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Andrea Colli

## Europe between the end of the Cold War and the Global Zeitenwende. From economic pivot to geopolitical wayfarer

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## **Abstract\***

This paper focuses on the identity of the European Union. The current tectonic changes under way in the World's geopolitical order are deeply challenging to the *raison d'être* of the Union, caught between its status of leading (geo)economic power, and its weakness as an international political actor. The reality of the geopolitical competition among great powers for the control of the material and immaterial "spheres of power" is clearly based not solely on the prerequisite of economic strength and leadership in the global economic space, but also on aspects linked to "size". The EU has the dimensions of a "Continental Empire" (as all the current great powers are) but lacks the consciousness of being potentially a geopolitical leader able to stand as an equal amidst other leaders. This "imperial" vocation is however impeded by a number of cultural, institutional and political obstacles that would have to be urgently removed for the EU to be able to play the role of a geopolitical pivot in the near future.





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# Europe between the end of the Cold War and the Global Zeitenwende. From economic pivot to geopolitical wayfarer

Andrea Colli

## Introduction

The Russian “military special operation” in Ukraine is still going on, nearly two years after its inception in February 2022. The profoundly shocking nature of this event – an anachronistic, nineteenth-century style military aggression perpetrated against a sovereign State in patent violation of the respect owed to territorial sovereignty and integrity – serves, amongst other things, to place in question the very purpose and *raison d’être* of the European Union.

To put it in a simple (perhaps too simple) way, in front of the “Global Zeitenwende”, as the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has tellingly described the great geopolitical revolution (an “epochal tectonic shift”) now under way, exemplified in the most terrible fashion by the Russian-Ukrainian war,<sup>1</sup> the European Union is at a crossroads. It is, by the inescapable force of history, called upon to find a way to forge its future as a “great power”. The real (and truly problematic) question is: “how”.

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1 Olaf Scholz, “The Global Zeitenwende. How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2023. Retrievable [here](#).

According to some commentators, as well as to influential EU leaders, notwithstanding her aspirations to become a “a power of the first rank”, the European Union lacks of some the fundamental attributes needed to fulfil her aspiration to implement a consistent foreign policy strategy in the present conjuncture, one characterized by the aggressive assertiveness of China and Russia, and the USA’s oscillation between internationalism and isolationism. As noted by Sir Michael Leigh, one of the most authoritative experts in the field of European foreign policy, “structural limitations “are inhibiting the Union’s foreign policy. These structural limitations include, for example, internal divisions regarding the handling of crises around the World, as well as her intrinsic nature as an economic power, which involves a “de facto” dependence on her trade with Russia and China, especially marked in the case of some pivotal members, notably Germany. As a consequence, the Union’s stance with regard to the ongoing process of decoupling of the US from China still tends to vary.

A second structural problem has to do with divisions over security, as well as diplomatic clashes, not solved by the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty: member states tend to manage security and diplomatic issues autonomously, not to speak of the vetoes used strategically by dissident member states, as for instance Mr. Orban’s Hungary.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, according to this vision, since the EU “was never meant to be a major foreign and security player”, its only chance of playing a primary role in the “World of Tomorrow” would be to leverage on (and perhaps further strengthen) her

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2 Michael Leigh, “The EU: A geopolitical or geo-economic power?”, GIS reports on line, July 9, 2021, available [here](#).

geo-economic influence. For the near future, geo-economic capabilities are thus, from this perspective, much more important than geopolitical aspirations.

### A (maybe still too soft) War “by Other Means”

Is Europe, therefore, leveraging *effectively* on her geo-economic power? Here too there is some cause for scepticism.

In confronting Mr. Putin’s ruthless aggression against Ukraine, the EU has so far certainly reverted to its geo-economic power, but in a way far less effective than the most enthusiastic supporters of this strategy would probably consider acceptable.

The Union has, indeed, leveraged on standard means of a geoeconomic nature, starting with the imposition of several rounds of sanctions, including those towards individuals; the de facto exclusion of some (though not all) the Russian banks from the SWIFT system (by the way, the debate regarding this measure started to reveal some of the soft spots in the European response); active support for the fearless Ukrainian resistance through the supply of weaponry, financial resources and training ; an acceleration in the initiatives aimed at reducing dependence on Russian imports, essentially in energy, minerals and basic foodstuffs; in some cases, the “nationalization” of Russian assets on European territory, as happened in the case of Gazprom Germania.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, European multinationals with a presence on Russian soil have been showing a remarkable variety of behaviours. Almost all those totally or partially owned by their respective governments have suspended or even shut down their operations

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<sup>3</sup> Melissa Eddy, “German Government Nationalizes Gas Unit Seized From Gazprom”, *The New York Times*, 14 November 2022, retrievable [here](#).

