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The metamorphosis of Europe and its geopolitical implications

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Abstract:

The notion of Europe transcends mere geographical boundaries, defining itself as a dynamic civilizational construct, the result of a long historical sedimentation of cultural, religious, and political processes. This analysis examines the continent's transition from a system of rival sovereign states consolidated by the Peace of Westphalia to a post-Westphalian model of integration embodied by the European Union, structured through *variable geometries*, a multilevel system that attempts to harmonize the core with its various associated peripheries. However, the evolution of the current geopolitical landscape reveals the exhaustion of the *geoliberal order*, which assumed that market interdependence and liberal democracy would guarantee lasting peace.

Keywords:

European Union, Europe, geography, geoeconomics, geostrategy, Russia, China, United States, NATO.

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Introduction

The definition of European space, and with it the idea of Europe, must be approached from a conceptual framework that situates the continent within the historical and cultural categories that have shaped what we call "the West." Europe cannot be conceived solely as a geographical entity delimited by physical borders, but rather as a civilizational construct, the result of a long process of historical, cultural, religious, and political sedimentation. From a geopolitical perspective, this foundational character of Western Europe has served both to structure the modern world order and to project a normative idea of civilization, anchored in Christian roots and the values of the Enlightenment, rationalism, and liberal humanism.

1. The West and the Western World: A Historical and Geopolitical Construct

The concept of the West originally emerged as a category opposed to the East, a concept that has evolved over time. Throughout the modern era, the notion of the West was consolidated as the laboratory of the scientific revolution, the modern state, and the capitalist economy. Thus, the West is less a spatial category than a form of political and cultural order, characterized by the primacy of the individual, the rule of law, and technical rationality.

The contemporary configuration of the “Western world” was consolidated after World War II, when Western Europe and the United States formed a strategic alliance around NATO (1949) and the Marshall Plan (1948), which was later joined by the European Economic Community (later the European Union). This alliance was not only military or economic, but also ideological: the defense of liberal democracy against Soviet authoritarianism and communism. Postwar Europe marked the institutionalization of a liberal order, in which political freedom and economic openness became instruments of power. By integrating, Europe projected an idea of the West that combined normative values (democracy, human rights, pluralism) with geostrategic structures that linked it, and subordinated it, to American hegemony[1].

[1] SEGERS, Mathieu y VAN HECKKE, Steven: *The Cambridge History of the European Union, Tomo I y II* (2023). This book addresses the historical sedimentation and construction of the modern order since the Enlightenment.

On the other hand, the term "European civilization" inherently contains a tension between universalism and particularism. Europe is considered the cradle of modern civilization and, at the same time, a unique space of cultural and historical diversity. However, this universalism contains a geopolitical paradox: while Europe proclaimed the universal values of freedom and autonomy, during the 19th and much of the 20th centuries it built exploitative and even genocidal colonial empires. "European civilization," in this sense, is not a homogeneous essence, but a system of cultural production that has combined processes of integration and exclusion. In geopolitical terms, this duality is reflected in Europe's ambivalence toward its periphery: the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Atlantic have been conceived as zones of projection and, at the same time, as borders.

This dialectic between center and periphery constitutes European identity, building its internal cohesion by delimiting and hierarchizing its immediate geographical environment. Thus, European civilization can be understood as an expansive system, based on three pillars:

1. Secular and scientific rationality as the foundation of technical power.
2. The nation-state as a sovereign political unit.
3. Market capitalism as the dominant economic structure.

This largely defines the European geopolitical ethos: a mixture of moral universalism and limited strategic pragmatism, which allows Europe to present itself as a normative reference point, but with a limited capacity for geopolitical action[2].

On the other hand, European culture is inseparable from the historical process of constructing continental identity. While humanism and rationalism constitute its foundational pillars, cultural and linguistic pluralism has been an essential element of its vitality. Europe has been home to multiple intellectual traditions (Latin, Germanic, Slavic, Scandinavian, Celtic, and Mediterranean) and a religious mosaic in which Christianity, Judaism, and, more recently, Islam, have coexisted subject to dynamics of conflict, tolerance, or assimilation.

[2] SEGERS, Mathieu y VAN HECKKE, Steven: *The Cambridge History of the European Union, Tomo I y II* (2023).

