

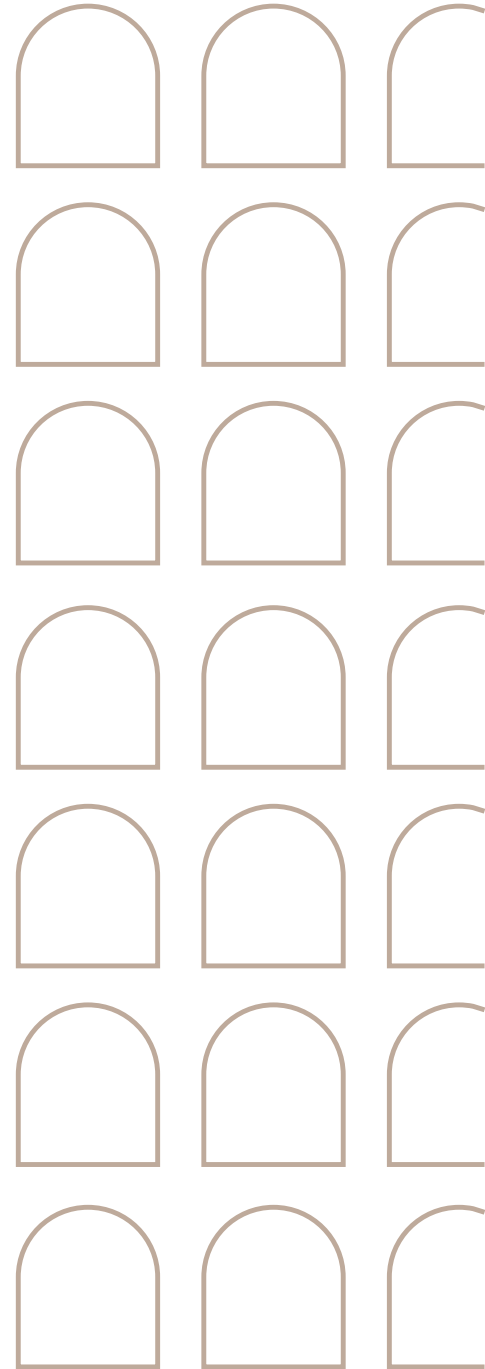
STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## BEYOND GEOPOLITICAL EUROPE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seismic shifts, conflicts and instability have spurred a revival of the geopolitical discourse in international affairs. Russia's attack on Ukraine has exacerbated this development, raising the stakes for the EU to translate its rhetoric on 'geopolitical Europe' into action. The EU took some important steps and mobilised significant means to counter the aggression. However, it is questionable that the geopolitical paradigm, which focuses on power politics and spheres of influence, suits the EU's own identity, its cumbersome decision-making process and its lack of hard power. The EU has recognised that it needs to face new threats and challenges and that doing so requires a wider toolbox, including coercive instruments. But this does not mean endorsing a geopolitical mindset. A more strategic Europe would build on its experience and invest in its strengths, to create the conditions for dialogue and stability at the continental and global levels. Despite its current limitations, the recently established European Political Community can become a useful laboratory to test new forms of governance and a platform for the EU to affirm shared principles of co-existence in a competitive and contested world.

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## 1. THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

From cabinet meetings to security councils, from boardrooms to teaching classes, geopolitics has made a forceful return to the language of foreign relations. In large part, this is a reaction to momentous seismic shifts – be they in Ukraine, Taiwan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kosovo or in relation to the Israel-Hamas conflict – as much as a pondered reflection on the complexities of planetary politics. But discourse matters: it influences and often determines the way we think, frame and act, as citizens, as well as policy makers.

The geopolitical discourse underscores a specific conception and dynamic of power, one that has been enacted upon by actors such as Russia or Iran in adversarial, binary, often opportunistic and sometimes brutal ways. From a narrower remit, that understood geopolitics as the determinant of power and influence over a salient geographical space, the concept has assumed ever wider connotations. It has come to encompass more prominently demographic if not ethnological considerations about where communities and nations belong in relation to their geography; it has resumed nineteenth-century elaborations of sovereignty and empire; and it has sometimes become the shorthand for the justification of spheres of influence in the phase of global instability currently rocking international politics. Not incidentally, some of the world powers often propounding the use of geopolitics also extoll it in connection to the virtues of a multipolar world.

