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The European Union as a Geopolitical Actor

TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC-
NORMATIVE AGENDA

Krzysztof Sliwinski

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Abstract

This study employs a qualitative analytical methodology grounded in a comprehensive review of policy documents, strategic statements by European political leaders, and relevant literature to examine the European Union (EU) as a multifaceted geopolitical actor. It applies a geopolitics-as-method-of-analysis framework, drawing particularly on Jakub J. Grygiel's conceptualization of geopolitics as the environment within which states operate, and Nuno Morgado's neoclassical geopolitics model, which highlights how systemic stimuli are filtered through the perceptions and capacities of decision-making elites. This dual theoretical lens is used to explore the EU's strategic priorities, value-driven identity, and diverse foreign policy instruments. As such, the study innovatively integrates theoretical perspectives on EU power identity, tracing its evolution from the framework of "Civilian Power Europe" to the notions of "normative power", "ethical power", and "militarization", thus offering a

nuanced understanding of the EU's hybrid civilian-military role. Through a systematic mapping of the EU's geopolitical focus on key regions—Europe (notably Ukraine), the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and global partners—alongside an examination of its normative values and policy toolkit, the study advances EU studies by bridging theoretical discourse with practical developments. Its critical engagement with tensions between ideals and pragmatism, as well as coordination challenges among member states, provides fresh insights into the EU's capacity and constraints as a global actor. This work contributes to the evolving scholarship by proposing a “pragmatic-normative” approach that accommodates the EU's unique post-Westphalian, hybrid nature in international relations.

Keywords

EU, actorness, instruments, values, identity

Introduction

Not long ago, the notion of geopolitics was not well-received in the chambers of academics or among policymakers navigating the halls of Western powerhouses. It smacked of a negative connotation with World War II and the Nazi-led foreign policy, and worse still, with the tragic consequences of some of the Third Reich's policies that led, among others, to the Holocaust. Yet, the European Union (EU) recently launched a website titled *The EU as a Global Actor* (EU Strategic Communications, 2023), which reads: “The European Union and its Member States are engaged around the world to promote peace, security and prosperity and the interests of European citizens. To this end, the EU works to prevent and resolve conflicts, to foster resilient democracies, to promote human rights and sustainable development, and to bolster a cooperative and rules-based global order”. In a similar context, Youngs (2022) observes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has widely been perceived as pushing the EU toward greater geopolitical cohesion and assertiveness, with developments in foreign and security policy advancing

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more rapidly in a few months than over previous decades. As highlighted by Youngs (2022), Josep Borrell even described this situation as “the awakening of geopolitical Europe”. Yet, while member states have displayed greater unity in some areas, divisions remain in others. Despite a notable shift in external action, there is little indication so far that the EU is projecting a fundamentally stronger or different kind of international power than before the war. At present, no radically new European geostrategy has emerged (Youngs, 2022). According to Youngs (2022), the war also forces a far less reassuring reflection on the EU’s international role and identity. Despite some optimistic rhetoric, Russia’s invasion marks a profound policy failure for the Union, one that has cost tens of thousands of Ukrainian lives. Youngs further stresses that analyses of EU external action must shift in light of the conflict, as it raises conceptual questions that are almost the reverse of those typically posed in this field. Supplementing these observations, Table 1 here offers a detailed breakdown of recent statements and actions by European political leaders, organized by country and role, talking about the EU as a “geopolitical actor”.

Table 1. Geopolitical Discourse and Strategic Attitude of European Leaders, 2022-2025
(Source: Author)

Leader	Country/Role	Date	Action/Discussion	Details
Keir Starmer	UK	March 2025	Hosted "Securing Our Future" summit	Announced "coalition of the willing" for Ukraine, 4-point plan, \$2B air defense missiles, emphasizing European security
Friedrich Merz	Germany	March 2025	Announced defense spending overhaul	Exempted military spending above 1% GDP from debt brake
Emmanuel Macron	France	March 2025	Gave national address on Europe's security needs	Emphasized Ukraine's role, rejected abandonment, called for national and European defense reinforcement, nuclear deterrent discussion
Ursula von der Leyen	EU (Commission President)	March 2025	Outlined ReArm Europe initiative	Proposed joint borrowing for defense, adapting debt rules, mentioned "indigestible steel porcupine" for Ukraine
Josep Borrell	EU (High Representative)	2022	Declared "awakening of geopolitical Europe"	Highlighted EU's need to assert itself as a global actor, part of broader strategic discussions

These examples illustrate a concerted effort by European leaders to position the EU as a geopolitical actor, particularly in response to external pressures. Particularly, Starmer's summit and Merz's defense spending proposals reflect national contributions to EU-wide goals. At the same time, Macron and von der Leyen's statements underscore the need for a unified European approach to security. Indeed, Borrell's earlier declaration provides historical context, showing a continuity in the discourse.