Thus, the contemporary European project must be understood as an institutional management of diversity. The European Union does not create a new cultural identity, but rather attempts to harmonize the multiple heritages that precede it. This cultural plurality constitutes both a source of strength (due to its capacity for adaptation and dialogue) and of fragility (due to the cyclical resurgence of nationalist, linguistic, or religious tensions), in which European historical memory, marked by civil wars, colonial empires, and genocides, also plays a structuring role. The lesson of history, especially after 1945, has given rise to a model of integration that seeks to replace power politics with rules-based politics, which is part of a broader geopolitical transformation: Europe, having lost its imperial centrality, seeks to redefine its power in normative and cooperative terms, within a reconfigured Eurasian space.

Consequently, contemporary European culture moves between three geopolitical dimensions[3]:

- Memory, which determines its collective identity and moral narrative.
- Diversity, which defines its complexity and internal tensions.
- Universality, which legitimizes its external projection as a "civil power."

2. The Concept of Europe, Political Europe, and the Place of the European Union as a Dynamic Entity

The concept of Europe has been the subject of multiple interpretations, both geographical and philosophical, political and geostrategic. More than a geographical continent, Europe has historically been a cultural and political construct. The European Union (EU) represents the most ambitious attempt to translate this tradition into a stable institutional form. However, its hybrid nature (neither entirely state-based nor purely intergovernmental) reflects the persistent ambiguity of the very notion of Europe.

The term "Europe" has roots that go back to classical antiquity. Its political significance began to solidify during the Middle Ages with the concept of Christianity, a model that fractured with the Renaissance and the Reformation, during which religious and political

[3] GARCÍA ÁLVAREZ, Jacobo: *Geopolítica de la Unión Europea* (2019). An academically focused book that, among many other things, defines Europe as a combination of civilizational, cultural, and strategic levels.

pluralism gave rise to a secular conception of Europe as a civilization. In the 18th century, Enlightenment thought bestowed upon Europe a universalist meaning: a space where progress and reason replaced dogmatic authority, conceiving of Europe as the vanguard of humanity's moral and political development. This universalist impulse has proven to be one of the pillars of "European geopolitical identity," endowing Europe with a normative vocation that transcends its physical borders. However, colonial expansion and the intra-European wars of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries highlighted the contradiction between ideals and practices. Europe became simultaneously a model of modernity and a focal point of conflict, some of which transcended to a global level. This dual nature explains why contemporary Europe has been defined less by its political unity than by its capacity to generate world orders, from the Concert of Vienna to the post-1945 liberal order[4].

The result is a Europe conceived as a “regulating idea” (in Kantian terms) rather than as a finished reality. Its identity, therefore, is not based on homogeneity, but on a permanent tension between integration and diversity, between history and project.

Thus, from a geopolitical perspective, the main problem with the idea of Europe has been its political structure. Unlike other civilizations, Europe was historically structured as a mosaic of sovereign states. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) consolidated this model, which became the guiding principle of the modern international system. However, the same pluralism that spurred the development of science, trade, and competition between states also generated a structural tendency toward conflict. The wars of the 18th century, the Napoleonic Wars, the nationalisms of the 19th century, and the two world wars of the 20th century revealed the fragility of European civilization in the face of its own fragmentation. Therefore, after 1945, the need arose to institutionalize peace through supranational cooperation, a response to the awareness that competition for power had led to its self-destruction. The European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and, subsequently, the European Economic Community (1957) symbolized the transition to a post-Westphalian order, in which sovereignty was partially shared to prevent the recurrence of conflicts.

This model gave rise to a new and unprecedented political entity: a union of states based on interdependence and the rule of law. Thus, the EU emerged as a "legal power," whose

[4] On European genesis and Westphalian order see SEGERS and VAN HECKE (2023), where they discuss the fragmentation after 1648 and the need to institutionalize peace after 1945.

legitimacy derives from normative consensus rather than coercive power. Its structure reflects a type of distributed sovereignty, where decisions are negotiated and national interests are balanced through common institutions: the Commission, the Council, the Parliament, and the Court of Justice[5].

But while the EU represents the most sophisticated attempt to give political form to the idea of Europe, its status as a geopolitical entity remains a subject of debate. Is the EU a regional power, a political civilization, or a moral project?

We can say that the EU constitutes a "functional configuration of power," whose scope depends on its capacity to exert influence in a competitive environment, especially within its geopolitical context. In other words, European integration emerges as a power management strategy: replacing national hegemony with multilateral governance capable of preserving continental stability.