Europe is not immune to the return of geopolitics; in fact, it could be referred to as one of the actors that has caught up with it more significantly in recent years. At the same time, Europe is also on the receiving end of it: geopolitics was brought to Europe

and Europe found itself in the position of having to respond. The new geopolitical framing and reality are proving more complex and less propitious for the realisation of the goal of a Europe that speaks and acts effectively in world affairs.

## 2. RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AND EUROPE'S GEOPOLITICAL TURN

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has lent new momentum to the idea of 'geopolitical Europe' and placed it at the center of discussions among policy makers and expert circles. The shock provoked by Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered a rapid and coordinated response by EU institutions and member states, laying the ground for Europe's newfound geopolitical confidence. Inspired by political unity and determination in the face of Russia's invasion, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell was quick to welcome "[the belated birth of a geopolitical Europe](#)".

The EU's geopolitical rhetoric, however, predates Russia's war against Ukraine. Already in 2019, at the outset of her mandate, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen set out to lead a '[geopolitical Commission](#)'. Soon after, Borrell stressed the urgency for Europe to learn "[to speak the language of power](#)." These statements, among other policy documents, reflect heightened awareness of the necessity to change the EU's approach to mounting international challenges and of its ambition to confront them.

Russia's war against Ukraine has put to the test the EU's bold new narrative, and raised stakes for the EU to translate its rhetoric into concrete actions, bringing urgency and gravity to its pledges. The war compelled the EU to break some of its long-standing

and deep-seated taboos. For one, the Union granted Ukraine the status of a candidate for accession. This move was clearly inspired by geopolitical considerations, by way of opposing Russia's aggression and recognising security interdependence between Ukraine and the rest of Europe. For another, the EU and its member states have started to provide substantial military support to Ukraine, including heavy equipment and the launch of a military assistance mission to train Ukrainian soldiers. In short, the war has demonstrated that Europeans have managed to mobilise significant resources in response to Russia's aggression. Does that make of Europe a geopolitical actor in its own right? And is the geopolitical frame suitable to think of Europe's power and of the EU's role in the world?

Ubiquitous references to geopolitical Europe call for closer scrutiny of what 'geopolitics' is, of what the EU means by using the 'geopolitical' qualification, and of whether it is actually meaningful, and suitable, to apply this concept to the EU. At its core, geopolitics is the discipline that connects geography and power. It assesses how geography – territory, borders, natural resources, transport routes – affects international relations, and how state powers use geographic factors in their mutual competition, whether through peaceful means or through force. This original definition has been expanded in the public debate to become a synonym of power politics – a zero-sum approach to international relations where major powers compete over territory and communities, and concerns over survival prevail over all others.

This is, however, not the way in which Europe, which is here for simplicity used interchangeably with the EU, its political, economic elites and member states, appear to understand geopolitics. In this narrative,

geopolitics seems broadly referring to the need to give more space to strategic considerations in shaping what are at its core technocratic policies. The choice of wording '[geopolitical awakening](#)' in official discourses and documents is reminiscent of the need for Europe to adjust to a new context. In the words of Borrell: "[We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be](#)".

According to this narrative, Europe would seek to [shape events rather than be merely driven by them](#), as demonstrated by emergencies from the euro crisis to the migration crisis, from Brexit to the Covid and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This call was accompanied by the recognition of the need for Europe to complement its capacity of attraction with instruments of coercion in order to maximise its influence. The return of large scale war in Europe required the EU and its members to take more responsibility for their own security. As a result, geopolitical Europe effectively amounts to a recognition of the surge of power competition, and of coercive power, in international affairs, and of the need for the EU to cope with that. Yet, most 'geopolitical' statements by EU leaders are accompanied by declarations of commitment to cooperation and multilateralism, which evoke a more value-driven agenda. The result appears confusing, when not misleading. Europe was dragged to the terrain of power politics and is compelled to stay in it, but it does not seem to be equipped or adamant to pursue it: a cognitive dissonance of sorts, whose pitfalls appear to be dire.

