander Dugin, echo historical doctrines and resist interpretation by modern Western rationalism.¹⁰

For decades, the West believed that integrating Russia into global markets and promoting liberal reforms would lead to peace and democracy. This assumption proved misguided, as Russia's strategic preferences remained rooted in traditional geopolitics.

Russia's shift toward liberal democracy stalled in the mid-1990s, yet the West continued to view it as a rational, peaceful actor due to its adoption of market economics. Focused on material interests, the West overlooked Russian revisionism and became dependent on its energy exports. Meanwhile, Russia's geopolitical mindset remained unchanged from the Cold War era.

Putin's "special operation" against Ukraine in 2022 was not a sudden break but a continuation of earlier events, notably the 2014 annexation of Crimea. That marked Russia's shift from cooperation to confrontation with the West, culminating in full-scale invasion and a direct challenge to the liberal international order.¹¹

The rise of authoritarian challengers to the liberal order was not solely responsible for its decline – Western naivety also played a role. After costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, US fatigue set in, while Europe, burdened by its past, failed to restore confidence. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the West has increasingly yielded to China's growing influence.

The liberal hope of ending geopolitics while continuing globalisation and interdependence was an illusion. This belief ironically fuelled a new wave of imperial geostrategy, with autocratic regimes like Russia and China using liberal norms

Soviet Union Between the Obsession of Security and Insecurity], Bucharest, Editura Corint, 2010, p. 17-18.

⁹ The concept of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) was formalized in 2007 with the creation of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, but its ideological roots trace back to Czarist Russia's doctrine of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality. Today, it blends themes of Russian culture, history, and Orthodoxy—either separately or in combination. (Alexander Meinenberger, *The concept of the "Russkiy Mir": History of the Concept and Ukraine*, in "Euxeinos", 2023, Vol. 13, no. 35, p. 16.).

¹⁰ Paradoxically, the ideological roots of *Russkiy Mir* echo older Western traditions, particularly the organic geopolitics of German thinkers like Ratzel and Haushofer.

¹¹ The West overlooked a warning sign in 2007 when President Putin, at the Munich Security Conference, openly criticized the U.S.-led unipolar order, NATO expansion, and Western military actions like the bombing of Yugoslavia - foreshadowing Russia's confrontational stance. (Nicole Fernandez, *Putin's Pivot: Understanding the Evolution of Russia's Anti-Western Stance*, in "Political Analysis", 2024, Vol. 22, Article 5, p. 70).

to justify their power politics. They reject Western universalist values while re-packaging old imperial ambitions in modern terms.

A critical geopolitical approach applied to the Ukraine war

Geopolitics never truly disappeared, though liberal idealists struggled to accept its persistence. As Ladis Kristoff noted in 1960, modern humans no longer fear nature – they seek to shape and conquer it. This mindset underpins the enduring relevance of geopolitics in today’s world.¹²

Modern geopolitics shifted from environmental determinism to human-directed influence over nature. Thinkers like Mahan, Mackinder, and Haushofer viewed geopolitics as a strategic tool. However, it was later exploited by expansionist leaders - from Mahan and Theodore Roosevelt to Hitler and Tojo¹³ - making it both influential and controversial. Strategists used geographic factors such as location, climate, and landforms to justify power and military expansion, framing conquest as a civilising mission.

Some 21st-century leaders, like Vladimir Putin, blur the line between geopolitics and geostrategy, often deliberately. This perspective reflects a lingering modernist bias, where strategic ambitions are masked as geopolitical reasoning.¹⁴ The West, absorbed by its rational ideals, failed to recognise the threat of Putin’s “special operation” until it was nearly too late—for both Ukrainians and Russians, who became victims of a historical narrative crafted to serve imperial ambitions.

Objectively ranking geopolitical concerns is difficult due to the complexity of the global system. Since the 1970s, thinkers like Yves Lacoste have advanced *critical geopolitics*, which examines not only physical factors such as location and size but also the narratives and representations leaders use to justify actions. This approach has influenced Anglo-Saxon scholarship since the 1990s.

As Gerard Toal explains, post-modern or critical geopolitics “seeks to recover the complexities of global political life and expose the power relationships that characterise knowledge about geopolitics concealed by orthodox geopolitics.” This approach highlights how geopolitical narratives are constructed and

¹² Ladis K. D. Kristof, *The Origins and Evolution of Geopolitics*, in “The Journal of Conflict Resolution”, 1960, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 15-51.