However, the 21st century has brought with it a return to geopolitical realism, driven by rivalry between states and shifting alliances. In this context, the EU is forced to redefine its role, oscillating between its normative vocation (the power of example) and the need to adopt a more assertive strategic stance.

Thus, the concept of European strategic autonomy precisely reflects this tension. Europe aspires to act independently in defense of its interests, but its political structure, based on consensus and legality, limits its room for maneuver. Therefore, the diversity of internal political models (liberal and illiberal democracies, federalisms, parliamentary monarchies) is both a sign of democratic strength and a challenge to strategic action. In this sense, the EU cannot be conceived as a traditional superpower, but rather as a process-based power: it considers its power to reside in its capacity to institutionalize norms and extend governance regimes beyond its borders, especially in its immediate geographical environment in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe[6].

On the other hand, from a conceptual perspective, the EU can be interpreted as the institutional continuation of the European civilizational project. In its normative

[5] SEGERS, Mathieu y VAN HECKKE, Steven: *The Cambridge History of the European Union, Tomo I y II* (2023).

[6] POLLAK, Johannes: *The European Union Geopolitics: the Lackluster World Power* (2025). The book analyzes the EU as both subject and heir, discussing the EU's inability to be a traditional superpower and its nature as a process-based power.

architecture, the EU integrates the three fundamental elements of the European legacy: humanism (as a moral principle), enlightened reason (as a legal principle), and cooperation (as a political principle). This legacy transforms it into a "form of geopolitics of consensus," where power is exercised not through coercion, but through regulation. Hence the concept of European soft power: the capacity to influence other actors by attracting them through its successful political, economic, and social model.

However, this model faces clear limitations. In a world of revisionist powers and partial deglobalization, the EU needs to move beyond being a normative power to also be a strategic power. The war in Ukraine (2022) marked a turning point, forcing Europe to rearticulate its notion of security, which is affecting its relationship with the US and the Eurasian region.

Therefore, the idea of Europe is undergoing a process of geopolitical redefinition, facing the dilemma of maintaining its internal coherence while projecting its global influence. Europe can no longer be defined solely by its cultural past and regulatory will, but also by its capacity to manage change in a multipolar world.

3. Geographical and political limits of Europe and the European Union: a Europe of institutionally variable geometries

The question of Europe's boundaries (geographic, political, and cultural) is complex and controversial, given that Europe is an indeterminate space, a continent whose identity has been constructed more by historical and cultural processes than by physical criteria. This geographical ambiguity is reflected in the EU itself, whose institutional evolution has given rise to a "Europe of variable geometries," in which different degrees of integration coexist within the same political framework. Therefore, the study of European boundaries requires a multifaceted approach, considering physical geography, political history, and institutional dynamics as dimensions of the same process.

From its origins, Europe has been defined as a borderland within the Eurasian supercontinent. From a strictly geographical perspective, Europe's natural borders are imprecise: the Ural Isthmus, the Caucasus, the Bosporus, and the Dardanelles are more lines of transition than true borders. Europe is a peninsula of the Asian continent, whose geopolitical autonomy derives not so much from its geography as from its distinct history

compared to the East and its pursuit of internal cohesion. For this reason, Europe has been defined more as a cultural space than a territorial one. In fact, the contemporary concept of Europe as a "continent" is the result of a geopolitics of differentiation. European borders are not fixed lines, but rather "contact zones" where cultures and even civilizations converge. The Balkans, the Caucasus, and the fracture in Ukraine are paradigmatic examples of this hybrid condition, where Europe is diluted and redefined through conflict, migration, and external influence. In this sense, Europe can be conceived as a system of mobile borders, in which geographical lines are subordinated to political and cultural logic. European borders are, ultimately, "borderlines of power"—that is, their location and meaning depend on the balance of power among Eurasian powers, especially between Russia, Turkey, and Western powers and organizations. Thus, at the political level, the notion of Europe has been transformed according to the balance of power and integration projects.

For centuries, the "European system" was synonymous with a balance of power, articulated around empires and nation-states, a product of the Peace of Westphalia. The EU, therefore, represents an attempt to build a post-Westphalian order, in which sovereignty is shared and peace is institutionalized. This process has created the absence of a definitive political border. Where does Europe end? To what extent can or should the European Union expand? These are central questions in recent geopolitical thought.

