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**Soft Power or Hard Power,**  
**Can the EU Have a Geopolitical Awakening?**

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**Abstract**

*The present study works to understand how the European Union has begun to develop a hard power dimension, as a shift in geopolitical doctrine, in reaction to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. While initial measures were of an economic nature, via the enactment of the strictest economic sanctions ever observed, the EU has increasingly offered military aid by supplying armament to Ukraine, through the European Peace Facility, as well as through Member States donations. These early signs of a geopolitical awakening have long been expected. What remains to be seen is whether it is sustainable. The return of war to Europe has sparked an upsurge in security concerns and a sudden realisation that more must be done for defence. The conflict is reshaping the European security order, and the EU must take action to shore up its defence as well as its strategic, economic, political, and energetic position in the world. Thus, it is no surprise that at the March EU Summit in Versailles, the main topics of the reunion were defence and energy independence. Thus, in this article, I will work to better understand the geopolitical awakening of the EU, via the tools and partnerships it possesses as well as how Member States interests affect its development.*

**Keywords:** EU, geopolitics, defence, sanctions, policy, NATO.

**JEL Classification:** F02, F51, F52, F53, F55.

**1. Introduction**

Historically, the European Union has focused on soft power as a means of exerting influence and bringing neighbours closer to its norms and values. With the help of action plans, trade agreements, funding agreements and other soft power tools, the EU has been projecting its values and norms to a debatable degree of success. Hard power has never been a doctrine utilised by the EU, it has always been the domain of its Member States. It is well known that geopolitical leverage has always been lacking in the EU's toolkit, drawing criticism for giving priority to

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financial instruments instead of geopolitical strategy. But the war in Ukraine, on the doorstep of Europe, seems to be a wake-up call for the soft-power loving Union. In a matter of days, the EU moved more swiftly than it had in 2 years of pandemic, with 5 sanctions packages passed within a week (European Commission, 2022). The trend is expected to continue as many European companies have moved to withdraw and stop investments in the Russian economy, with almost 500 companies taking such a move by the time of the writing of this article (Yale School of Management, 2022). The EU's unexpected openness and unity in utilising its economic weight as a tool against Russia is evidence of the growing sentiment within the EU that geopolitical action must be taken, even if the price is to be paid by the union itself, due to exploding energy prices.

Inside the European block, the Member States, together with the European Union, are enacting policies that will be able to mitigate the hardships brought on by sanctions on the lives of EU citizens. In Brussels, the Temporary Protection Directive, a policy enacted in 2001 but never used, was triggered (Citizens Information, 2022). This mechanism grants protection to Ukrainian refugees, such as medical assistance, access to education and the labour market, as well as residency rights. In support of the Ukrainian state, the EU announced a financial and humanitarian aid package, while moving to increase disinformation efforts through the Commission's East StratCom Task Force and suspending Russian media outlets (Jack, 2022).

On an even more important scale, the EU is developing into a security actor, capable of playing on the geopolitical board of chess, by using the European Peace Facility, which became operational in July 2021, as a measure to financially aid the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU (European Council, 2022). The instrument is set to offer 500 million euro in equipment, armament, and defensive weapons to Ukraine. The EU's geopolitical awakening could not have happened without a shift in the policy of Germany, which, after decades of reluctance, has allocated a special fund, worth 100 billion euro, over the next four years for defence acquisitions and a permanent increase in its annual defence budget of 2% annually (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Sweden, Romania, Latvia, Denmark, Poland, and the United Kingdom have also pledged an increase in defence expenditure between 2.5% and 3% annually (Mackenzi, 2022), and other EU and NATO states are expected to follow suit.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The issue at hand is that the European Union is facing a geopolitical game, while lacking the experience in the field. So, will its effort be sustainable? The increases in defence spending by Member States are a crucial starting point, one which must be broadened at a European level. Member States thus began making use of the Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund, to guarantee that defence budgets are not spent in an uncoordinated manner, as well as encourage all Member States to achieve at least 2% GDP allocation to their defence budget, as per NATO requirements.

Becoming a geopolitical actor requires more than increasing defence spending. The defence structure framework of the EU already exists; it is only a question of utilising them. The Strategic Compass is a step in that direction, as it evokes the possibility of utilising article 44 of the TEU European (Defence Agency, 2022), which permits the EU to delegate the implementation of security tasks to a group of Member States that desire to act in the security and defence of the union. In this respect, the EU, NATO, and partner countries can use the multinational, rapid response military units, brought to life in 2003, but never utilised, the EU Battlegroups (External Action Service, 2022). Agreeing on leadership is always a challenge, but a necessary one, and the EU cannot hope to give a place at the geopolitical table if it does not do so. At the same time, a change in the manner in which the EU currently implements its neighbourhood policy must be made.