¹³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁴ Putin operates within a 19th-century worldview, rooted in spheres of influence in which great powers control their neighbours’ destinies. Concepts like “New Russia” and “Russian World” reflect efforts to resist Western influence. He conflated geopolitical goals with geostrategic planning – plans that largely failed during the initial invasion, despite later military recovery following Ukraine’s 2023 counteroffensive.

used, moving beyond fixed truths to uncover deeper power dynamics.¹⁵ Critical geopolitics focuses on how geographical space is imagined and represented by political leaders, who turn these representations into geopolitical codes. These narratives often justify policies like interventionism or military spending, as seen in regions such as the Balkans, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Gerard Toal's framework for critical geopolitics includes formal, practical, popular, and structural geopolitics. Formal geopolitics builds on traditional theory; practical geopolitics reflects foreign policy in action; media and culture shape popular geopolitics. Structural geopolitics, as Toal defines it, is "the study of the structural processes and tendencies that condition how all states practice foreign policy. Today, these processes include globalisation, informationalisation and the proliferating risks unleashed by the successes of our techno-scientific civilisation across the earth."¹⁶

Ukraine has long been central to Russia's geopolitical imagination – almost an obsession – due to its strategic location and high population density. As a largely landlocked continental power, Russia views Ukraine as vital to its influence. Zbigniew Brzezinski noted, "The loss of Ukraine was geopolitically pivotal, for it drastically limited Russia's geostrategic options".¹⁷ Fifteen years later, he reiterated: "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire."¹⁸ With its roughly 40 million people,¹⁹ Ukraine was seen as a way for Russia to address its demographic issues, partly.

Since 1996, Russia's politics have moved away from liberal democracy and the rule of law, making a shift toward neo-imperialism predictable based on its historical behaviour. When Vladimir Putin became interim president in December

¹⁵ Gerard Toal, *Understanding critical geopolitics: Geopolitics and risk society*, in "Journal of Strategic Studies", 1999, no. 2-3, p. 107-124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 46.

¹⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*, New York, Basic Books, 2012, p. 95.

¹⁹ Ukraine's population was about 41 million in February 2022 before the Russian invasion, dropping to around 39 million by 2025, according to *Macrotrends*, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ukr/ukraine/population#:~:text=Total%20current%20population%20for%20Ukraine,a%207.34%25%20decline%20from%202021> (Accessed on 20.05.2025).

1999 and was elected in 2000, he stated in his inauguration speech that Russia's history compels him to act.²⁰ Putin consistently invoked Russian history to justify actions, including aggression against Ukraine. The West responded weakly, imposing limited sanctions and largely ignoring the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Europe continued business with Putin; the *Northstream* pipelines exemplify this.

Ukrainian lands and people were part of the Russian Empire for centuries and central to Pan-Slavic, Pan-Orthodox, and Eurasianist ideologies. Czar Nicholas II, like his predecessors since 1721, called himself "Emperor of All Russias." South Ukraine, known as Novorossiia – from Donbass to Odessa – aligned with the former Golden Horde Khanate. The term, popularised under Catherine the Great after the 1774 conquest, was revived by Putin in his 2014 speech.²¹

Ukraine is central not only to Russian popular geopolitics but also to its formal strategic thinking. Alexander Dugin, seen by some as a Kremlin ideologue, wrote in *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997) about the "Ukrainian problem": "The sovereignty of Ukraine represents a phenomenon so negative for Russian geopolitics that it can easily lead to armed conflict"²². Dugin views Ukrainian independence as a threat to Eurasia, arguing it should return to being an administrative part of a centralised Russian state. His work was slow to reach the West, which largely ignored Russian propaganda.

The West woke from its long illusion of a friendly Russia. Strategically, Putin misjudged the response to his February 24, 2022, invasion, expecting little resistance and a swift victory in Kyiv. Yet Ukraine is vital to both European and Russian structural geopolitics. The West had to respond, though its reaction -marked by hesitation - failed to deter the Kremlin's "special operation."

Russia's international behaviour mirrors Soviet-era foreign policy, focusing

²⁰ Vladimir Putin stated that "The Kremlin is a focal point of our national heritage. Here, within the walls of the Kremlin, the history of our nation has been made for centuries, and we have no right to be 'Ivans who don't remember their predecessors.' We must not forget anything, we must know our history, know it the way it was and learn its lessons; we must always remember the people who created the Russian state, defended its honour and made it a great, powerful and mighty state". See Vladimir Putin, *Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony*, May 7, 2000, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21399> (Accessed on 20.09.2025).

²¹ Vladimir Putin, *President of Russia Vladimir Putin addressed Novorossiia militia*, 29.08.2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46506> (Accessed on 3.07.2025).

²² Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, English translation from Russian, Arktoagaia, St. Petersburg, 1997, p. 199.

on maintaining a sphere of influence and building alliances against the West.²³ Many Russian foreign policy moves reflect deep-rooted fears and insecurities. Putin and his allies likely saw a democratic Ukraine as a threat, though they officially cited strategic concerns – claiming NATO membership would turn Ukraine into a war platform against Russia. Yet NATO could have done so from the Baltic states since 2004, – but never did.