In this context, the present study examines the EU as a multifaceted geopolitical actor, focusing on its strategic priorities, core values, foreign policy instruments, and evolving power identity. The first section establishes the conceptual framework by positioning geopolitics as a method of analysis, drawing on Grygiel's (2006) emphasis on geography as an external environment that imposes constraints and Morgado's (2020; 2023) neoclassical model that highlights how systemic stimuli are filtered through leaders' perceptions and institutional capacities. Within this framework, the subsequent section explores the EU's strategic regional priorities, focusing on Europe—especially Ukraine—as well as the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, and global partners. Following this section, the study critically synthesizes the major analytical debates on the EU's identity and examines the core values underpinning EU foreign policy, including democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. Against this backdrop, the fourth section then outlines the core values—such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, multilateralism, sustainable development, peace, solidarity, and social justice—that the EU promotes globally, showing how they shape its identity and guide its foreign policy actions. The final section examines the diverse instruments through which the EU translates its values into action—ranging from sanctions, trade policy, strategic partnerships, mediation, and development aid to energy, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance, defense, enlargement, neighborhood policy, and multilateral engagement—highlighting how these tools collectively enable the Union to project influence, pursue strategic interests, and uphold its normative commitments on the global stage.

Conceptual Framework: Geopolitics as a Method of Analysis

Geopolitics has been used as an analytical tool since the 19th century. Its reputation was tarnished as a consequence of the policies of the Third Reich, both before and during World War II. However, it remains a valuable approach for explaining the nexus between states' foreign and security policies and their geographical location within a historical context. Geopolitics is therefore accepted as one of the grand theories of international relations (Sloan, 2017). Fundamentally, rather than treating states as separate, alienated geographical entities, geopolitics enables us to view a broader picture, encompassing regions or even the entire globe, thereby making it possible to account for interactions between multiple states and other actors operating within specific systems defined by geographical criteria.

Defining geopolitics is complex, as its meaning varies depending on the context and the user's perspective. It can be understood in several ways. For instance, the study of international relations in terms of geographical factors encompasses the influence of geography on political power, international relations, and the distribution of resources. This perspective often emphasizes the role of physical geography, such as location, terrain, and natural resources, in shaping political outcomes (Tuathail, 1994). Another way of looking at geopolitics is to describe it as a specific set of political beliefs or ideologies that often focuses on the importance of territorial expansion, national power, and strategic competition between states. This understanding of geopolitics can be associated with particular historical figures and movements, and it has sometimes been used to justify expansionist or aggressive foreign policies (Tuathail, 1994). Geopolitics can also be seen as a method of analysis. Geocriticism, for example, uses geographical space to understand literature and culture. Bertrand Westphal explains that geocriticism “incorporates the study of geographic space (as cited in Sárdi, 2015, p. 18)” in literary analysis. This approach emphasizes how geographical factors shape cultural and artistic expression.

This study adopts the “geopolitics as a method of analysis” framework with a specific reference to Jakub J. Grygiel and Nuno Morgado's works. According to Grygiel (2006), geopolitics exists outside the state; it is the environment within which, and in response to which, the state must act. The central thesis of Jakub Grygiel's book, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, is that geography and geopolitics play a crucial role in shaping international relations and US foreign policy. Grygiel argues that the physical facts of geography—specifically, resources and trade routes—create objective constraints that influence the foreign policy of states, which he refers to as geostrategy, focused on territorial security. He seeks to reassert the importance of geography in political discourse, suggesting that understanding geopolitical factors is vital for contemporary foreign policy despite the changes brought about by globalization and technology. Similarly, our analysis also engages with Nuno Morgado's work, particularly in the context of “neoclassical geopolitics”, which operates within a “soft positivist” framework. Morgado (2020; 2023) argues for the consolidation of geopolitical studies under the label of neoclassical geopolitics, which he defines as a descriptive-analytical approach that explains how geography and other elements of state potential, filtered through the perceptions and capacities of decision-makers, shape foreign policy and international politics. Unlike classical geopolitics, which often leaned toward determinism, neoclassical geopolitics incorporates possibilism—the idea that geography provides opportunities and constraints but does not dictate outcomes—and stresses the importance of leaders' interpretations and strategic choices. The model rests on three sets of variables: systemic stimuli and material potential as independent variables, geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities as intervening variables, and foreign policy outcomes, particularly geopolitical design, as dependent variables (Morgado, 2020; 2023).

Accordingly, this study's discussion of the EU's prioritization of Ukraine in response to Russia's 2022 aggression reflects the type of systemic stimulus that Morgado (2020; 2023) highlights in his neoclassical geopolitics model: an external shock that compels the recalibration of foreign policy. The European Commission's 2025

work programme, which foregrounds the creation of a European Defense Union, exemplifies how institutional capacities and elite perceptions filter this stimulus into concrete geopolitical design. This also aligns with Grygiel's (2006) view that geopolitical realities—here, the need to secure territorial borders and ensure stability in Europe's eastern neighborhood—create objective pressures to which political actors must respond. Similarly, the EU's initiatives in the Mediterranean and Western Balkans illustrate how broader geopolitical environments, such as migration flows and enlargement dynamics, constrain and shape policy, while decision-makers' strategic framing—through instruments like the Mediterranean Pact and the New Growth Plan—mediate these pressures. In this sense, the paper implicitly applies Grygiel's (2006) notion of geopolitics as an external environment imposing constraints, while operationalizing Morgado's (2020; 2023) emphasis on the interaction between structural stimuli, elite perceptions, and institutional capacities in producing foreign policy outcomes.