The shortcomings of this approach are multiple. Hans Kundnani argues that [the nature of Europe's geopolitical actorness is contested, its origins are problematic and its meanings confusing](#). In addition to the conceptual imperfections, the narrative of a

geopolitical Europe cannot dissimulate a number of [discrepancies between the EU's ambitions and its actions](#), its ends and means, as stressed by Richard Youngs. Transforming the EU into a geopolitical actor would require departing from its self-conception as a normative power. Since its beginnings, the European Union has not only distanced itself from power politics, but also asserted this feature as one of its main strengths – a normative power equipped with civilian and regulatory means to shape a rules-based international order. The geopolitical framing, with its adversarial and binary underpinnings, seem ill-suited to further this narrative.

On a political level, the affirmation of the newly proclaimed geopolitical role would require unity and determination on the part of the EU member states. Narrowing their differences and moving towards a common strategic culture and a converging worldview would be essential prerequisites of a geopolitical Europe. The EU should acquire the necessary instruments and pool together its resources, including defence capabilities, to an extent that EU member states have so far rejected. The recent conflict in Nagorno Karabakh and the outbreak of violence in Northern Kosovo have once again proved how far the EU is from playing a decisive role to prevent, manage or settle security crises in Europe itself. The new, acute phase of the Israel-Hamas conflict has also exposed divisions among EU member states and within EU institutions, while the influence of Europeans on the evolution of this conflict is limited.

### **3. BEYOND GEOPOLITICS: A DIFFERENT WAY FORWARD FOR STRATEGIC EUROPE**

If Europe is to get out of the geopolitical corner it painted itself in, something radical needs to happen in its conception and

practice of power. Looking back at the EU's experience in Eastern Europe before Russia's aggression against Ukraine can offer important lessons for the future. In the run-up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, short-term economic interests compounded energy dependencies with revisionist Russia. Self-imposed red lines on its own engagement with Eastern Europe did not prevent Russia's geopolitical ambitions either. The past two decades bear witness to the fact that transformative foreign policy through enlargement, while unique and valuable, has not been an adequate answer to the immediate security challenges confronting the continent. Democracy-building in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries remains imperative, but insufficient in the face of Russia's neo-imperial instincts. Today few would question that Europe should become more resilient, strategically-minded and equipped with the necessary capabilities and resources to ensure its security and to extend it to the continent.

This finding does not mean, however, that the EU should endorse a geopolitical mindset or engage in power politics. Nor does it compel the EU to neglect its normative *raison d'être* and to compromise its identity, quite the opposite. Regaining strategic thinking and acting accordingly can and should derive from the EU's own experience. The EU can draw lessons from its prior reliance on civilian instruments such as far-reaching association agreements with close partners and maximise the added value of its transformative approach by making it part of a wider strategic toolkit and bringing it in line with its broader agenda. Achieving that would also enhance the credibility and the legitimacy of the EU in shaping broader frameworks for dialogue and cooperation on shared challenges on the global stage. Peaceful and consent-based relations on the continent are an



absolute prerequisite for spreading a vision of peace and stability worldwide.

From this standpoint, a strategic definition of Europe must cover a broader scope than that of the EU and encompass the entire continent, including the countries that are not members of the Union and NATO. In this context, the creation of the European Political Community (EPC) is an important addition to Europe's governance architecture to emancipate the continent from the imprint of a troubled and violent history and, as France's President Macron put it, "[build lasting peace in Europe.](#)" The EPC came into existence in September 2022 as part of Europe's political response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Its principal value has been symbolic; it has paraded a strong message of European unity in condemning the aggressor and supporting the victim. Its success has been measured by the attendance of up to 50 European leaders and the number of bilateral exchanges held on the margins. Flexibility, as well as the informal and non-hierarchical nature of the framework, have been presented as the main strengths of the EPC. All the European countries attending the summits participate on an equal footing, irrespective of their membership of the EU and NATO.

What the powerful images of several heads of states and governments gathering together cannot conceal, however, is their differences in terms of democratic credentials, security concerns and foreign policy priorities. Not all of them share the EU's worldview nor align with its positions, such as concerning the adoption of sanctions against Russia. This reality, however, points to the potential role that the EPC can play to enhance strategic convergence around common agendas by encouraging socialisation, reinforcing the practice of consultation and dialogue and helping shape a common European

strategic culture. Despite the recent failure of European crisis diplomacy in preventing renewed conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, the EPC provides a potentially useful and neutral venue for political crisis management given its wide membership.