“The soft underbelly of Russia,”²⁴ as some modern geopolitical thinkers describe Ukraine, may seem a valid strategic concern to leaders like Putin who are rooted in the past. Understanding recent Russian behaviour requires recognising its deeper fears. The involvement of Russia’s allies in Ukraine suggests a prelude to a broader, long-term conflict between liberal democracies and rebranded autocracies of the East and South, which claim to fight for a just multipolar world.

Paradoxically, the Soviet Union was more predictable than Putin’s Russia. Yet tactics like denial, disinformation, fake news, and strategic deception were already part of Soviet warfare. Hybrid warfare was theorised in the USSR and even earlier.²⁵ The Soviet Union often backed down in the face of firm US resistance, despite masking its technological inferiority with bold rhetoric. This history suggests that effective deterrence – especially from the US, the same power that once brought the USSR to its knees – is key to containing Russia in the Ukrainian conflict.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – unprecedented in Europe since WWII – has awakened prominent security actors to the return of hard geopolitics. NATO can largely continue its role unchanged, but the EU now sees the need for a stronger Common Security and Defence Policy, though progress may be slow. The key question remains: will the US remain committed as Europe’s security provider, or can Europe develop strategic autonomy in the event of an American retreat?

²³ Russia’s foreign policy reflects its strategic ambitions through initiatives like the Near Abroad doctrine, the CSTO (established in 2002), the Eurasian Economic Union (2014), and memberships in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS—all aiming to counter Western influence.

²⁴ The phrase “the soft underbelly of Russia” was coined by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during World War II, referring to the Soviet Union’s southern flank -comprising the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea.

²⁵ Evgenii Messner, a former Tsarist and later White Army officer, during his exile to the West wrote extensively on what he called *мятеж-война* (“mutiny-war”) in the 1960s and 1970s (Evgenii Messner, *ХОЧЕШЬ МИРА, ПОБЕДИ МЯТЕЖ-ВОЙНУ!* [If You Want Peace, Win the Mutiny War!], Moscow Military University, Moscow, 2005). Some of Messner’s ideas influenced the Gherasimov Doctrine. In the Soviet era, Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Vladimir Triandafillov developed the concept of “deep operations.”

The geopolitics and geo-economics of resources

Today's geopolitics is deeply intertwined with international politics and economics – the lifelines of societies. In a globalised world facing demographic pressures and resource scarcity, geopolitics is less about territorial ambitions and more about advancing strategic interests. This section explores how resources shape 21st-century geopolitics, reflecting the current industrial-technological revolution and environmental challenges. While vital resources like water and energy are under threat, this essay focuses on the power sources driving technological development. For the past two centuries, global politics has revolved around carbon and steel, oil, gas, and metals. The 1940 US embargo on Japan's iron, steel, and petroleum, which led to the Pearl Harbour attack, illustrates how resource control has driven major geopolitical conflicts, including World War II.

While still partly reliant on carbon and steel, today's economy is increasingly driven by resources fuelling the digital and AI revolutions. Geopolitics now includes geo-economics, focused on controlling scarce resources. This situation explains the strategic interests of powers such as China, Russia, and the US in regions including Greenland, the Arctic, Antarctica, and even outer space.

Controlling the "Rare earths" (REE) ore deposits has already become one of the defining geopolitical games of the 21st century. These elements²⁶ have become essential for modern hi-tech products, including cellular phones, computer hard drives or electrified vehicles. The most sought-after of them is lithium, a key ingredient in batteries. Yet they are predictably unevenly distributed. Having valuable resources isn't always a blessing – especially for countries that are weak or perceived as weak. The Trump administration's pressure on Ukraine to sign a rare-earth deal highlights the new geopolitical-geo-economic landscape. While REE competition may not directly cause modern conflicts, it creates strategic opportunities for nations to survive or thrive. Ukraine, estimated to hold about 5% of the world's critical raw materials, is a clear example of this dynamic.²⁷ This quantity is practically a covert invitation for those wanting to save Ukraine from the Russian aggression.

Classical geopoliticians were pioneers in linking geography, geology, and

²⁶ 15 elements of the Lanthanide series, plus scandium and yttrium. See USGS Mineral Resources Program, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2014/3078/pdf/fs2014-3078.pdf> (Accessed on 10.04.2025).

