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European Union as a Geopolitical Actor: Aspirations towards an Empire or Fall into Insignificance

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Abstract

This essay interrogates the European Union's contested status as a geopolitical actor, tracing the tension between its founding self-conception as a "normative power" and its increasingly evident geopolitical actorness across internal and external domains. It examines three interlocking questions: first, the extent to which EU foreign policy and its professed values remain entangled with the imperial and colonial legacies of a minority of member states, producing a normative cleavage between Western and Central/Eastern Europe; second, whether soft power should be understood as an instrument of values or as a value in itself; and third, how the war in Ukraine has cast the EU in the role of "global conscience" while exposing the limits of that role as a substitute for effective foreign policy. Drawing on the geopolitical typology developed by Walters (2004) and Browning and Joenniemi (2008), the Westphalian, Imperial, and Neo-Medieval models, the essay argues that while the EU's normative rhetoric remains Westphalian in aspiration, its actual practice increasingly conforms to the Imperial model of a core radiating diminishing influence toward its peripheries, leaving the polycentric Neo-Medieval alternative largely undesirable.

Keywords: European Union; NATO; geopolitics; EU foreign policy



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Approaching the European Union (EU) as a geopolitical actor has been, to some extent, avoided at both the academic and, even more so, the political level in Europe. Eventually, however, questions about whether the EU is a geopolitical entity, how its geopoliticality is exercised, and what the consequences of the geopolitical dimensions of European integration are for the EU itself and its external environment seem inevitable. The European project was originally created to overcome geopolitics (Parkes, 2020), seeking to play the role of a "normative power", promoting a rule-based international order and a set of values centered on human rights. However, the EU quickly came to be perceived as a geopolitical actor, focusing on three key issues: security considerations, the promotion and projection of "European values," and regional cooperation (Scott, 2011). This actorness has been visible in both the internal and external dimensions of EU geopolitics (Jańczak, 2017). The internal dimension can be understood as "the consolidation of an economic, social, and political European space, partly through the 'flexible' construction of Europe within a context of a composite polity." Meanwhile, the external dimension manifests, for example, in initiatives such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), where "the EU is attempting to 'project' its identity and, in doing so, promote a partial 'Europeanisation' of societies outside its borders" (Scott, 2011). However, the normative elements of the EU's geopolitics are contested, among others, because there has never been a deep internal debate within the EU regarding the nature of norms and values among its diverse regions.

In the subsequent sections of this essay, three main issues will be examined from the perspective of the argument presented above.

First, what are the enduring legacies of European empires in formulating EU foreign policy? To what extent are current EU values perceived as rooted in imperial and colonial histories?

The issue of the legacies of European empires in shaping EU foreign policy must be understood within the context of the diverse histories of different parts of the continent, as well as the present imbalances of power within the Union. To some extent, this legacy reflects the dominance of Western Europe—comprising the large states with significant historical and contemporary ambitions located on the left side of Europe's map—in crafting narratives about the interpretation of the continent's historical and political processes. When Europe is viewed from a global perspective, it is often identified with this same group of major players and their historical legacies. Consequently, the EU is frequently perceived through the lens of its founding states, which are also the former colonial powers, particularly within the academic discourse surrounding post-colonial studies. Among the 27 EU member states, only

eight (France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Denmark) have a colonial legacy, while another two or three could be classified as having experienced imperial episodes in their history (Poland and Austro-Hungary). This means that over half of the current EU's members have no colonial past. As a result, arguments characterizing the EU as a neo-colonial power—a modern extension of the policies of its former imperial states—are often seen in these countries not only as unclear or incomprehensible but as inconsistent with empirical facts and historical developments. This perspective is especially evident among the member states of Central and Eastern Europe, where collective historical memory is profoundly shaped by experiences of foreign domination and incorporation into neighboring imperial formations. When translated into the language of values, these disparities reveal a cleavage in how imperial and colonial legacies, as well as related narratives, are perceived and discussed. This divide primarily separates the (South-)Western and (North-)Eastern regions of the EU.