The European Union as a Geopolitical Actor: Regional Priorities and Global Engagement

Building on this conceptual framework, it is now possible to situate the EU as a unique supranational entity that seeks to project influence in specific regions of strategic importance. Broadly speaking, geopolitical actors often concentrate their activities in specific regions, reflecting their strategic interests, the availability of resources, and historical ties. In the case of the EU, the first and most obvious region is the European continent. Indeed, Ukraine stands out as a top priority due to Russia's ongoing aggression, which began in 2022. The European Commission's work program for 2025 also highlights Ukraine, focusing on building a European Defense Union in response to the war (European Movement International, 2025). This strongly reflects Ukraine's role in European security and the EU's efforts to ensure stability in its eastern neighborhood.

Additionally, the Middle East and the Mediterranean are crucial

for addressing conflicts and managing migration. The Commission's work program for 2025 also includes a new Pact for the Mediterranean, aiming to deepen cooperation with the southern neighborhood. These efforts underscore the strategic importance of managing security challenges and migration flows in these areas (European Movement International, 2025). In a similar vein, the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighborhood are strategically crucial for EU enlargement and influence. The European Parliament's agenda for 2025 calls for supporting enlargement countries, particularly those in the Western Balkans, through initiatives such as the New Growth Plan. As Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas' priorities include a more strategic approach to the neighborhood, focusing on candidate countries and the Eastern Neighborhood (European Parliament, 2025). This reflects the EU's aim to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity in these regions, aligning with its broader enlargement strategy. Indeed, global partners such as India, South Africa, Brazil, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia are also important for the EU's international standing. Relatedly, Kaja Kallas' (2025) speech at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2025 highlights the significance of these countries, noting their perceived increase in EU influence over the next decade. Moreover, the EU's focus on economic statecraft and digital partnerships, as seen in discussions around the International Digital Strategy for 2025, further emphasizes the importance of these regions for strategic cooperation (European Commission, 2025), which aligns with the EU's goal to be a strong global player in security and foreign policy.

To summarize this section, the EU faces many challenges in these regions, including ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, migration pressures in the Mediterranean, and the need for consensus on enlargement in the Western Balkans. In this regard, experts and officials emphasize the importance of navigating transatlantic relations and responding to hybrid threats, which impact the EU's strategic approach to these regions (Marinova et al., 2024). Worthy of note is that several measures are underway to address these priorities. The EU is pushing for a European Defense

Union, increasing defense spending, and enhancing cooperation with NATO, particularly in response to the threats posed by Russia. For the Middle East and Mediterranean, the EU is fostering partnerships through the Mediterranean Pact and supporting reconstruction plans in Gaza. In the Western Balkans, the New Growth Plan aims to support economic development and integration. Finally, regarding global partners, the EU seems to be mostly focusing on financial and digital cooperation.

Analytical Approaches to the Evolving Nature of EU Power: Between Identity and Material Interests

Having identified the regions in which the EU seeks to assert its influence in response to systemic stimuli, the next step is to follow Morgado's analytical sequence by examining how these external pressures are mediated through the perceptions and capacities of EU elites and institutions. To fully grasp these contemporary debates on perceptions, however, it is necessary to situate them within the deeper, historically rooted discussions on the EU's evolving identity.

In recent history, it is Francois Duchene's idea of "Civilian Power Europe" (CPE) that once dominated debates about the role of Europe and European institutions in the world. Duchêne's concept of CPE refers to a particular role for Europe in the world that emphasizes non-military means of influence and the promotion of international values. Duchêne's original idea, articulated in the early 1970s, suggested that Europe could play a distinctive role based on low politics, non-state actors, ideational influences, and international interdependence rather than traditional military power. The CPE concept highlights Europe's potential to exercise considerable non-military power, combining the power dimensions akin to a "European Trading State", with a normative foreign policy perspective aimed at promoting values such as equality, justice, and concern for people with low incomes abroad (Orbie, 2006).

Fast forward to the 21st century, and Ian Manners proposes

another equally influential concept, namely “normative power”. Ian Manners' main argument is that the EU should be understood not only in terms of traditional conceptions of “civilian power” or “military power” but rather as a “normative power” in international relations. He contends that the EU's international role is fundamentally based on its ability to shape norms and define what is considered “normal” in world politics. This normative power stems from the EU's unique historical context, hybrid political structure, and constitutional basis, which predispose it to act normatively by promoting principles such as peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Manners argues that this normative dimension is crucial for understanding the EU's identity and influence internationally, as exemplified by the EU's active pursuit of the international abolition of the death penalty. He emphasizes that the EU's power lies less in its military or economic capabilities and more in its capacity to diffuse norms and reshape international standards, making the concept of “normative power Europe” not a contradiction but a significant form of power in world politics (Manners, 2002).

Shortly afterwards, Lisbeth Aggestam proposed yet another concept regarding the nature and role of the EU in the world: “ethical power”. The concept of “ethical power Europe” (EPE) in EU foreign policy represents a shift from focusing on what the EU “is” to what it “does”. It articulates the EU's ambition to be a proactive global actor that not only serves as a positive role model but actively works to change the world in the direction of a “global common good”. This involves the EU taking on new tasks in crisis management, peacekeeping, state-building, and reconstruction of failing states, complementing its existing roles in development aid and humanitarian assistance. The EU positions itself as a “force for good” and a peacebuilder in the world, justifying its acquisition of both civilian and military power capabilities in these terms (Aggestam, 2008).