²⁷ Abdujalil Abdurasulov, Robert Plummer, *What minerals does Ukraine have and what are they used for?*, in "BBC News", 1 May 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20le8jn282o> (Accessed on 05.05.2025).

national interest. The geostrategic vision of Haushofer and its subsequent interpretation by American geopoliticians during and after World War II was limited by the technology of that period. Digital and AI technologies now offer unprecedented insight into the physical and human geography of resources. It's no surprise that leading global powers – those driving this tech revolution – are also the most geopolitically active in the 2020s. They've replaced the cooperative era of globalisation with a more assertive, mercantile approach to global politics, shaped by international capital and corporate strategy. In this new landscape, geopolitics and geo-economics are merging into a unified strategic framework.

THE EU'S RHETORICAL SHIFT: THE STRATEGIC COMPASS AND ITS LANGUAGE CHALLENGES TO THE EU'S GEOPOLITICAL AUTONOMY AND OPERATIONALISATION

The European Union, ranked among the top three economies in the world alongside the US and China, is also the largest trader of services and the second-largest exporter of goods after China.²⁸ However, it does not fare well in terms of military power, even though the EU's Member States combined military expenditure in 2024 was around \$457 billion, compared to China's \$232 billion and Russia's \$146 billion. However, the numbers do not tell the entire story. With the notable exception of the United States, recent global dynamics in militarisation increasingly favour the challengers of the Liberal International Order. The context is significantly unfavourable to the European Union, as the war in Ukraine unfolds right at its doorstep.

The expression "geopolitical awakening" was used by former High Representative Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell in his Preamble to the "Strategic Compass."²⁹ The document adopted in March 2022 aims "to guide the necessary development of the EU security and defence agenda for the next ten years". This document originates from the European External Action Service – a truly European institution not directly tied to Member States. Its success depends on building consensus among European leaders—a challenging task due to

²⁸ Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/european_economy/bloc-1b.html?lang=en (Accessed on 15.07.2025).

²⁹ The document's complete title is *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*. See the website: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en (Accessed on 15.07.2025).

historical patterns of international behaviour, some already noted and others not.

By using the term “geopolitical awakening,” Josep Borrell suggested that Europe has lost touch with traditional geopolitical thinking – a shift that began after World War II. In the early 20th century, European Great Powers, with vast colonial empires, frequently relied on geopolitics and geostrategy. But post-war European societies adopted fundamentally different principles. During the Cold War, US protection of Western Europe from the Soviet threat further distanced collective Europe from strategic reasoning.

A historical retrospective

Strategic thinking was largely absent in the European Communities – and later the European Union – until the Nice Treaty in 2007, when a common defence policy was established. Some Member States believed it was unnecessary, as NATO had provided security for Western Europe since 1949. In reality, Europe played a secondary role, with the United States serving as the primary security provider throughout the Cold War. This arrangement was accepted due to the bipolar structure of the global system. Aside from France and Britain, which retained some military strength as former colonial powers, most European countries maintained limited military capabilities. Germany, in particular, emerged as a demilitarised, peace-oriented state, highly reluctant to engage in external military operations. This reluctance was rooted in Germany’s historical legacy – having initiated two world wars – and reinforced by its restrictive constitution, the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany.³⁰

Meanwhile, Western European countries experienced an unprecedented era of democracy and prosperity, in stark contrast to life behind the Iron Curtain and under American-led hegemony. After the Cold War, they expected to finally reap the benefits of peace – often referred to as the “peace dividend.”³¹

³⁰ The Basic Law, adopted in 1949, stipulated in Article 26 that “Acts tending to and undertaken with intent to disturb the peaceful relations between nations, especially to prepare for a war of aggression, shall be unconstitutional” and “shall be criminalised”. This article is practically a prohibition on war of aggression. Still, the German government also interpreted it as a reason for refusing to deploy combat troops in several post-Cold War international military operations, including the Western Balkans (most notably Kosovo) and Libya in 2011.

³¹ The general tendency was the reduction of military expenditure and its redirection toward civilian projects. According to Michael Intriligator, “defence conversion involves a shift in the guns-butter mix in the economy, transforming labour, capital, and other real resources in the economy from the military to the defence sectors of the economy.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, most European countries - including NATO members, former Warsaw Pact states, the Russian Federation, and other ex-Soviet republics - largely abandoned mandatory military conscription. This shift marked the beginning of a broader effort to professionalise armed forces, aligning with the post-Cold War context of peaceful relations and cooperation among former adversaries. The goal was to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and technological advancement. However, these reforms were accompanied by significant cuts to defence budgets.

During the 1990s, Europe faced several low-intensity conflicts in the Western Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia) and in the former Soviet Union (Transnistria, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh). These crises exposed the European Community – and later the European Union – as lacking adequate crisis management capabilities.