(even if in some important cases, as for instance that of the French Renault company, the door has been left open for a possible future comeback).<sup>4</sup> Non-State owned companies are displaying a much less coherent behaviour, without pressure being exerted by their respective governments,<sup>5</sup> with a very few exceptions.<sup>6</sup>

The effectiveness of EU economic pressure on Russia is, overall, still far from being straightforward; thus, while the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Joseph Borrell, sounds stubbornly optimistic,<sup>7</sup> the opinion of other observers is much more nuanced.<sup>8</sup>

Quoting, in sum, a bestseller published in 2016, right at the beginning of the trade war between China and the US,<sup>9</sup> the Union has started to fight its own “War by other means”, against Russia; this strategy has been, so far, reasonably effective, but marked by several flaws. The EU has been, in sum, leveraging on geoeconomics as her main tool of statecraft; this is not proving effective enough, I regret to say.

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4 “Renault sells Russia’s Avtovaz stake, but leaves room for return”, *Reuters* May 16, 2022. Retrievable [here](#).

5 See for instance Giorgio Leali, “French companies grapple with staying in Russia despite mounting public pressure. Only a few have shuttered operations there, and Paris isn’t demanding it”, *Politico*, 23 October 2022, retrievable [here](#); Elliott Smith, “Nearly a year on from the supposed Russian exodus, most major companies have yet to withdraw”, *CNBC*, 31 January 2023, retrievable [here](#)

6 Ben Martin, “Chancellor puts more pressure on companies to pull out of Russia” *The Times*, March 13, 2022. Retrievable [here](#).

7 Joseph Borrell, “Yes, the sanctions against Russia are working”, *European Union External Action*, August 26, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

8 Valerii Nohzin and David Bellamy, “Are the economic sanctions against Russia actually working?” *Euronews*, June 28, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

9 Robert D. Blackwill, Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means. Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2016.

## The EU geoeconomic illusion

During the years of the hyperglobalisation process following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the European Union accumulated an enormous geoeconomic power, thanks to the acceleration in the process of territorial integration as most of the economies of the former Eastern Bloc were brought into the Union. She has done so thanks to an unshakeable faith in liberal principles (deregulation, monetary orthodoxy, fiscal austerity, free trade and capital transfers *within* its borders, as well as the role of multilateral institutions of global governance *outside* its borders), and thanks to a unique geopolitical framework, better known as the “US. unipolar moment”. Implicitly protected by the umbrella of the US-led Northern Atlantic Alliance, the Union (and first and foremost those of its members particularly oriented towards the benefits of foreign trade, such as Germany, France, and Italy) has therefore been blessed by the growing intensity of the global integration process. This has meant an unshakeable consciousness of being an economic superpower in a context of global liberalism and liberalization, and the ahistorical illusion that the benefits of globalization and geopolitical unipolarity were destined to last, probably for a very long time, if not forever. Today, instead, these principles are being vigorously shaken by an aggressive Chinese mercantilism, by a US.-triggered trade war which endangers the once smoothly working mechanisms of global integration, and, indeed, by the rise of assertive revisionist powers. The EU’s reliance on a weaponization of its economic might is, therefore, quite understandable.<sup>10</sup> How-

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10 See Matthias Matthijs and Sophie Meunier, “Europe’s Geoeconomic Revolution. How the EU Learned to Wield Its Real Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2023. Retrievable [here](#).

ever, at this point an important (and in some ways a radical) question arises: will leveraging on her superior geoeconomic power be sufficient for Europe to stand among other great (super) powers in the overall structure of the next World Order, the one that is taking shape right now. A shape very different from that of the past, for now realist assertiveness is mixed with geopolitical ambitions.

### How globalization resurrected geopolitics

The end of the Cold War started a phase in global history which resembled in many respects the geopolitical World Order that had characterized a large part of the nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The latter was an order based on a “concert of powers”, ultimately acting under the uncontested British dominance deriving from its overwhelming command of the seas. The fall of the Berlin Wall saw again the emergence of a unique hegemon, the USA, in a World Order characterized by a widespread consensus regarding liberal values, and the presence of two geo-economic leaders sharing the American political and economic vision: a European Union expanding her economic power, through a policy of enlargement of her “borders”; and a Japan that, even if navigating troubled economic waters, still proudly played the role of Asian pivot. These three were also the protagonists of Lester Thurow’s bestseller, “Head-to-Head: the coming economic battle between Europe, Japan and America”, published in 1993, which was all about economic superiority – in sum, forget about geopolitical competition. A collapsed and fragmented former Soviet empire was politically unstable, economically devastated, and under a disoriented leadership all too eager to adopt, and



quickly, Western economic models and structural reforms – overlooking the dramatic social consequences. A developing China was courting the West as well, hoping both to attract Western investments and also to gain access in short order to the global community of the WTO.