The eastward enlargement, which began in 2004 and culminated in 2013 with the accession of Croatia, extended the EU's political borders to Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. This expansion profoundly altered the structure of the continent, integrating countries with very diverse histories, cultures, and geostrategic trajectories. This expansion responded both to a moral logic (the reunification of the continent after the Cold War and the expansion of democracy) and to a logic of power (the consolidation of the Western sphere of influence, under US domination, against Russia).

However, Europe's political borders do not coincide with its cultural or economic borders. Turkey, a candidate for membership since 1987, has seen its accession blocked for political and cultural reasons. Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, and Georgia, although geographically European, find themselves in a zone of strategic ambiguity: they aspire to EU integration but are not fully integrated. This situation has resulted in an enlarged but

not cohesive Europe, a community of states that share basic norms but with very different levels of integration and institutional capacity. This asymmetric model poses considerable geopolitical challenges, as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is conditioned by the different and divergent perceptions of threats among member states[7].

This notion of a Europe of variable geometries is key to understanding the continent's institutional structure, with regard to the different degrees of participation and commitment of states to the EU, NATO, or those options led by Moscow. Thus, Europe is not a homogeneous bloc, but a multi-level system articulated by concentric and eccentric rings, with varying degrees of integration and diverse alliances. This variable geometry reflects the attempt to reconcile political unity with national diversity. At the EU's core are the states fully integrated into the Eurozone and the Schengen Area; in a second ring are the member states with voluntary exclusion regimes (such as Denmark or Poland in certain areas); and on the periphery are the states associated through the European Economic Area or bilateral agreements (such as Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, or the United Kingdom). This diversity is also observed in NATO.

But this flexible model poses strategic dilemmas. On the one hand, it allows integration to be adapted to national specificities, but on the other hand, it generates an institutional asymmetry that weakens the coherence of foreign and security policy. This variable geometry seems to lead to a stratified Europe, where political and economic power is distributed unevenly, reinforcing tensions between the core and the peripheries.

In fact, the war in Ukraine and the energy crises of 2022-2024 have reignited the debate on the need for a multi-speed Europe, capable of acting effectively in matters of defense, energy, and foreign policy, without depending on the unanimous consensus of the 27 member states. To this end, an institutional reconfiguration based on functional circles is proposed[8]:

- A political core of states committed to strategic integration;
- An economic ring of associated partners;

[7] GARCÍA ÁLVAREZ, Jacobo*: Geopolitics of the European Union* (2019.
[8] Geographical Ambiguity and Variable Geometries): These concepts are direct contributions from Jacobo García Álvarez (2019)6. He is the author who develops the concept of the "Europe of variable geometries" and borders as "contact zones".

- And a cooperative periphery focused on the European Neighbourhood and the Eastern Partnership.

Furthermore, Europe also has normative boundaries that define who can be considered part of the European project. The Copenhagen Criteria (1993) (democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and a market economy) constitute the political standard of contemporary European identity, that is, of access to the EU. However, their application has proven to be selective and, at times, contradictory.

Thus, the European project faces a crisis of normative coherence[9]: while the EU defends liberal democracy as a universal principle, it tolerates illiberal tendencies in some of its members and cooperates with authoritarian regimes in its geopolitical environment. This tension reveals that Europe's limits are also defined by its capacity—or willingness, or lack thereof—to defend its own values. The issue of migration and neighborhood policies illustrate this paradox. In this way, the Mediterranean has become Europe's symbolic border, where its universalist vocation and its need for geopolitical control clash. Thus, the European border now functions as a "risk management instrument," where security, identity, and morality intersect.

4. The more specific geographical context: location, maritime character and territorial fragmentation

Europe is not merely a product of history or culture: it is also a unique geographical reality, marked by its peninsular position relative to Asia, its territorial fragmentation, its complex hydrography, and its long-standing interaction with the surrounding seas. This geographical dimension has determined both its economic development and its strategic orientation, establishing the material foundations upon which its history has been built.

The geography of Europe—its peninsular position, its maritime character, its latitudinal diversity, and its territorial fragmentation—has been the basis of its history and strategy. Europe cannot be understood apart from its physical space: its geographical dispersion has fostered political decentralization and cultural innovation, while its maritime openness

[9] THEUNS, Tom: *Protecting Democracy in Europe*; 2024. The book analyzes the crisis of normative coherence and the rise of illiberal democracies.

has enabled its expansion and global power.