Some steps were taken to address this gap, including the Petersberg Declaration (1993), the Saint-Malo Declaration (1998), and treaty negotiations leading to Maastricht, Amsterdam, and Nice. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 introduced the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which later evolved into the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), now known as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Despite these developments, progress toward a unified European defence policy – or a common European army – has been slow. Many European leaders continued to rely heavily on NATO as the primary guarantor of European security³² to continuously “keep Americans in, Germans down and Russians out” as Lord Ismay, the first Secretary-General of NATO, reputedly said. Even so, the international ambitions of other Member-States, particularly France, had led to the setting of several goals by a more ambitious European Union.

One of the most notable initiatives was the Helsinki Headline Goal, set by the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, which aimed to establish a European Rapid Reaction Force of up to 15 brigades (50–60,000 soldiers) capable of

Such a shift is helped by market mechanisms that facilitate such reallocation by using factor markets to reallocate these resources”. See Michael D. Intriligator, *The Concept of a Peace Dividend*, in “Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)”, 2024, <https://www.eolss.net/sample-chapters/c13/E6-28A-02-04.pdf> (Accessed on 12.08.2025).

³² The most notable case is that of Denmark, a country that always invoked constitutional arguments for rejecting a common defence policy for the EU, and later for refusing the participation in the already established structures. Therefore, Denmark signed four opt-out clauses with the EU and its Member States.

undertaking the full range of Petersberg tasks.³³ This goal was never achieved, nor was its successor – the Headline Goal 2010, adopted by the European Council in June 2004 – which envisioned the creation of “battlegroups” consisting of around 1,500 soldiers.

A commentary by the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations offers insight into the reasons behind these failures: Member States remain reluctant to cede national-level decision-making on defence matters; defence planning continues to be confined to the national level, rather than coordinated at the European or even Atlantic level; and, crucially, there has never been sufficient political will to establish such a rapid-reaction force, even though it remains a nominal objective for defence planners across the Union.³⁴

The 2000s saw gradual progress in European defence coordination. Following the 9/11 attacks, European Member States were slow to support the United States, despite President George W. Bush invoking Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time. Still, in 2003, the EU adopted its first security strategy, *A Secure Europe in a Better World*, drafted under Javier Solana, then Secretary-General and High Representative for the CFSP.

However, momentum stalled with the failure of the Constitutional Treaty in 2004. The Lisbon Treaty of 2007 offered a compromise to break the deadlock, but it was not until 2016 that the EU adopted a new Global Strategy: *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*. While rhetorically strong, it was followed by another setback – the 2018 Capability Development Plan by the European Defence Agency failed to generate the necessary political and defence-industry consensus.³⁵ It is true that PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), a procedure established with the Lisbon Treaty, was established by the EU Member States in 2017. Still, the catalyst was Brexit (both for PESCO and for the Global Strategy) and the dark expectations that the Europeans have developed due to the evolutions in the regional and global security environment (the best example was the

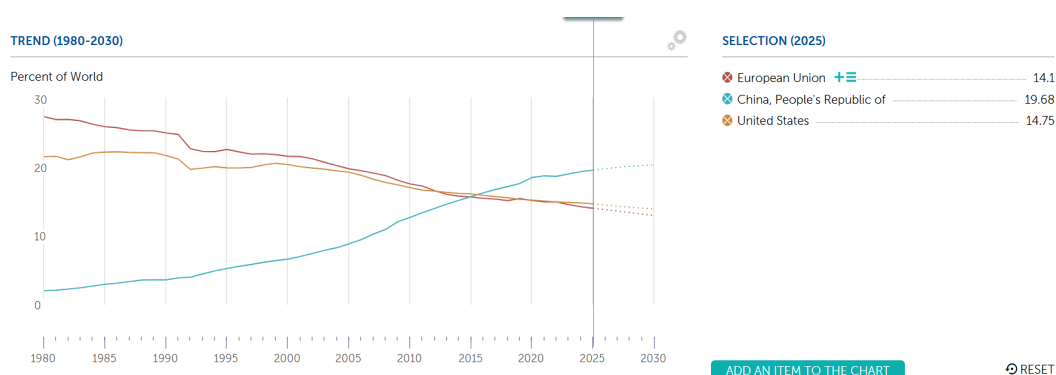
³³ The Petersberg Tasks, set by the 1992 Petersberg Declaration were: “humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks, and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking”. See Western European Union, *Petersberg Declaration made by the WEU Council of Ministers*, Bonn, 19 June 1992, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/16938094-bb79-41ff-951c-f6c7aae8a97a/publishable_en.pdf (Accessed on 20.09.2025).

