

EUROPEAN UNION'S GEOPOLITICAL POWER ASPIRATIONS

MAHMOUD JAVADI
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

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Introduction

'The return of geopolitics' has become a commonly used phrase since the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in February 2014. However, as Walter Russell Mead notes in his essay for Foreign Affairs magazine, this was not the only event that contributed to this trend. Mead [states](#): 'Whether it is Russian forces seizing Crimea, China making aggressive claims in its coastal waters, Japan responding with an increasingly assertive strategy of its own, or Iran trying to use its alliances with Syria and Hezbollah to dominate the Middle East, old-fashioned power plays are back in international relations'. Since Mead's essay, as he outlines, geopolitical rivalry has once again taken center stage in world affairs. Established powers, middle powers, and emerging powers all seek to expand their spheres of influence while haphazardly avoiding provocation of their competitors, whether peers or non-peers. However, Russia's 20th-century-style war in Ukraine in February 2022 has convinced the West that a systemic rivalry is indeed unfolding.

This geopolitical rivalry has given rise to seismic internal and external crises for the European Union (EU) and its Member States. As per the renowned [statement](#) by EU founding father Jean Monnet, 'Europe would be built through crises', Russia's brutal aggression war in Ukraine in February 2022 marked the start of what High Representative Josep Borrell has described as '[the awakening of geopolitical Europe](#)'. The emergence of geopolitical Europe has been long-awaited, and Russia's attack on Ukraine has acted as a wake-up call for the EU to establish itself as a formidable geopolitical power.

However, despite making progress in the geopolitical arena, such as with the Ukraine war and other major theaters, the EU is still only a *geopolitical actor* and has a long way to go before it can claim the title of a *geopolitical power*. Several factors support this assertion. While documents like the [A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy](#) and [Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#) demonstrate the EU's renewed collective commitments to the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy, the EU's internal dynamics hinder its ability to develop unified foreign, defense, and security policies for all Member States. Additionally, the EU struggles with quick and efficient decision-making on high politics. It is no exaggeration to say that without significant structural and treaty reforms, and massive financial and non-financial investments/procurements, among other vital issues, the aspirations of becoming a geopolitical power are merely a pipe dream. Nonetheless, the EU can leverage its geopolitical actorness to develop the capability to become a geopolitical power in the long run by reconceptualising (1) European strategic autonomy and (2) the global balance of power.

European Strategic Autonomy Revisited

The concept of European strategic autonomy lacks a clear definition and is not universally embraced by EU Member States. For the latter, some Eastern European countries, for instance, perceive the Atlantic alliance as [crucial to their survival](#), even in the era of Donald Trump, and are unwilling to compromise this alliance. To address concerns that European strategic autonomy could be seen as protectionist or disengaging, the EU needs to strike a balance between autonomy and interdependence.

A key component of this balance is developing symmetric partnerships with other states, blocs, and regions (hereinafter 'target actors') worldwide. These partnerships could help dispel concerns about strategic autonomy as a policy of self-sufficiency and isolationism. As Pohl [stated](#), 'if understood as anti-protectionism measures, it should be clear that European strategic autonomy is not only compatible with, but may be strengthened by, symmetric partnership' with target actors to the extent that the EU and target actors, alike, can equally reap the benefits of the transactional-free partnerships.

As symmetric partnership is a key factor in promoting interdependence and reinforcing European strategic autonomy, it is important to consider a caveat. In a world where power distribution and global order are in transition, and where multilateral rules are sometimes replaced by unilateralism, the EU must approach its partnerships with a mindset of '[principled pragmatism](#)' if it wants to advance its geopolitical power status. The EU should acknowledge the world as it is, rather than how it wishes it to be, while remaining flexible on its fundamental principles. In other words, as an aspiring geopolitical power, the EU should seek to partner with both first- and second-tier states and work on projects driven primarily by legitimate interests rather than *elusive* values. It is worth noting that principled pragmatism should not be seen as a compromise on European values, but rather as a means of achieving a stronger geopolitical EU in a world where power politics play a central role.

Additionally, symmetric partnerships offer two crucial benefits for the EU, which is striving to become a significant geopolitical power. Firstly, such partnerships provide the EU with intriguing options to minimize the hedging behavior of its target actors, thereby securing their allegiance to the EU.

Secondly, establishing symmetric partnerships with various actors enables the EU to delicately counterbalance the influences of its revisionist competitors (i.e., China and Russia) in the target actors' regions. To realise these long-term dividends, the EU must exhibit innovation and agility. A *covert balancing* strategy presents a creative approach for the EU to achieve these objectives.

EU Covert Balancing Strategy

There are only a few geopolitical powers that have developed strategies to check, control, and contain the ambitions of their rival great powers around the globe. These powers seek to employ alliances and partnerships with target actors to balance against competing great powers. However, these target actors are not without agency. They possess the ability to influence balancing strategies; their evolving preferences and priorities can also play a significant role in shaping and driving these strategies, either enabling or constraining them.