Thus, the EU is the result of the institutional territorialization of a fragmented geography, whose success depends on its capacity to transform geographical diversity into political cohesion. Europe is “a peninsula that learned to think like a world.” Its geography does not limit it: it defines it[10].

5. Historical and Geopolitical Context: Continental Evolution, 19th-Century Europeanization, Armed Conflicts, and the Genesis of the European Union

The history of the European continent can be interpreted as a constant tension between fragmentation and convergence, between the centrifugal forces stemming from its political and cultural diversity and the centripetal forces that have sought to articulate the idea of a unified Europe. Geography and history intertwine here in an essential dialectic: Europe has been both the laboratory of modern power and the stage for its excesses. The geopolitical evolution of Europe, from the formation of modern states to the creation of the EU, reflects the search for a balance between sovereignty, security, and legitimacy, and constitutes the historical foundation of its current position in the international system[11].

For centuries, Europe was the center of world civilization, but also the main arena of conflict. The balance of power system that emerged after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) established an interstate logic of rival sovereignties, based on the principle of non-interference and the territorial legitimacy of states. This model, inherited from medieval political fragmentation, allowed for the coexistence of multiple sovereign actors within the same civilizational space, but also generated a constant risk of war.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the European balance of power transformed into a global geopolitical system, driven by the Industrial Revolution, colonialism, and maritime expansion. Europe ceased to be a mere continent and became the unifying core of the modern world. The European Enlightenment project—based on economic rationality,

[10] GARCÍA ÁLVAREZ, Jacobo: *Geopolítica de la Unión Europea*, (2019).

[11] SEGERS and VAN HECKE: *The Cambridge History of the European Union* (2023). Segers and Van Hecke's historical synthesis covers the fragmentation after 1648, the Europeanization of the 19th century, the crisis of European centrality after the world wars, the reflexive process of integration as a geopolitical reconstruction strategy after 1945, and the need to institutionalize peace.

scientific progress, and the expansion of trade—was projected outward in the form of a geoliberal order that combined economic hegemony with civilizational legitimacy.

The 19th century was the century of the "Europeanization of the world." During this period, European ideas, institutions, and economic models expanded globally, structuring the contemporary international system. The British Industrial Revolution, the financial hegemony of London and Paris, and colonial expansion created a global network dominated by Europe.

This Europeanization was not only economic but also cultural and ideological. The notions of progress, citizenship, rationality, and the modern state became universalized as part of the European civilizational imaginary. While the 19th century lacked a formal policy of continental integration, it consolidated a shared space of knowledge, science, and normative values.

Simultaneously, the geopolitical foundations of modern Europe were forged. The expansion of railways, new national borders, and the balance of power between the central powers (Germany, France, Austria-Hungary) and the peripheral powers (Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy) generated a mosaic of forces incompatible with lasting stability.

The 19th century was also an era of strategic paradoxes: while Europe exported its values to the world, it incubated within itself the tensions that would ultimately destroy it. Nationalism, initially liberating, transformed into an exclusionary ideology. Imperial competition degenerated into militarization and the exploitation of subjugated peoples. The European civilizational project fractured under the weight of its own contradictions.

Thus, this very impulse contained the seeds of systemic rivalry. German unification (1871), the rise of nationalism, and colonial competition altered the balance of power. Europe, transformed into a global power, entered a process of imperial hypertrophy that led to two world wars, which constituted the fundamental geopolitical rupture of the European system. With them, Europe lost the centrality it had maintained for four centuries, ceding prominence to non-European superpowers.

World War I (1914–1918) destroyed the imperial order and gave rise to a new political map based on nation-states, which emerged from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Tsarist regimes. However, the lack of a robust collective security structure (following the failure of the League of Nations) revealed Europe's inability to govern itself

geopolitically.

World War II (1939–1945) was an even greater cataclysm: it devastated the continent and divided Europe into two spheres of influence, one of them non-European. The Iron Curtain, stretching from Stettin to the Adriatic, divided the continent into two ideological and strategic systems. Europe became the target of the strategies of the United States and the Soviet Union. The loss of European autonomy was complete.