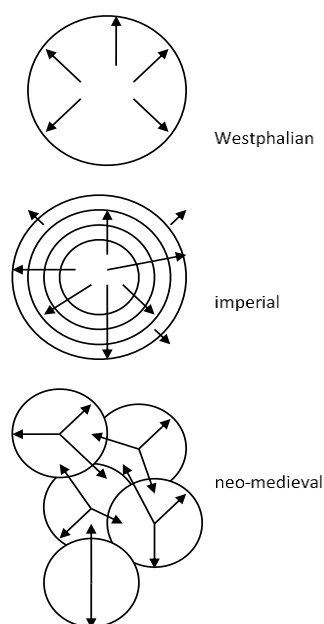
Second, the EU lacks a common military force, meaning the European response to the war in Ukraine has been channeled primarily through NATO. Does this reliance diminish the EU's geopolitical significance? Additionally, much of the EU's influence has rested in its soft power. Even as we see a rapid transition to militarization of the EU, we should ask: is soft power an effective medium for conveying values, or is it a value in itself?

The EU has traditionally perceived itself as a normative power, a stance rooted in the post-Second World War European normative framework and reinforced by the dynamics of post-Cold War globalization. However, the collapse of this global order, coupled with Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, has created a new geopolitical reality. The absence of a European army has made NATO - alongside individual nation-states - the primary framework for supporting Ukraine and countering Russia. Consequently, again discussions about European values in this context seem imprecise or even unjustified. Two distinct legacies have shaped divergent approaches within the EU. In the post-Soviet EU - comprising Central and Eastern European member states - accession to the Union has been seen primarily through economic opportunities, alongside elements of identity and belonging. NATO, in contrast, has been perceived as a guarantor of security, particularly in the classical, hard-power sense. This perception has fostered a close alliance with the United States, viewed as the only power both capable of and willing to respond to materialized military threats. This realist perspective on geopolitical realities has been dominant in Central and Eastern Europe since the early 1990s. It also reflects the strong influence of neo-realism among the political and intellectual elites in the region. These elites have often interpreted the EU's

intergovernmentally driven integration project as a collection of interactions led by the national interests of sovereign member states (Waltz, 1979). This perspective underscores a significant divide between the Western and Eastern parts of the EU in their understanding of soft and hard power. This division was particularly evident during the Iraq War, when most Central and Eastern European states supported the United States, including through military means. Symbolically, this divide was highlighted by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's characterization of "Old" and "New Europe." Despite these differences, normative elements have played a role in the so-called "New Europe's" engagement with promoting European values among Eastern neighbors and advocating for further EU enlargement to the East (Delcour, 2015). However, these efforts were largely driven by geostrategic considerations.

Third, how do world crises reveal the significance or insignificance of EU values? Following the argument that European integration develops through challenges and crises, the current Russian war against Ukraine has enabled the EU to assume the role of a global conscience. The Union has expressed support for its neighboring victim on political, humanitarian, and, eventually, military levels. However, the role of conscience alone seems insufficient for an effective foreign policy (Bialasiewicz, 2023).

The three issues discussed above can be analyzed through the lens of geopolitical models of the European Union, as developed by William Walters (2004) and further elaborated by Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2008). According to these scholars, European integration can be understood in three ways:



Source: Browning and Joenniemi (2008: 523).

1. The Westphalian Model: This model envisions the EU as a structure with clearly defined boundaries, a specified territory, and a sharp division between the internal and external. Norms, values, and policies originating from centralized authorities are uniformly circulated across the entire EU territory.
2. The Imperial Model: In this interpretation, the EU resembles an empire with a central core and multiple peripheries, taking the form of a "European Onion" (Wolf, 2011). Norms, values, and policies are created in the center, but their influence diminishes the farther one moves toward the periphery. The outer circles extend beyond the EU's official borders, encompassing candidate states, associated states, and neighboring regions (Zielonka, 2007).
3. The Neo-Medieval Model: This approach views the EU as a polycentric entity with multiple centers of influence. These centers mutually shape one another, creating subregional networks and overlapping sovereignties (Wind, 2003).

While the Westphalian model aligns with the normative aspirations of European geopolitics, the imperial model appears to characterize the EU's practices in recent years. The neo-medieval model, though theoretically interesting, is often viewed as undesirable in the context of observable realities.

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