EPE encompasses both civilian and military power, as well as social and material power, thereby broadening the scope beyond

earlier concepts, such as civilian power in Europe, as proposed by Duchene, and normative power, as emphasized by Manners, which primarily focused on civilian and normative influence. The EPE concept also reintroduces the international and national dimensions into the analysis of the EU's role, recognizing the importance of member states' interests and acknowledging that material interests and ethical considerations often overlap.

Importantly, EPE is not presented as an empirical reality but rather as a concept that opens new lines of critical reflection on the EU's role, motivations, and ethical dilemmas in foreign policy. It recognizes the complexity of ethical foreign policy, given competing visions of order and justice in the world and the challenges of translating ethical ambitions into practice. The concept invites analysis of the ethical values the EU promotes, the relationship between ethics and interests, the just use of power (including military force), and the problems inherent in pursuing a consistent ethical foreign policy.

Conversely, Karen Smith asserts that CPE is definitively dead, and the EU now finds itself somewhere along a spectrum between civilian and military power, like most other international actors. Rather than debating whether the EU is a civilian power, the focus should be on critically analyzing what the EU does and what it should do in international relations (Smith, 2005). According to Smith, the implications of the EU employing military means are significant and multifaceted.

Firstly, the EU's acquisition and use of military instruments challenge the notion that the EU remains a purely "civilian power". Clinging to the civilian power label stretches the term beyond its breaking point, as military means are fundamentally non-civilian. Peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, often considered civilian activities, frequently involve military personnel and can evolve into military operations, thereby further blurring the distinction between civilian and military roles. Secondly, by using military instruments—even as a "residual" tool to safeguard other means—the EU complicates the clear-cut distinction between civilian and military power.

This leads to fuzzy interpretations about when the EU ceases to be a civilian power, making it difficult to establish a clear cut-off point or assess changes along the civilian-military spectrum. Thirdly, employing military means signals a shift from a post-modern, law-based international identity toward a more traditional power politics approach. This militarization risks discrediting the EU's earlier vision of transforming international relations through law and civilian influence alone. The EU moves closer to a "Hobbesian" model where military force backs diplomacy, which may undermine its unique post-modern identity and soft power. Fourthly, the use of military force raises complex questions about the EU's ends and means, including the justifications for intervention, the legitimacy of coercion, and democratic control over foreign policy decisions. Finally, the continued use of military means necessitates moving beyond simplistic categorizations of civilian power to a more nuanced analysis of what the EU does in international relations. The EU, like most actors, falls somewhere along a spectrum between civilian and military power, and its military capabilities must be critically assessed rather than dismissed or downplayed.

Overall, it is possible to argue that all of these concepts are limited in their explanatory power and do not present the whole picture of the complexity of the EU as a geopolitical actor and its character. They should be treated as helpful and yet highly focused and therefore biased. In this context, one could consider a concept articulated by Damro, who asserts that the EU should be fundamentally perceived as a "market power Europe" (MPE). This perspective suggests that the EU's identity is primarily derived from its status as a large single market characterized by significant institutional features and competing interest groups. This identity enables the EU to exert influence in international affairs through the externalization of its economic and social market-related policies and regulatory measures. Damro contends that this exercise of power can be both intentional and unintentional, employing both persuasive and coercive means to influence global actors. He contrasts this conceptualization of the EU with the more prevalent "normative power

Europe” (NPE) approach, which emphasizes the EU's normative identity. Instead, Damro highlights the material basis of the EU's power, rooted in market size, regulatory capacity, and interest group contestation (Damro, 2012).

Values of the EU as a Geopolitical Actor

The EU has consistently positioned itself as a unique international actor, driven by a set of core values that guide its foreign policy. These values are not only enshrined in the EU's founding treaties but are also reflected in its external actions, policies, and strategies. This section explores the central values underpinning EU foreign policy.

Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are central to the EU's identity and foreign policy. The EU is often described as a “normative power” that seeks to promote these values globally. Therefore, the promotion of human rights is a cornerstone of EU foreign policy. The EU actively advocates for human rights in international forums and through its bilateral and multilateral relations. For instance, the EU has been a vocal critic of human rights violations in non-Western countries, where it has called for greater respect for civil and political rights (Balducci, 2008). Overall, the EU's human rights promotion efforts are guided by its commitment to the universality and indivisibility of human rights, as enshrined in international human rights law. This approach is reflected in the EU's support for human rights defenders and its opposition to practices such as capital punishment and torture.

Importantly, the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, as outlined in its 2021 strategy, highlights its commitment to democracy and human rights as part of its geopolitical leadership (Michalski & Parker, 2024). In a similar vein, the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions emphasize the promotion of human rights and the rule of law in conflict zones (Khan, 2023). The EU's dedication to these values is also evident in its enlargement policies. As part of the accession process, candidate

countries are required to respect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as stipulated in Article 49 of the Treaty on EU (TEU) (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016).