Thus, the Cold War profoundly transformed the relationship between space and power in Europe, with an Eastern bloc subordinated to Soviet logic and a Western bloc subordinated to the United States. The Marshall Plan and NATO consolidated a model of strategic dependence and paved the way for European cooperation, while conditioning it. In this way, the idea of European integration arose precisely as a response to this loss of autonomy. Faced with the devastation of war and the bipolar threat, European leaders—Monnet, Schuman, Adenauer, and De Gasperi—conceived of integration as a project of geopolitical reconstruction, rather than a purely economic one.

The creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) was the first step toward the institutionalization of European power. By integrating strategic sectors under a common authority, the determining factors of the Franco-German conflict were neutralized. Subsequently, the Treaty of Rome (1957) gave rise to the European Economic Community (EEC), establishing a common market and a supranational political framework. This stage should be interpreted as an attempt at the geopolitical reconstruction of the continent from its center, articulating Western Europe as a cohesive bloc against the East. In fact, economic integration was inseparable from the strategic context of the Cold War. The EEC was consolidated under the security umbrella of NATO, which allowed for the development of an autonomous European identity, but within the Atlantic framework.

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), integration acquired a new dimension: that of continental reunification. Eastward expansion represented a dual process: the expansion of the market and democracy, but also the projection of European normative power in the post-Soviet space. This stage can be understood as the institutionalization of the idea of Europe, understood as a civilizing project. The European Union, born from the Maastricht Treaty (1992), was not only an economic structure, but also a geostrategic commitment to transform the continent's diversity into a system of

shared governance.

6. Europe and the European Union in the World: Realities and Conditions in the 21st Century

21st-century Europe aspires to be a civilizational power, but lacks hegemony. The continent that defined the international system for centuries now faces a progressive loss of strategic centrality. The European Union, the institutional heir to the integration project born after 1945, represents the most ambitious attempt to translate a civilizational identity into a post-Westphalian political structure. However, its capacity to act as a global actor is limited by internal tensions, vulnerabilities, and geoeconomic and geostrategic dependencies.

Thus, the EU experiences a paradox: it is a space of prosperity, norms, and regulatory influence, but it lacks the traditional instruments of hard power. This is why it is said that the Union is a regulatory and structural power, but not a hegemonic one. Its economic and regulatory weight is undeniable, although declining, but its autonomy and strategic projection remain clearly insufficient. In fact, since the beginning of the 21st century, the EU has sought to redefine its international role, structuring its discourse around the concept of "European normative power"—that is, the capacity to influence the behavior of other actors through values, standards, and norms. This deeply idealistic conception worked while the international environment was favorable and not threatening. However, the erosion of Western power and the return of competition between powers are clearly calling into question the viability of this model. The annexation of Crimea (2014), the war in Ukraine (2022), the growing assertiveness of China, coupled with the clear and undeniable hostility of the US, seem to be forcing the Union to evolve from a normative power to a strategic one[12].

The war in Ukraine appears to mark the end of the "European geoliberal order," the one that assumed that market expansion, interdependence, and liberal democracy would guarantee peace. Contemporary reality demands a rethinking of European power, where security, defense, and industrial autonomy are once again at the center of the agenda:

[12] YOUNGS, Richard: *Europe: Geoliberal order and the test of war* (2025). In the book he analyzes the end of the geoliberal order after the war in Ukraine and the need for the EU to learn the language of power.

"Europe must learn to speak the language of power"[13]. However, the purported European strategic autonomy faces three structural obstacles:

1. Military dependence on the umbrella of the United States and NATO.
2. Internal political fragmentation among member states.
3. Geoeconomic and critical resource dependence on China and the United States (energy, technology, defense, AI, etc.).

The current international system is characterized by an increasingly conflictive (unbalanced) multipolarity, in which the EU simultaneously faces its strategic dependence on the United States, systemic competition with China, and the revisionist threat from Russia. Consequently, the EU oscillates between its universalist vocation and its material limitations, between the cosmopolitan ideal and the need for power vis-à-vis the great powers of the moment. With regard to the United States, the transatlantic relationship that, until now, has been the cornerstone of European security is being clearly challenged by the American hegemon, its architect. NATO continues to guarantee collective defense, and the war in Ukraine has reaffirmed Europe's military dependence on Washington. However, this relationship presents structural tensions: divergences in trade, industrial, digital, and energy policies, and the realization that American leadership is selective, volatile, and, at times, hostile (as demonstrated by its ambitions regarding Greenland).

