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Geopolitics is back — and the EU needs to get ready

Serious upheavals in the world order require that major powers think and act geopolitically. The EU must do so as well

Read this article in German.

Read Marius Müller-Hennig's article 'A truly geopolitical EU Commission?' which argues that the European Commission should be weary of playing geopolitical games.

According to Ursula von der Leyen's Mission Letter to the High Representative, the new European Commission will be a geopolitical one. A recent piece in IPS warned that the Commission should refrain from playing geopolitical games. However, as a reproach to the ambition of being a great power, this is short-sighted. Of course, geopolitical strategies should not be pursued unquestioningly; on the other hand, neither should they be categorically rejected.

If central actors of the international order act increasingly geopolitically, the EU must also be able to think along these lines, and then act if necessary. Evidenlty geopolitics alone is not a solution. But acting purely based on technical cooperation, values and multilateralism will not, on its own, bring about change for the better. Successful foreign policy needs both approaches.

To find a way to deal with the current geopolitical reality, one must first clarify what makes the concept of 'geopolitics'. The term is commonly used to analyse the interactions between geography and power. The basic assumption is that both parameters have an impact on relations between states. Political planning should therefore take their interaction into account. Beyond this definition, in public debate geopolitics is also often used as a synonym for power politics.

US, Russia, China: geopolitics today

Geopolitics have always had an impact on the international order and, accordingly, the foreign and security policy considerations of Germany (and all other countries). The establishment of NATO followed a geopolitical logic: a sufficient level of deterrence should prevent Soviet influence from spreading to Western Europe. The inclusion of the West Berlin enclave was therefore strategically important for the Federal Republic of Germany. And that's why NATO military planning knew that any potential Soviet invasion would have to be stopped at the 'Fulda Gap' at the latest to gain enough time for troop supplies from Western Europe and the US.

Another example from recent history is the EU-3 negotiations with Iran, when the EU set out to prevent a nuclear threat from emerging in Europe's neighbourhood. In this case, it's important to note that it was the Iranian nuclear weapons programme that was physically close to Europe and not the North Korean one. Thus geopolitics have played a role all along. Von der Leyen's demand should therefore be regarded as the recognition of an already existing political dynamic.

But why is geopolitics so prominent now? The answer is as banal as it is troubling: Because the United States, China and Russia – to name the most obvious examples – are attempting to create spheres of influence in a resurgent competition of great powers by using the instruments of power politics. The Trump administration says that the world is not a global community, but rather an arena in which states, corporations and other actors compete with each other. From the spaces of Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe, the US is withdrawing from political processes and institutions. The defence budget, on the other hand, will continue to increase. The primacy of politics no longer seems to be a given. Military power is becoming the chief currency.

The US-China trade dispute increasingly becomes a technology conflict and also shows itself to be a struggle for supremacy in the digital space. China is vying for territorial control as well: that's why it's building artificial islands in the South China Sea and placing rockets on them. The 'One Belt, One Road' strategy also follows a geopolitical and geo-economic logic. The establishing and control of connectivity infrastructure such as ports, pipelines and telecommunications networks in the markets of the future enables China to have political influence. We are experiencing the establishing of a new international order with Chinese characteristics.

At the same time, Russia advances into the areas of the Middle East and

Europe that the United States is withdrawing from. Syria and Ukraine are the most significant examples. In both cases, Moscow is demonstrating its increasing willingness to use military force to achieve political goals. Another example is the Balkans, where Russia is trying to torpedo rapprochement between the local countries and the EU through hybrid measures. And in the Arctic, where climate change is opening up new territory, all three major powers and the EU member states will eventually come into conflict. With the planting of a Russian titanium flag on the seabed at the North Pole, Russia has most impressively demonstrated its geopolitical logic of action.

The EU should be capable of acting geopolitically

In order to assert itself in this changing strategic environment, the EU must at least be able to think in the geopolitical categories of political players and opponents, even if it sets other priorities for itself or prefers a less power-focused international approach. This is one of the conclusions the EU must draw from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, after Kyiv and Brussels concluded an association agreement. And that is also what EU High Representative Josep Borrell demands when he says: 'The EU has to learn to use the language of power' – an example that again shows how, in public discourse, geopolitics and power politics function mostly as synonyms.

This doesn't mean that the EU should move with flying colours into the great power competition. Rather, the emphasis should be on preserving the multilateral and rules-based acquis. That is why the 'Alliance for Multilateralism' initiated by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas is so important. But if the key players no longer abide by the rules of the game, it's not enough to merely insist on their compliance. The normative demands of Germany and its allies are often shattered by the reality of the actions of less normative third parties. The resulting ineffectuality must give way to new ideas for political action. Hence, for the EU's capability to make global politics, the necessary condition is multilateralism – but geopolitics is the sufficient one.

However, in order to become an independent pole in the new world order – and not to be crushed in the conflict between liberal democracies and authoritarian systems – the EU must also be able to define its own global position in geopolitical terms. For Germany to contribute to this, an appropriate conceptual foundation and well-informed public debate are necessary. Among other things, local universities would need to broaden their course offerings. Unlike France and Great Britain, where

geopolitics and strategy have always ranked high on the university agenda, in Germany the focus in political science has been on governance studies or peace and conflict research. These disciplines can explain part of the global reality. But there also exists another part that is concerned with power and influence and seems to dominate present-day reality; it must be addressed accordingly.

What does this mean for German and European foreign policy? In an increasingly uncomfortable global political situation, we should not succumb to the siren call that claims that the world no longer thinks in terms of territories and power politics. Political strategies and instruments need to be adapted to radically changed conditions. This also includes the ability to think and act geopolitically.



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