The EU is also a strong advocate for multilateralism and a rules-based international order. It actively supports international institutions and agreements, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Paris Agreement on climate change, to address global challenges (Obacz, 2023). The EU's commitment to multilateralism is rooted in its belief that a rules-based system is essential for maintaining global stability and prosperity. In its foreign policy, the EU often prioritizes cooperation over unilateral action. For example, its response to the war in Ukraine, including the imposition of sanctions on Russia and the provision of support to Ukrainian civilians, demonstrates its commitment to upholding international law and multilateral norms (Bosse, 2022).

In this regard, one should highlight that good governance and the rule of law are essential components of EU foreign policy. The EU promotes these principles in its external relations, particularly through its neighborhood policy and enlargement process. For instance, the EU requires candidate countries to demonstrate progress in combating corruption and ensuring judicial independence as part of the accession process (Niezen, 2017). The EU's emphasis on good governance is also reflected in its development cooperation policies, which prioritize transparency, accountability, and the fight against corruption to ensure that aid is used effectively and efficiently.

Additionally, sustainable development and climate action are key components of EU foreign policy. The EU has been at the forefront of global efforts to combat climate change, as evidenced by its leadership in the Paris Agreement and its ambitious climate-neutrality targets under the European Green Deal (Michalski & Parker, 2024). The EU's external policies, including its development cooperation and trade agreements, are increasingly aligned with sustainable development goals (SDGs) to ensure that economic growth is environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, for instance, emphasizes the importance of sustain-

able connectivity and green transitions, reflecting its commitment to integrating climate action into its foreign policy.

Moreover, peace and security are fundamental objectives of EU foreign policy. The EU has been actively involved in peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts around the world, particularly through its CSDP missions and its support for transitional justice mechanisms (Khan, 2023; Davis, 2013). The EU's approach to peace and security is rooted in its commitment to human rights and the rule of law, as well as its belief in the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict. The EU's engagement in peace processes, such as its support for the two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict, highlights its dedication to promoting peace and stability in volatile regions.

Human dignity and solidarity are also core values that underpin the EU's foreign policy. The EU's response to the war in Ukraine, including its decision to grant Ukrainian nationals the right to live and work in the EU, reflects its commitment to protecting human dignity and upholding solidarity with affected populations (Bosse, 2022). This approach is also evident in the EU's humanitarian aid policies, which prioritize the protection of vulnerable populations in crisis situations. The EU's emphasis on human dignity is closely linked to its promotion of human rights and its opposition to practices that violate these rights, such as torture and the death penalty (King, 1999).

Finally, equality and social justice are integral to the EU's foreign policy. The EU promotes gender equality and women's empowerment in its external relations, as reflected in its development cooperation policies and its support for gender-sensitive peacebuilding initiatives (Bharti, 2024). The EU also advocates for social justice in its trade and investment agreements, ensuring that economic activities contribute to equitable development and do not exacerbate inequalities. The EU's commitment to equality is further evident in its support for the rights of marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals, in its neighborhood and enlargement policies (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016).

The Instruments of the EU as a Geopolitical Actor

If values represent the guiding principles of the EU's external action, then its foreign policy instruments constitute the practical means through which these principles are implemented and projected on the global stage. The EU has developed a diverse array of tools to conduct its foreign policy, reflecting its role as a geopolitical actor. This section of the article will examine most of these tools, starting with sanctions through energy policy and ending with crisis management. Importantly, sanctions have emerged as a cornerstone of EU foreign policy, particularly in response to geopolitical crises. The EU has increasingly relied on targeted sanctions to influence the behavior of third countries, as seen in cases such as Russia, Iran, and Myanmar. These sanctions are often designed to support human rights, democracy, and non-proliferation objectives. For instance, the EU has imposed comprehensive trade bans and asset freezes in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, demonstrating the scale and scope of its sanctions regime (Portela, 2014).

Indeed, the effectiveness of EU sanctions depends on several factors, including the level of support from regional powers, the presence of United Nations (UN) legitimation, and the robustness of enforcement mechanisms. While the EU has made efforts to develop targeted sanctions, challenges remain, particularly in terms of enforcement and coordination among member states. Despite these challenges, sanctions remain a critical tool for the EU to project influence and uphold its values on the global stage.

Trade policy is another key tool in the EU's foreign policy arsenal. The EU utilizes its economic influence to promote its strategic interests, whether through trade agreements, market access, or targeted restrictive measures. The EU's trade policy is closely tied to its geoeconomic strategy, which seeks to blend economic and security concerns. A case in point is how the EU uses trade restrictions and market access to influence the behavior of third countries, as part of its broader geoeconomic toolkit (Bauerle Danzman & Meunier, 2024).

The EU's trade policy is also closely linked to its development agenda. Through initiatives such as the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, the EU provides preferential access to its market for developing countries, while also promoting human rights and sustainable development. However, the effectiveness of EU trade policy as a foreign policy tool is constrained by institutional factors, such as the autonomy of the Directorate-General for Trade (DG Trade) and the influence of member states with divergent interests (Bossuyt et al., 2020).

Adding to sanctions and trade policy, strategic partnerships are a relatively new and evolving tool in EU foreign policy. These partnerships are designed to foster cooperation with major global actors on issues of mutual interest, such as climate change, trade, and security. The EU has established strategic partnerships with countries like China, India, and Brazil, as well as with regional organizations such as the African Union. These partnerships reflect the EU's commitment to multilateralism and its desire to address global challenges through collaborative efforts (Grevi, 2013).