³⁴ Egmont Institute, *The coordination problem in European defence planning*, 10 November 2021, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/the-coordination-problem-in-european-defence-planning/> (Accessed on 12.07.2025).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Donbass conflict).³⁶

In the years following the Lisbon Treaty, it became increasingly evident that one reason behind the EU's slow progress in defence initiatives under the Common Security and Defence Policy was its worsening economic situation. This began with the European sovereign debt crisis (2009–2018) and continued through the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), both of which strained resources and limited political momentum for deeper defence integration. Here's the chart illustrating the GDP growth comparison between the European Union, the United States, and China from 2000 to 2023, based on IMF data:³⁷



Adding to this broader trend, it's essential to recognise that the European Union comprises 27 diverse Member States. At the same time, the United States and China are unified, dominant forces in the global economy. Their influence is felt more strongly than that of the EU, both economically and militarily. These comparisons do not even account for global military strength rankings, where the US and China lead. The highest-ranked EU Member State is France, placed 8th globally.

Thus, while the EU remains a significant economic power, it is increasingly losing ground – and militarily, it lacks a unified identity. The idea of a European military force is still far from reality. Brexit further weakened the EU's defence potential, as the United Kingdom – ranked 6th globally in military strength – was

³⁶ Dacian Duna, Raul-Ciprian Dăncuță, *Cooperarea structurată permanentă – un mic pas spre integrarea politico-militară europeană* [Permanent Structured Cooperation – a Small Step towards European political-military integration], în "Gândirea militară românească", serie nouă, anul XXX, 2019, no. 2, p. 97.

³⁷ International Monetary Fund, *GDP based on PPP, share of world, 2025*, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/EU/CHN/USA> (Accessed on 29.07.2025). Note that PPP is the abbreviation for Purchasing Power Parity.

the only other European country besides France with substantial global military influence.

A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence

The Strategic Compass, adopted in 2022, marked a turning point in the EU's approach to defence, calling for a more assertive Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It opens by acknowledging the return of geopolitics to Europe's agenda: "The return of war in Europe, with Russia's unjustified and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, as well as major geopolitical shifts, are challenging our ability to promote our vision and defend our interests."³⁸

The Compass deserves credit for acknowledging that the global landscape has changed, and not for the better. It recognises the need to adapt the European Union to these new realities and advocates for a broad reform of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This includes a range of bureaucratic tools, each at different stages of development. However, the document falls short in addressing a critical issue: the political will of Member States. As the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, the real challenge is urgency. And in that regard, the EU - at least in its current structure - is not equipped to respond swiftly or decisively.

Expressions like "sea change in EU security and defence", "a quantum leap forward" or "equip ourselves with the mindset" show the predilection of EU institutions for smart rhetoric specific to the post-modern world, but this is only a war-time speech for times of utter crisis. The following remark made by Mr Borrell is suggestive: "Europeans will continue to favour dialogue over confrontation; diplomacy over force; multilateralism over unilateralism. But it is clear that if you want dialogue, diplomacy and multilateralism to succeed, you need to put power behind it. That is the point of 'learning to speak the language of power'."³⁹ It invokes the importance of "awareness" and "agreement" as part of the "process of strategic convergence". These are words that describe what the Compass does not use as direct references but implies indirectly: security and strategic culture.⁴⁰

³⁸ European External Action Service, *The Strategic Compass of the European Union – Introduction*, https://www.strategic-compass-european-union.com/0_Introduction_Strategic_Compass.html (Accessed on 19.09.2025).

³⁹ European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass to Make Europe a Security Provider*, Foreword by HR/VP Josep Borrell, from *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf (Accessed on 19.09.2025).

⁴⁰ Dacian Duna, *Ruling an unruly world: A critical assessment of the European Union's*

However, the language of the Compass shows the persistence of normative, consensus-driven framing rather than a decisive break toward hard-power readiness. Phrases such as “complementarity with NATO,” “upholding multilateralism,” and “inclusive partnerships” reflect the EU’s ongoing hesitation to embrace unilateral or coercive measures fully. Even the Rapid Deployment Capacity is framed more as a symbol of political resolve than as a warfighting capability ready for high-intensity conflict.

While the Strategic Compass succeeds in updating the EU’s strategic language to reflect the fast-changing realities of the 2020s, it also highlights a familiar weakness: Europe’s delayed response to geopolitical crises. Notably, President Putin did not wait for the EU to finalise its Compass before launching his brutal war against Ukraine. This disconnect led some observers to label the document as *brand new, yet already obsolete*.

Reading the Compass leaves a mixed impression. On the one hand, it offers a sound analysis of the strategic environment and includes motivational rhetoric. On the other hand, it feels hastily assembled, blending old and new ideas without convincingly demonstrating that the EU is prepared to move beyond diplomatic protest. The repeated emphasis on “we should” reflects the EU’s long-standing challenge: implementation.⁴¹

The Strategic Compass rightly acknowledges that the world has changed, though not in the way Europe had hoped. It recognises the need for the EU to adapt and proposes broad reforms to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), involving various bureaucratic instruments at different stages of development. However, it fails to confront a key issue: the political will of Member States.