A new approach is necessary with respect to the Balkan countries, of which several have had candidate status for years, and negotiations have stalled, pushing them to seek partnerships with Russia and China. The EU's objective of building a "ring of friends" with Balkan countries and the Eastern Partnership as an alternative to membership to the EU, has been an unsuccessful endeavour. While it focused on fighting corruption and boosting economic and cultural links, it completely left out the security dimension. Countries such as Moldova and Georgia are fearful of falling victim to Russian aggression once again, and in this sense, the EU must provide support. Membership within the EU is unlikely for several years to come, but the Russian threat will mobilise the EU to add a security dimension to the neighbourhood policy (European Commission, 2022).

Preparing the EU for the geopolitical dimension will require a rethinking of the geoeconomics one. For Germany, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was regarded as a purely economic project, without a political dimension (Eurocorps, 2022). It would seem that view or presentation of the project was flawed. Without sufficient fossil energy resources within Europe, member States were obliged to accept dependence on Russian gas, of which 41% comes from (Şpaiuc, 2021). The war in Ukraine has put the spotlight on this weakness of the EU and accelerated the need to transition to the green energy sources sooner than envisioned (Simon, 2021). An unintended positive side-effect to an otherwise tragic period. Still, the fact remains that until new energy sources are built, the EU will have to diversify as well as continue to buy gas from the Russians. To this effect, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, Russia had a botched attempt to blackmail the EU into accepting payments for gas in rubbles, or otherwise see the pipelines close (Meredith, 2022). The bluff was initially called by the Europeans, showing that dependency on gas runs two ways (Corbeau, 2022). But dissent lingers within the EU, as the push to ban the import of Russian oil has been met with resistance, especially from Hungary, as well as Slovakia and Czechia, all of whom have managed to obtain an exemption to the ban, until 2024 (Emmott, Guarascio, Strupczewski, 2022).

### **3. Aims of the Research**

The present research aims to analyse the state of the European Union's development of a hard power approach in international relations after decades of soft power doctrine. By analyzing Member States, as well as rival and partner countries interests, the paper aims to gauge the geopolitical spectrum in Europe to assess whether the EU is working towards a new approach. The article aims to contribute to the perspective of the European Union as a developing hard power player at European level, while studying the interests of the main actors, in a manner which allows one to understand their objectives.

### **4. Research Methods**

Political sciences express a tendency to utilise qualitative methods (Naji, Jawan, Redzuan, 2011). Under this line of thinking, the research methods utilised in this paper are of a qualitative nature, due to the nature of the subject, which relies on the analysis of agreements, strategies, policies, and actions of the European Union, its partners, and rivals. The literature has been reviewed from the perspective of qualitative research methods, with policies, statements, official documents, books on this topic as well as scientific articles having been reviewed.

The research approach utilized in the articles, combines various fields, such as economics, politics, European Union policies and laws, Member States policies, in order to accentuate the wide range of factors having an effect on the soft and hard power dimension of the EU. The cross-disciplinary view, while seemingly chaotic, ensures that several perspectives are taken into account, assuring an in-depth analysis of the topic as well as bringing valuable contributions to the research.

### **5. Findings**

#### ***5.1 The Heart of the European Union Sets the Tone***

The results of the literature review brought to light that political will is never guaranteed, due to ever shifting interests of Member States, and for the European Union's there are always efforts to be made to sustain political will at European level. The positions of France and Germany are considered the core of the European Union. The literature review has shed light on the dual approach these two countries have had with relation to Russia, while often criticising it for not respecting human rights, annexing Crimea in 2014 and the use of resources as a blackmail tool, they have also benefitted greatly by developing a partnership that assured cheap natural resources and markets for their products (Dodman, 2022). With the new conflict, the two countries have drawn many criticisms from the public, but also other European countries, for their incoherent approach regarding Russia. As a reaction to the shifting stance within Europe, in a hard power approach, Paris has acted by enhancing consultations with Eastern European partners, and by offering military assistance (SHAPE Public Affairs Office, 2022). Berlin has also been forced to re-evaluate its military stance, which historically it has underfunded for decades. It

began by increasing the defence budget to 2%, from 1.1%, and investing an extra 100 billion euro, in a 4-year period (Sheahan, Marsh, 2022) on top of that, in an effort to boost Germany's role in defending Europe. While these moves from the two most important European capitals are promising for unity and the geopolitical dimension of the EU, divisions still exist. One such division regards the leadership question. Should the EU develop its own military command infrastructure or remain under the umbrella of NATO. France, while supporting NATO commitments in Europe, by deploying troops to Romania and Estonia, is still a supporter of pushing for more European sovereignty and strengthening capabilities (SHAPE Public Affairs Office, 2022). On the flip side, the Member States which have the most geographical exposure to Russia: Romania, Poland, Scandinavian, and Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the security provided by NATO and the United States. Whilst France and Germany signal the beginning of an increase in military capability for Europe, others have also begun to follow suit, Poland announced a military modernisation plan, with the acquisition of 350 American made tanks, 450 south Korean tanks, as well as 35 F-35 fighter jets, and others; whilst Romania increased its military budget from 2% to 2.5% of GDP.