While strategic partnerships have the potential to enhance the EU's influence on the global stage, their effectiveness is often hampered by a lack of coordination among EU institutions and member states. Additionally, the EU's strategic partnerships are often criticized for their lack of concrete outcomes, raising questions about their impact on the EU's foreign policy goals. Despite these challenges, strategic partnerships continue to be a valuable tool for the EU to engage with key global actors and advance its strategic interests.

Besides strategic partnerships, the EU has also emerged as an important international mediator, leveraging its diplomatic capabilities to broker peace and stability in conflict zones. For example, the EU has played a key role in mediating conflicts in the Western Balkans, particularly in the case of Kosovo and Serbia. The EU's mediation efforts are often supported by its ability to offer economic incentives, such as accession prospects or financial assistance, to encourage compromise and cooperation among conflicting parties (Růžek, 2022). Yet, the EU's effectiveness as a mediator has much to

do with its ability to project “smart power”, which combines elements of hard and soft power. By leveraging its economic and diplomatic resources, the EU can influence the behavior of conflict parties and contribute to the resolution of disputes. However, the EU's mediation efforts are not without challenges, particularly in cases where the conflict parties are unwilling to compromise or where external actors undermine the EU's efforts.

One should add that the concept of smart power has become increasingly important in EU foreign policy, especially regarding security matters. Smart power refers to the combination of hard and soft power resources to achieve desired outcomes in international relations. The EU has sought to leverage its innovative power capabilities to address a range of challenges, from conflict resolution and crisis management to the promotion of democracy and human rights. For example, the EU has used its smart power to support democratic transitions in the Southern Neighborhood, combining economic incentives, diplomatic pressure, and support for civil society with military assistance and humanitarian aid (Matthiessen, 2013).

Development aid is another critical tool in the EU's foreign policy arsenal. The EU is one of the largest providers of official development assistance (ODA) in the world, and it uses this aid to promote development, reduce poverty, and foster stability in developing countries. The EU's development policy is closely aligned with its foreign policy objectives, particularly in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. For example, the EU has used development aid to support democratic transitions in the Southern Neighborhood and to address the root causes of migration and instability in Sub-Saharan Africa (Panchuk & Bossuyt, 2014). However, the effectiveness of EU development aid as a foreign policy tool is influenced by several factors, including the level of coordination among EU institutions and member states, the alignment of aid with the needs of recipient countries, and the ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of aid programs. While the EU has made progress in improving the effectiveness of its

development aid, challenges persist, particularly in ensuring that aid is utilized efficiently and contributes to sustainable development outcomes.

The EU has also experimented with lead groups and differentiated cooperation as tools for advancing its foreign policy objectives. Lead groups are informal coalitions of member states that take the initiative on specific issues, such as nuclear negotiations with Iran or conflict management in Ukraine. These groups have been effective in generating consensus and spurring action within the EU, particularly in cases where unanimity is difficult to achieve. For instance, the Franco-German duo played a key role in brokering a truce between Russia and Ukraine, demonstrating the potential of lead groups to give initiative and content to EU foreign policy (Alcaro & Siddi, 2021).

Differentiated cooperation, on the other hand, involves the participation of a subset of member states in specific policies or initiatives. This approach has been used in areas such as defence and security, where not all member states are willing or able to participate. While differentiated cooperation can enhance the effectiveness of EU foreign policy by allowing for more flexible and targeted action, it also risks undermining the unity and coherence of EU policy, particularly if it is not aligned with common EU values and positions (Siddi et al., 2022).

The concept of resilience has become an increasingly important tool in EU foreign policy, particularly in the context of its external action. The EU has sought to promote resilience in its neighborhood, particularly in regions characterized by limited statehood and contested orders. Resilience is understood as the ability of societies to withstand and recover from external shocks, whether these are related to conflict, economic instability, or environmental degradation. The EU has mobilized a range of instruments, including diplomacy, economic aid, and military means, to promote resilience in its neighborhood (Bargués et al., 2020).

The EU's approach to resilience is characterized by multiple, sustained, and indirect actions. By way of example, the EU has

provided long-term support to countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood to strengthen their institutions, promote economic development, and enhance their ability to withstand external pressures. While the EU's resilience approach has shown promise, its effectiveness is often constrained by the complexity of the challenges it seeks to address, as well as the need for greater coordination among EU institutions and member states.

In a similar context, the EU's comprehensive approach to security is another key tool in its foreign policy arsenal. This approach seeks to integrate the EU's various instruments, including diplomacy, development aid, humanitarian assistance, trade, and crisis management capabilities, into a coherent and effective response to security challenges. The comprehensive approach was formalized in the Lisbon Treaty and has been applied in a range of contexts, from conflict prevention and crisis management to post-crisis intervention. For example, the EU has used its comprehensive approach to address the security challenges posed by the conflict in Ukraine, combining sanctions, humanitarian aid, and support for reforms with military assistance and diplomatic engagement (Matthiessen, 2013). The effectiveness of the EU's comprehensive approach mostly concerns its ability to coordinate its various instruments and to ensure that they are used in a joined-up manner. While the EU has made progress in developing its comprehensive approach, the main challenge is to ensure that the different components of EU policy are aligned and mutually reinforcing.