As the war in Ukraine has shown, the real challenge is urgency. And in that regard, the EU, in its current form, struggles to respond effectively. While the Compass updates the EU’s strategic language to reflect the fast-paced changes of the 2020s, it also highlights Europe’s tendency to lag in reacting to geopolitical crises. President Putin did not wait for the EU to finalise its strategy before launching his invasion - prompting some analysts to call the document *new, yet already obsolete*.

The document leaves a mixed impression. On the one hand, it offers a coherent analysis of the strategic environment and includes motivational rhetoric. On the other hand, it feels rushed and uneven, blending old and new ideas without convincingly showing that the EU is ready to move beyond symbolic protest. The

Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, in “Crisia”, Supliment, 2022, no. 2, p. 21-22.

⁴¹ Dacian Duna, *Ruling an unruly world: ...*, p. 22.

repeated use of “we should” underscores the EU’s enduring problem: implementation.

The Re-Arm Europe Project/ Readiness 2030

Since Ursula von der Leyen assumed the leadership of the European Commission in 2019, incremental changes in the institutional design of the European Union have aimed to make the Commission a geopolitical player.⁴²

The European Commission tried to assume a role that was initially taken away from it by the Lisbon Treaty – the right to initiative in the CFSP-CSDP matters. Usually, the Commission still held an ace up its sleeve: the High Representative (HR) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is double-hatted, also serving as Vice-President of the European Commission.

Von der Leyen’s ambitions of leading a geopolitical commission have materialised due to the need for leadership through a series of crises, which included the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ursula von der Leyen has assumed this role when very few European leaders did. Using initiatives connected to trade and industrial policy⁴³, the European Commission has managed to become the most visible European institution.

Another key factor that enabled the emergence of the “Geopolitical Commission” was the set of financial instruments it manages. A pivotal development came in 2017 with the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF), proposed by the Juncker Commission in 2016. The EDF became essential for operationalising Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), allowing the European Commission to take on a more central role in defence financing.

By co-financing PESCO projects, the EDF reduces the financial burden on individual Member States and incentivises collaboration within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework.⁴⁴ This financial leverage has allowed the Commission to act as a driver of defence integration, even in areas where the Treaties limit its formal powers. In effect, the EDF has become a strategic tool for shaping defence policy from behind the scenes, reinforcing the Commission’s

⁴² Calle Håkansson, *Von der Leyen’s Geopolitical Commission: Vindicated by Events?*, in “European Policy Analysis”, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, March 2024, https://sieps.se/media/2uapy21y/2024_7epa.pdf (Accessed on 17.02.2025).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ European Defence Agency, *Permanent Structured Cooperation*, [https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/permanent-structured-cooperation-\(PESCO\)#:~:text=PESCO%20projects%20are%20eligible%20for,as%20an%20incentive%20for%20cooperation](https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/permanent-structured-cooperation-(PESCO)#:~:text=PESCO%20projects%20are%20eligible%20for,as%20an%20incentive%20for%20cooperation) (Accessed on 11.03.2025).

geopolitical ambitions.

On the European Commission's website, one can find the slogan *A Stronger Europe in the World*, which subtly echoes the EU's first security strategy - the Solana Strategy of 2003, originally titled *A Secure Europe in a Better World*. Notably, the word "better" is omitted, signalling a shift from idealistic aspirations to a more pragmatic tone.

By branding itself as a "Geopolitical Commission," the European Commission positions the EU as a global actor committed to defending freedom, democracy, and the rules-based international order.⁴⁵ This rhetorical shift reflects the EU's growing awareness of the need to assert itself in an increasingly competitive and fragmented global landscape, even if its institutional tools and political cohesion still lag behind its ambitions. The European Commission outlines its global ambitions under the banner *A Stronger Europe in the World*, listing seven key objectives:

1. Standing with Ukraine for as long as necessary,
2. Supporting the Western Balkans through a new growth plan,
3. Promoting global solidarity,
4. Connecting the world via the Global Gateway initiative,
5. Fostering alliances to combat climate change,
6. Strengthening bilateral relations, and
7. Advancing trade.

While these goals reflect the EU's broad international engagement, not all are explicitly geopolitical in nature. Crucial global concerns – such as nuclear proliferation, strategic deterrence, or military readiness – are notably absent from this list. These issues are likely monitored by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP), but they remain subject to differing interpretations and priorities among Member States. This fragmentation continues to limit the EU's ability to act cohesively on hard-security matters.

Re-Arm Europe, now rebranded as Readiness 2030, is an ambitious investment initiative launched by the von der Leyen Commission, aiming to elevate European collective defence spending to unprecedented levels. Aligned with the goals of the Strategic Compass (2022), the plan seeks to rebuild Europe's military-industrial base, enhance Member States' defence capabilities, and foster strategic autonomy.