Regarding Russia, the invasion of Ukraine has redefined the European security map. Russia, perceived during the 1990s as a potential partner, has become a hostile strategic adversary. This conflict not only reconfigures the post-Soviet space but also reaffirms Europe's eastern border as a geopolitical boundary with strategic consequences. NATO's expansion into Finland and Sweden, and the strengthening of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), appear to consolidate a new axis of confrontation (and containment?) with Moscow, which, for now, is playing out in the latter's favor.

China, for its part, represents a more structural than purely military challenge. The EU maintains an ambivalent relationship with Beijing: partner, competitor, and systemic

[13] BORREL, Josep. Available at https://www.abc.com.py/internacionales/2024/11/30/borrell-europa-esta-en-peligro-y-ha-de-aprender-a-hablar-el-lenguaje-del-poder/, accessed on 22 January 2026.

rival[14]. Europe is heavily dependent on the Chinese economy for its trade and critical technology supply chains, but fears disruption through geoeconomic pressure and China's penetration of strategic sectors (ports, energy, telecommunications, etc.).

Thus, the triangle (US, China, and Russia) is defining the new Eurasian order, in which Europe is no longer the center, but a pivot between these powers. Its ability to maintain its autonomy will depend on its capacity to balance its transatlantic dependencies with its Indo-Pacific strategy and the management of its eastern neighborhood[15].

But the EU's global position is also determined by its internal contradictions. The Union is not a state, but a hybrid system of shared sovereignties, where foreign and security policy remains largely a national competence. The growing gap between European technocratic governance and national democratic sovereignties fuels citizen disaffection and the rise of Eurosceptic or illiberal movements, undermining the cohesion and external coherence of the Union's policy[16].

The Europe of variable geometries is expressed here in its greatest complexity: different degrees of integration, differentiated paces, and divergent agendas coexist within the same institutional framework. The challenge is not only strategic but also ontological, since it is logical to ask whether Europe can act as a united front without being a single state. This would require the capacity to coordinate policies on defense, energy, digitalization, and neighborly relations without requiring political unanimity, thus articulating coherent power without sacrificing the diversity that constitutes its essence.

In the geoeconomic sphere, Europe maintains a prominent but vulnerable position. The EU remains the world's third-largest economy, a leader in trade regulations and sustainability standards, but highly dependent on raw materials, energy, and advanced technology. The energy crisis stemming from the war in Ukraine has revealed the structural fragility of its external dependency model. Furthermore, global competition for

[14] EUROPEAN COMMISSION JOIN (2019) 5 final: EU China – A strategic outlook; available at https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf, accessed on 22 January 2026.

[15] BRANDS, Hal: *The Eurasian Century: Hot wars, cold wars, and the making of the modern world* (2025); in which he analyzes the role of Europe as a pivot in the new conflictive multipolarity.

[16] On political fragmentation and democratic legitimacy see: THEUNS, Tom: Protecting Democracy in Europe; Pluralism, Autocracy and the Future of the EU (2024) and Book on the Future of Europe, TEPSA (2025), available at https://tepsa.eu/book-on-the-future-of-europe/., accessed on January 22, 2026.

strategic resources (rare earth elements, semiconductors, etc.) presents new challenges.

Thus, the European economy finds itself caught between two hegemonic models: Chinese state capitalism and American technocapitalism[17]. The European response has been to promote a regulatory geoeconomy, based on the creation of standards (the Data Protection Act, the AI Act, the Carbon Border Mechanism) that export global standards and project structural power without resorting to force, but which appears to have overstepped its regulatory bounds, thus hindering its economy[18]. However, this strategy faces limitations. The fragmentation of capital markets, decades of low defense spending, and technological dependence have transformed the EU into an actor that exerts influence more through its regulatory power than through its coercive capacity.

The crisis of liberalism does not necessarily imply European decline. While the EU cannot compete with the major powers in terms of military power or resource control, it can nevertheless play a crucial role in global governance. Unfortunately, there are five main strategic limitations for the European project:

1. Demographic sustainability and immigration management.
2. Energy and technological autonomy.
3. Common defense and cybersecurity.
4. Internal cohesion versus political fragmentation.
5. The democratic legitimacy of the European project.

These challenges define not only its foreign policy but also its geopolitical identity. In a world where power is redistributing towards Asia and the Global South, Europe must redefine itself not as a hegemonic center but as a relational power, capable of mediating, regulating, and articulating multilateral coalitions.