Another important tool in EU's foreign is democracy promotion. The EU has sought to promote democracy and human rights in third countries through a range of instruments, including sanctions, development aid, and diplomatic engagement. For example, the EU has used its European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) to support civil society organizations and human rights defenders in countries such as Belarus and Cuba. The EU has also used its Partnership Agreements and Association Agreements to promote democratic reforms and the rule of law in countries such as Ukraine and Tunisia (Panchuk & Bossuyt, 2014). The effectiveness of EU democracy promotion is influenced by several factors,

including the level of political will among EU member states, the alignment of EU policies with the needs and priorities of recipient countries, and the ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of EU initiatives.

Energy policy has also emerged as a crucial tool in EU foreign policy, especially regarding its efforts to promote energy security and reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels. The EU has sought to use its energy policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly with countries such as Russia and the Gulf States. For example, the EU has used its energy policy to promote the diversification of energy supplies, the development of renewable energy sources, and the enhancement of energy efficiency. The EU has also sought to use its energy policy to promote its values, such as sustainability and climate action, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). The effectiveness of EU energy policy as a foreign policy tool is closely tied to its ability to project influence through its energy markets and to promote its values and interests in international energy governance.

Cybersecurity has also become an increasingly important tool in EU foreign policy, particularly in the context of its efforts to protect its critical infrastructure and to promote its values in the digital domain. The EU has sought to use its cybersecurity policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to countries such as China and Russia. For example, the EU has used its cybersecurity policy to promote the development of a secure and resilient digital environment, to protect its citizens and businesses from cyber threats, and to promote its values, such as privacy and data protection, in international cybersecurity governance (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). The impact of the EU's cybersecurity policy as an instrument of foreign policy rests on its capacity to leverage digital markets while advancing its values and strategic priorities within global cybersecurity governance.

Humanitarian aid is no less important in EU foreign policy, which is directed at responding to humanitarian crises and to promote its values, such as solidarity and compassion. The EU has sought to use its humanitarian aid to advance its foreign policy

objectives, particularly in relation to countries such as Syria and Yemen. For example, the EU has used its humanitarian aid to provide assistance to refugees and displaced persons, to support the delivery of emergency relief, and to promote the respect for international humanitarian law. The EU has also sought to use its humanitarian aid to promote its values, such as human dignity and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Matthiessen, 2013).

Climate and migration policies are closely linked to the humanitarian dimensions of EU foreign policy. Climate policy is crucial in the context of the EU's efforts to promote its core values, such as sustainability and environmental protection. The EU has sought to use its climate policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly about countries such as China and the United States. For example, the EU has utilized its climate policy to promote the development of renewable energy sources, enhance energy efficiency, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The EU has also strived to use its climate policy to promote its values, such as sustainability and environmental protection, in international climate governance (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). Similarly, the EU is also using its migration policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly about countries such as Türkiye and Libya. For instance, the EU has utilized its migration policy to manage migration flows, support the protection of migrants' rights, and enhance the security of its external borders. The EU has deployed its migration policy to promote its values, such as human dignity and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

The humanitarian focus of EU foreign policy goes hand in hand with policy responses to conventional threats, particularly when it comes to defence policy. The EU has instrumentalized its defence policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly about countries such as Russia and China. By way of example, the EU has used its defence policy to promote the development of its defence capabilities, to enhance its military cooperation, and to support its crisis management operations. The EU has also sought to use its defence policy to promote its values, such as peace and

stability, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

This being said, one should highlight that responding to threats is not the only preoccupation of EU foreign policy. A case in point is the EU enlargement policy. The EU has used its enlargement policy to promote the accession of candidate countries, to support their democratic reforms, and to enhance their integration into the EU's political and economic structures. The EU has also sought to use its enlargement policy to promote its values, such as democracy and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

In a similar vein, the EU uses its neighborhood policy to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to countries such as Ukraine and Morocco. The EU has used its neighborhood policy to promote the development of its neighborhood countries, to support their economic and political reforms, and to enhance their integration into the EU's political and economic structures. The EU has also sought to use its neighborhood policy to promote its values, such as democracy and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012). Yet, one should add that neighborhood also comes with problems, hence the significance of the EU's efforts at crisis management, which are used to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in countries such as Syria and Libya. For example, the EU has utilized its crisis management to promote the delivery of humanitarian aid, support conflict resolution, and enhance the security of its external borders. The EU has also sought to use its crisis management to promote its values, such as human dignity and human rights, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

Beyond enlargement and neighbors, the EU's engagement is also extended to multilateralism at the global level. The EU has instrumentalized its commitment to multilateralism to advance its foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to global challenges such as climate change and pandemics. For instance, the EU has used its multilateralism to promote the development of international agreements, to support the work of international organizations, and

to enhance its cooperation with other countries and regions. The EU has also made use of multilateralism to promote its values, such as peace and stability, in its relations with third countries (Biscop & Whitman, 2012).