⁴⁵ EU Commission, *A Stronger Europe in the World*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/story-von-der-leyen-commission/stronger-europe-world_en (Accessed on 11.03.2025).

The plan is expected to unlock nearly €800 billion in defence-related funding over the coming years, including €150 billion earmarked for the *Security Action for Europe (SAFE)* - a “loans-for-arms” program designed to support Member States in acquiring military equipment.⁴⁶ Notably, the EU will redirect existing funds, including cohesion funds, toward defence investments, and allow Member States greater flexibility under the Stability and Growth Pact to meet NATO’s defence spending target of 2% of GDP.⁴⁷

However, this ambitious financial strategy faces several risks. One major challenge is the uneven absorption capacity among Member States. Even with instruments like the NextGenerationEU recovery fund, disparities persist in how effectively countries utilise EU funding. In contrast, global rivals such as Russia, China, and the United States, with centralised defence policies, do not face such fragmentation when modernising their armed forces.

There is also a risk of widening the gap between core EU powers—especially Germany and France—and the rest of the Union. These stronger economies are better positioned to meet funding criteria and absorb resources, potentially leaving weaker Member States, particularly those bordering Ukraine, further behind. Economic hardship and existing constraints, such as participation in the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP), may prevent these countries from accessing loans or investing adequately in defence, undermining the EU’s goal of cohesive and balanced strategic development.

CONCLUSIONS

The expression “*Uncle Sam does the best he can*” could be adapted to describe the current state of the European Union. As one of the last standing champions of the Liberal International Order, the EU is striving to navigate the turbulent waters of 21st-century geopolitics – a world increasingly shaped by power politics, where the interests of major global players often outweigh cooperation and globalisation.

⁴⁶ European Commission, *Press statement by President von der Leyen on the defence package*, March 4, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sv/statement_25_673 (Accessed on 30.05.2025).

⁴⁷ This is a target set by NATO members since 2014, even though none have ever met it. In June 2025, NATO leaders agreed to raise the target for core defence spending to 3.5% of GDP.

Leadership within the EU has been taken up by the European Commission, which, under Ursula von der Leyen's presidency, has rebranded itself as a "*Geopolitical Commission*." However, the EU institutions are constrained mainly by the limits of the Treaties. They are doing what they can – or more precisely, what they know how to do – within a framework designed for consensus and bureaucratic management, not for rapid strategic action.

The Commission operates much like a large corporation, adept at creating administrative structures to manage European affairs. While corporate-style governance may seem efficient in theory, it struggles under the unpredictable conditions of global politics. Bureaucracies, such as the EU, perform best in stable environments. Their greatest fear is uncertainty. As such, European institutions tend to respond to crises by seeking to build momentum through structured processes, often invoking threats such as terrorism or aggression from powers like Russia to push Member States toward consensus.

This approach can yield limited success, especially within the CFSP-CSDP framework during crises. Momentum for action may come from the High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP), the European External Action Service, or the European Commission itself. Yet, once the immediate crisis subsides, Member States often reassert their sovereignty, slowing or reversing progress toward deeper integration.

The minimal compromises achieved within the CFSP-CSDP framework have not enabled the EU to transcend its identity as a civilian power and emerge as a true geopolitical actor. Moreover, the EU continues to struggle with internal imbalances – between the North and the South, and the East and the West. Power remains concentrated in the North, with Germany at the helm and Poland increasingly joining the ranks of influential European nations. Meanwhile, the Southern and especially South-Eastern flanks remain underdeveloped and vulnerable, forming what Winston Churchill once called Europe's "underbelly."

This imbalance is not only economic but strategic. The EU's ability to project power and respond to crises is unevenly distributed, which undermines its credibility as a unified actor on the global stage. The Re-Arm Europe initiative and the Strategic Compass represent essential steps toward building a more capable and responsive EU. Still, they remain hindered by fragmented political will, uneven resource absorption, and a lack of a shared strategic culture.

The time for conferences and roundtables has passed. If the EU wishes to join the ranks of global strategic players – alongside the United States, China, Russia, India, and others – it must move beyond rhetorical commitments and

cooperative frameworks. The path forward requires real defence integration, political will, and a readiness to act decisively in a world that no longer waits for consensus.

Furthermore, the EU must confront the reality that its current institutional design is not suited for high-intensity geopolitical competition. It must evolve from a reactive, bureaucratic entity into a proactive strategic actor. This transformation will require not only institutional reform but also a cultural shift, one that embraces strategic urgency, operational readiness, and a willingness to lead rather than follow.

In short, the EU's geopolitical awakening must move from rhetoric to reality. Without this shift, Europe risks remaining a powerful economic bloc with limited strategic influence – an actor that speaks the language of power but lacks the means to enforce it.

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