## ***5.2 Russia, the Great Unifier***

We observed that the immediate threat of Russian escalation put old debates on hold. Member States seem to be aware that the coordination of efforts is crucial at this time, and even countries that are usually weary in this aspect are shifting their stance. For example, Denmark announced a referendum in which it will be decided if they are to join the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (The Guardian, 2022), from which it has currently opted-out. In the conferences on the position of Member States within from this summer, it has been declared that increased coordination efforts will be done while guaranteeing continued compatibility with NATO. And these capabilities are not limited to EU Member States, as the US, Norway, and Canada were invited to adhere to the EU PESCO project (European Defence Agency, 2022), aimed at increasing military mobility. Synergies are being built, a fact demonstrated by the joining of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and foreign ministers from the UK, the US, and Canada, at the European Council meeting in Brussels (European Council, 2022). As well as the joining of the US President Joe Biden in the NATO meeting in Brussels, a first time for an US President (Klein, Liptak, Collins, Sullivan, 2022). The invasion of Ukraine has brought to light the preference of the US to empower European partners and share in the burden of defending security by deploying not only US force, but also more European ones.

## ***5.3 Old Allies Remain Essential***

The analysis has also observed that European countries remain committed to their existing alliances, and even seek to further develop them. The United States is a key element in the European Union's capability of becoming a real geopolitical actor,

as it has been pushing the EU to become a geo-economic arm of the NATO. The EU's geopolitical position, for the moment, seems to be dependent on the US and their approval in certain aspects. Germany and Eastern Europe are in this aspect, the most likely to wait for Washington's approval when making decisions, as they are more dependent on the US than most of the Member States. The planned shift in focus of the US toward the Pacific, due to the rise of China, has resulted in the creation of AUKUS, a NATO equivalent, meaning that the EU is likely to increase its role as an independent geopolitical actor not only due to the conflict in the region but as a necessity to supplement the US.

The United Kingdom remains a steadfast partner for the EU, in terms of defence (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022), even if post-Brexit animosities are still present. Since the beginning of the war, the UK has maintained itself as a reliable ally, through the deployment of troops in EU member states, assisting in air policing and the presence of UK ships in key areas of defence. While a formal security cooperation agreement between the EU and the UK is not to be expected or needed, cooperation will be developed via NATO. The UK remains present in other defence formats at European level, such as the Northern Defence Cooperation (Nordefco) and the European Intervention Initiative (Mills, 2019).

#### **5.4 Who Shall Lead?**

The key observation from the research is that the European Union has all the prerequisites for becoming a geopolitical actor, as well as the network of alliances to support its blooming position in the world, but continues to lack one important element, leadership.

An increase in defence spending is not enough to become a geopolitical, hard power actor, but it is a step in the right direction. The European Union has a long history in the defence industry and a well-developed infrastructure of collaboration between Member States (as the case of the Eurofighter Typhoon has shown). By factoring in the Strategic Compass, coupled with the infrastructural capabilities of the EU, there already exists an almost complete security framework for the EU, but no transnational leadership system. In this aspect, NATO can fill in the gaps, as a cooperative transnational system already exists, in which the EU Battlegroups can play a role. Deciding on the leadership of EU forces has always been a point of contention, and without it, the EU cannot hope to request a place at the geopolitical table. Using the framework of NATO would be a stepping stone in that direction, if not the easiest.

## **6. Conclusions**

In this article, we worked to determine the intricate system through which the EU is developing into a security actor, thus observing that it is not by premeditated design, but due to need. What has also resulted is that the advance towards a hard power dimension has been underway, through the military infrastructure which has been under development for quite some time. Recent increases in investments and

defence budgets as well as common defence projects will only strengthen the existing framework. Added to these factors is the closer cooperation between Member States and their membership within NATO, thus creating most of the prerequisites for the EU to become a contender on the geopolitical map. It is particularly ironic that the war begun by Russia, as a bet on the divisions in Europe, has brought about the awakening of the EU's hard power dimension and the beginning of the development of a geopolitical identity. Investing and developing the military systems of the EU is a step in the right direction, but not enough. What we have observed is that the EU is still lacking in terms of true cooperation and a clear leadership system for the implementation of hard power policies. An intergovernmental system is required to allow a European military system to become efficient. And that is where the main issue stands, the partial renunciation of military sovereignty, which is seen as a founding pillar of national sovereignty and unity. While the Member States agree that more is needed, the manner in which it is to be accomplished eludes them. There are many hurdles left to surpass, and the leadership mechanism seems the toughest one, as national sentiment and old rivalries still play a role in the relations of members. The easiest solution, due to the pre-existing framework, remains NATO. But Europeans will likely desire, as France has stated in the past, to develop a parallel system for the common military capabilities, which would work with NATO, and reduce the influence of their American and British partners. It remains to be seen if the EU will develop into a geopolitical actor within its own framework, or within NATO. Regardless of the road it chooses to take, the development of a geopolitical identity and of a hard power dimension for the EU, is not only a necessity for its survival and relevance in the world, but a certainty.

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