Conclusion

The EU has emerged as a multifaceted geopolitical actor that blends strategic interests, core values, and a diverse set of instruments to address global challenges. Its primary focus remains on Europe—especially Ukraine amid Russia's 2022 aggression—while also engaging in the Middle East, Mediterranean, and other parts of the world with countries like India and Brazil. Central to its identity are values such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, multilateralism, and sustainable development, which the EU promotes globally as a normative power. In this context of systemic stimuli and inherited identity, the EU's toolkit includes sanctions, trade policies, strategic partnerships, mediation, development aid, resilience-building, and a comprehensive security approach combining hard and soft power. Its evolving power identity has shifted from Duchêne's "Civilian Power Europe" toward a broader concept of "ethical power" that integrates market and military capabilities, reflecting a more complex civilian-military spectrum.

One could therefore conclude that the EU's geopolitical role challenges traditional International Relations theories by hybridizing realism's security concerns with liberal institutionalism's emphasis on cooperation and constructivism's focus on norms. This positions the EU as a post-Westphalian actor that bridges ideals and power realities. Going forward, the EU must navigate internal divisions and hybrid threats to maintain its influence, which also suggests that IR theory should adapt toward more pragmatic and normative frameworks to better capture the EU's unique role in global politics.

An important complication in the EU's geopolitical actorness concerns decision-making processes. These processes in member states and the EU itself differ fundamentally due to their distinct

nature as geopolitical actors. States are sovereign entities with supreme authority over their territories, characterized by clear territorial boundaries, institutional capacity, and monopoly on the use of force within their borders. Decision-making in states is typically centralized, with governments exercising authority through established institutions such as legislatures, executives, and judiciaries, enabling relatively swift and cohesive policy implementation aligned with national interests. In contrast, the EU is a hybrid supranational and intergovernmental entity composed of multiple member states, each retaining sovereignty but sharing competencies in various policy areas. Its decision-making is inherently complex, requiring consensus or qualified majority voting among member states and institutions like the European Commission, European Parliament, and Council of the EU. This multi-level governance structure often leads to slower, more deliberative processes to accommodate diverse national interests and values. The EU's foreign policy decisions involve balancing these interests, fostering cooperation, and promoting shared values such as democracy, human rights, and multilateralism.

Moreover, while states often prioritize hard power tools like military force, the EU emphasizes normative power, blending hard and soft power instruments such as sanctions, trade policies, and diplomatic engagement. The EU's decision-making reflects this hybrid identity, navigating between civilian and military power and integrating ethical considerations in foreign policy. Thus, the divergence in decision-making stems from the EU's collective, multi-actor governance versus the centralized sovereignty of individual states, influencing their geopolitical actorness and strategic behaviors.

While the EU positions itself as a normative power that promotes core values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable development, there exist inherent tensions and contradictions in simultaneously advancing these values and pursuing economic interests, especially when engaging with non-European regimes. The EU's economic statecraft often requires pragmatic engagement with countries whose records on human rights are deemed problematic from a Western perspective. Strategic

partnerships with important global economic players like China, India, Brazil, and Gulf States illustrate this complexity. These partnerships aim to enhance trade, investment, and digital cooperation, which sometimes necessitate downplaying contentious issues to maintain mutual economic benefits. Moreover, the EU's trade policy, while tied to promoting human rights and sustainable development, can be constrained by institutional factors and divergent interests among member states, which complicate enforcement and coherence. The EU's development cooperation reflects a similar balancing act, aiming to reduce poverty and promote stability while aligning with recipient countries' priorities, which may not always include rigorous human rights improvements.

Engagement with illiberal regimes presents ethical and strategic dilemmas. The EU must balance its normative ambitions against realpolitik considerations, especially when these regimes are key economic or security partners. For instance, while the EU condemns human rights violations, it simultaneously pursues climate, energy, and trade cooperation with them. This duality is further reflected in the EU's foreign policy concepts, such as Lisbeth Aggestam's "ethical power", which envisions the EU as a force for global good, including military and civilian roles in crisis management and peacebuilding. However, Karen Smith critiques the persistence of military involvement as potentially undermining the EU's normative identity, complicating the ethical coherence of its external actions. Similarly, the promotion of democracy and human rights through tools like sanctions, development aid, and diplomatic engagement is often hindered by the limited political will among member states and the challenge of ensuring sustainable impact. Furthermore, the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policies face internal divisions and difficulties in achieving consensus, which can dilute the effectiveness of normative promotion.

In particular, sanctions have emerged as a fundamental component of the EU's foreign policy, particularly in response to geopolitical crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU increasingly employs targeted sanctions—such as trade bans and asset freezes—to influence the behavior of third countries, especially in relation to

human rights, democracy, and non-proliferation objectives. For instance, the comprehensive sanctions imposed on Russia illustrate the breadth and depth of the EU's sanctions regime.

Finally, strategic partnerships constitute a relatively novel mechanism aimed at enhancing cooperation with significant global entities such as China, India, and Brazil, as well as regional organizations like the African Union. These partnerships are designed to address shared interests in domains such as climate change, trade, and security, thereby reflecting the EU's dedication to multilateralism and global governance. However, various foreign policy instruments, including trade policy, development aid, energy policy, cybersecurity, and crisis management, exhibit varying degrees of effectiveness. This variability is associated with factors such as institutional coherence, alignment with the needs of recipient countries, and the challenge of balancing the diverse interests of member states.

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