Given the agency of target actors, who are the primary targets of balancing and partnership behaviors, the EU and its Member States must explore innovative responses to address their hedging and minimise the risk of their alignment with revisionist assertive powers such as China and Russia. To this end, the EU could potentially resort to covert balancing to preserve its current great power status and lay the ground for achieving geopolitical power capability in the future.

Overt balancing refers to the traditional definition of external balancing, which involves forming or reinforcing alliances to counteract the threat posed by another state or group of states.

In contrast, [covert balancing](#) involves a great power like the EU disguising its collaboration with target actors, creating a latent capacity to generate new partnerships for the Union while balancing the EU's peer and non-peer competitors and circumventing target actors' possible hedging strategy.

To sustain European strategic autonomy, symmetric partnerships led by the EU should offer mutual benefits to all parties involved. However, it is also important to indirectly use these partnerships to counter the influence of great power rivals, such as China and Russia, in the target actors. The design and framework of these partnerships should however not be overtly focused on curbing the influence of these competing revisionist powers on the target actors.

Covert balancing refers to situations in which the EU, as an established great power and aspiring geopolitical power, strengthens its relationships with specific target actors to address challenges or issues that may not appear to be related to geopolitical balancing. For instance, the EU may focus on non-traditional security challenges or countering the threats posed by state or non-state actors. However, these relationships can also be leveraged to balance against the EU's revisionist peer and non-peer competitors.

Although the EU's reconceptualisation of European strategic autonomy and its balancing strategies to attain a geopolitical power status require collective resolve, long-term vision, and foresight planning, the EU has the advantage of time on its side. With Spain as the rotating president in the second half of 2023, the EU can take significant steps to move away from mere geopolitical actorness and towards a geopolitical power status.

A Policy Recommendation for the EU (and Spain)

The EU under the presidency of [Spain aims](#) to reinvigorate strategic autonomy in the second half of 2023. The new president also plans to convene several high-level conferences, including the [European High-Level Conference](#), the Summit between the 27 EU heads of state and government, and the 33 leaders of the Community of States of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC), as well as the [Euro-Mediterranean Summit](#) and high-level meetings between EU and African leaders. With its extensive investment and expertise in foresight planning, Spain can put forth foresight proposals concerning EU's symmetric partnership and covert balancing across the world.

The [State of the Global Climate 2021](#) by the World Meteorological Organization on the State of the Climate in Latin America and the Caribbean warns that 'worsening climate change and the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have not only impacted the biodiversity of the region, but have also stalled decades of progress against poverty, food insecurity and the reduction of inequality in the region'. These repercussions are likely to directly affect the wellbeing of Latin American citizens and may also impact the political stability of the region's states in the medium to long term.

Given the EU's notable capabilities and leadership in addressing ecological insecurity, the EU has the unique ability to offer Latin American states a revitalised partnership focused on enabling and empowering regional states to mitigate such insecurity, something that revisionist powers like China and Russia cannot.

By initiating a symmetric partnership through covert balancing with the states in Latin America, the EU can not only primarily dissuade the region from further aligning with the EU's great power rivals in Latin America –where those rivals enjoy deep-rooted footprints– but also establish a type of effective and beneficial interdependence with the CELAC states that can inherently offset the revisionist rivals' influence in the long term. Furthermore, this approach would enhance the EU's global image and reinforce the Union's role as a global security provider far beyond its borders.

An analogous European approach could be implemented in other regions. It is important to emphasize that the EU's partnership with target actors primarily situated in the Global South should not be restricted to exporting a particular way of life, promoting specific values, providing aid, and generating jobs solely for European citizens. Nor should it be explicitly aimed at countering the influence of the EU's revisionist competitors. These are issues that the EU's much-hyped [Global Gateway](#) fails to adequately address. Despite criticism of its feasibility, finances, and investment types, the Global Gateway overtly aims to surpass China's Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, [characterises](#) the Global Gateway as a values-based and geopolitical project.

To achieve a balance between autonomy and interdependence while pursuing its geopolitical power ambitions, the EU must establish more symmetrical partnerships. However, in order to maintain this balance and counter its revisionist competitors, the Union must also engage in covert balancing. The success of this strategy will depend on the EU's ability to consider the agency of the target actors. If the EU's only goal is to outcompete China, Russia, and a few other rivals, these actors may perceive the EU's offers for partnership and collaboration differently and thus may hedge accordingly.

Since Spain is not a member of globally pivotal groupings like the G7 and G20, its EU presidency presents a unique opportunity for Madrid to exhibit its foresight leadership and finetune the Union's direction in global politics and grand projects such as Global Gateway. To get the ball rolling for the EU's geopolitical powerness, Spain can enable the Union to forge new symmetric partnerships and enhance the existing ones guided by covert balancing.

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Coordinators: Eva Ribera and Larisa Spahic (TEPSA).

Mahmoud Javadi is a Masters student at European University Institute and winner of the TEPSA Student Contest 2023: "The future of Europe in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine".