On a broader level, European leaders should be more vocal in stressing that in the current international juncture of competition and confrontation, universal principles of consent, human dignity, mutual recognition in international relations do not necessarily require a geopolitical approach. Forums like the EPC can provide a platform to foster Europe's role in promoting these principles. Defiance in the face of military aggression and relevance in the face of institutional inertia represent the preconditions to play this role. Europe's capacity should include an ability to do things like mediating conflicts, protecting critical infrastructure, manage migration in a more humane manner, expand digital connectivity as a way to reimagine European citizenship. Europeans must do so mindful of the moral bias and double-standards that have ever so often tainted their posturing. They should be clearer, more transparent, and when necessary tougher and even nastier on what Europe cannot deliver. Whether Europe is geopolitical or not is beside the point, which is ultimately to plant and nurture the kernel of Europe's planetary aspirations.

The Florence School of Transnational Governance (STG) delivers teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State. Based within the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, the School brings the worlds of academia and policy-making together in an effort to navigate a context, both inside and outside Europe, where policy-making increasingly transcends national borders.

The School offers Executive Training Seminars for experienced professionals and a Policy Leaders Fellowship for early- and mid-career innovators. The School also hosts expert Policy Dialogues and distinguished lectures from transnational leaders (to include the STG's Leaders Beyond the State series which recorded the experiences of former European Institution presidents, and the Giorgio La Pira Lecture series which focuses on building bridges between Africa and Europe). In September 2020, the School launched its Master-of-Arts in Transnational Governance (MTnG), which will educate and train a new breed of policy leader able to navigate the unprecedented issues our world will face during the next decade and beyond.

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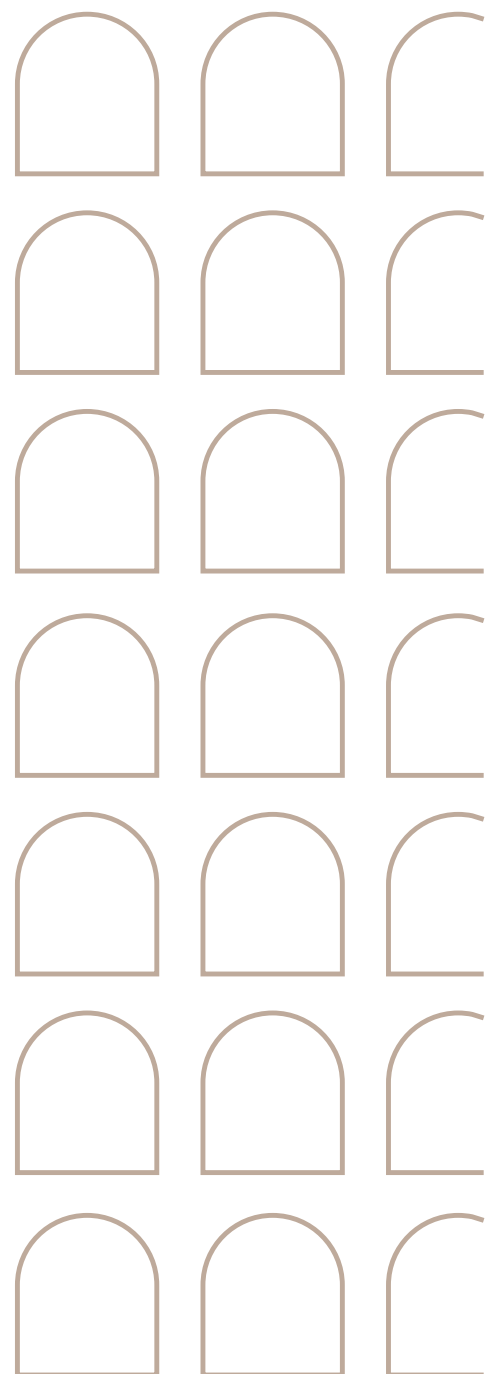
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