Thus, Europe's future will clearly not be about regaining dominance over Eurasia, but about learning to manage its interdependence, addressing its geoeconomic vulnerabilities and lack of strategic cohesion.

[17] POLLAK, Johannes: *The European Union Geopolitics: the Luckluster World Power,* (2025)
[18] EUROPEAN COMMISSION: *The future of European competitiveness: Report by Mario Draghi*; available at https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/draghi-report_en, accessed on 22 January 2026.

7. Conclusions

From the perspective of contemporary geopolitics, the idea of Europe combines three levels: civilizational, cultural, and strategic. At the civilizational level, Europe is the source of Western modernity and the liberal international order. At the cultural level, it is a mosaic of identities in constant interaction, and at the strategic level, it is an entity that seeks to articulate political power in a multipolar global system.

This threefold dimension explains why the European Union must be understood not only as an economic or institutional organization, but also as an attempt to reconstruct Europe's geopolitical significance. Thus, the idea of Europe implies both a historical self-definition (what Europe is and what values underpin it) and a strategic projection (how it fits into the world).

The geopolitical study of Europe must begin by recognizing that its borders are territorial, symbolic, and normative. The "European boundary" is not drawn only on maps, but also in ideas: between universalism and particularism, between civilization and power, between identity and openness.

Europe is not a closed spatial unit, but a constantly expanding and redefining political process. Its geographical boundaries are porous, its political borders contingent, and its identity plural. The European Union represents an attempt to give coherence to this diversity through a flexible institutional system, but this very flexibility is a source of vulnerability.

Therefore, the concept of Europe and its embodiment in the EU constitute a dynamic identity, the product of a historical process of political and cultural construction. Europe is neither a natural unity nor a static civilization, but a space in constant transformation, where geography intertwines with history and culture with strategy.

Thus, Europe is simultaneously a geographical form and a political idea: its power does not reside in the immobility of its borders, but in the capacity to project its order beyond them. Variable geometry is, in this sense, a manifestation of European complexity, but also an expression of the lack of complete political unity.

The question of Europe's borders cannot be answered solely with maps or treaties. Europe ends (and begins) where its political project manages to establish itself, since its borders reflect its strength, its will, and its credibility as an ongoing project.

The European project can be understood, in historical terms, as a process of reflective Europeanization: a reconfiguration of the continental space through mechanisms of cooperation, integration, and regulation.

But, while the EU has not managed to translate its institutional density into equivalent geopolitical power, its success lies in having created an unprecedented space of stability and prosperity on a continent historically prone to conflict.

Europeanization has also entailed a reinterpretation of territory: from a space of rivalry to a space of interdependence, in which the EU represents a post-Westphalian experiment, where sovereignty is distributed among multiple and overlapping levels of authority. In this sense, European integration is an institutional innovation that redefines the relationship between power, space, and legitimacy. Thus, European history, from the Romans to the 21st century, can be summarized as a trajectory of internal geopolitical transformation: from imperial competition to supranational cooperation, from centrality to interdependence.

Thus, the transition from imperial power to regulatory power, and from regulatory power to strategic power, constitutes the guiding thread of European evolution. The Union must learn to combine strategic autonomy with internal pluralism and the defense of its values with the pragmatic management of its interests.

The result is a Europe that, despite the loss of its traditional hegemony, retains, for the moment, normative and structural relevance in the international system. Europe is not so much a world power as a way of ordering the world. In a context of systemic crises (energy, climate, technological, and geopolitical), this capacity for order, rather than domination, will define its place in the 21st century.

In the 21st century, Europe faces its geopolitical maturity. It can no longer aspire to be the center of the world, but neither can it afford irrelevance. Its role should be that of a global equalizer, a space of stability in an uncertain international system.

Its challenge lies in translating the ideal of European civilization into effective power, without losing its normative essence. In geopolitical terms, Europe finds itself at a crossroads between three possible scenarios:

1. Consolidating itself as a cooperative regional power.
2. Evolving into a strategic federation with real autonomy from the great powers.

3. Fragmenting under the pressure of centrifugal forces and external challenges.

The future of Europe will depend on its ability to reconcile the philosophical ideal with geopolitical reality and transform its plurality into an instrument of power, rather than an obstacle.

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