But then globalization turned this “unipolar moment” on its head, putting in motion forces of unexpected power. The pervasive comeback of a truly global economy between the last decades of the previous millennium and the first decade of the present one, engendered several illusions. The first was “the end of history”, quoting Francis Fukuyama, that is, the end of the ideological struggle between two opposed universalistic visions of the World, Communism and Capitalism, and with it the triumph of the liberal vision of the “Washington consensus”. The second illusion was the widespread belief about the benefits of global integration, in terms of income convergence between countries. The third – even if less openly mentioned – illusion was that all this was taking place under one important condition: the end of geopolitical confrontation between great powers and the establishment of a new stable World Order.

The acceleration of global integration meant, indeed, convergence for some.<sup>11</sup> Let’s limit ourselves to just two countries. First, globalization (and its 2001 access to the WTO) transformed China into the “workshop of the World”. In 1999, after two decades of reforms the GDP per capita was nearly 900 dollars (at 2021 constant prices), while in 2013 it was well over 7 thousand. Russia trod a slightly different path, becoming the World’s (and in particular Europe’s) energy provider. The Russian leadership used the energy rent to consolidate its power and a domestic consensus. The per

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11 See Branko Milanovic, “The Great Convergence. Global Equality and Its Discontents”, *Foreign Affairs*, June 14, 2013, retrievable [here](#).

capita GDP (at 2021 constant prices) rose from 1330 dollars in 1999 to nearly 16 thousand in 2013. Then it was that the West discovered that economic growth and global integration had at least three important effects. The first was to strengthen economically these two powers, China and Russia, which became increasingly eager to reinstate themselves as protagonists on the international stage, revising the Western-based order. In this perspective, the 2007 anti-NATO speech given by Vladimir Putin in Munich sounded the alarm. The second was to reintroduce a new version of the Cold War ideological clash, this time between liberal democratic values and the supposed efficiency of authoritarian regimes. Again, it was an outspoken Putin who, in 2019, openly told two appalled interviewers from the Financial Times that “liberalism has outlived its purposes”. Third, globalization resurrected the ghost of geopolitics as a zero-sum-game among powers of an imperial nature and with imperial aspirations.<sup>12</sup>

### “Imperial” Powers are back

Top revisionist powers such as Russia and China share “imperial” dimensions in terms of population and territories, comparable to those of the US. Differently from Russia, to these same attributes China adds a control over important technologies, while Russia exerts a firm control over a vast endowment of natural resources of every conceivable kind.<sup>13</sup> In terms of its military budget, the US. is still spending far

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12 Robert Kaplan, “The Return of Empire and Great Power Competition”, speech at the United States Army Heritage & Education Centre, available [here](#).

13 Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (MAY/JUNE 2014), pp. 69-74, 75-79, available [here](#).

more than double that of the two other powers combined, which nonetheless are both nuclear powers.

Geopolitically speaking, and recalling an “old jargon”, at the top of the rankings there are three political entities of “imperial size”, the US, China and Russia. Size apart, two of the three ostensibly show a modern version of “imperial behaviour”, both in terms of cultural homogenization and revanchist nationalistic stances, together with an aggressive behaviour at their external borders.

This is precisely why the present situation constitutes a profound challenge to the very identity of the European Union. Indeed, she is called upon to undertake an in-depth structural transformation, within a new geopolitical context which seems to render inefficient, and even obsolete, the notion of postimperial modern national states. The concept of “imperial power” has instead to be revisited. In a much celebrated, and even more criticized, article published in 2023 in the pages of the journal *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>14</sup> the historian Timothy Garton Ash provocatively floated the idea that the European Union *already has* all the characteristics of an imperial power – being, indeed, a “post-imperial Empire”. Europe has a decent level of political unity in terms of interstate relationships, as well as a (contested, but still important) central authority which is capable of effective decision-making. And, Garton Ash continues, there is nothing bad in the idea that, in an age of great power competition, it is not only appropriate but also advisable to reassess the idea of the nation state, in the name of a superior *raison d’être*.

The European Union has, indeed, already, in geographical, demographic, economic, military, technological and scientific terms the critical mass of a modern Empire. Some-

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14 Timothy Garton Ash, “Postimperial Empire. How the War in Ukraine is Transforming Europe”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2023, retrievable [here](#).

thing that none of its member states has. The idea of a new identity for Europe as a sort of modern version of an Imperial entity, by the way, is not new, nor limited to the fantasies of academics. In 2019 the former Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, during an intervention at a pre-anti-Brexit convention of the British liberal democrats dared to use the term “empire”:

...the world order of tomorrow is not a world order based on nation states or countries. It's a world order that is based on empires...The world of tomorrow is a world of empires, in which we Europeans and you British can only defend your interests, your way of life, by doing it together in a European framework and a European Union.

More recently, in 2022, and well after the beginning of the Russian military operation, Verhofstadt has further refined the concept:

It has been eight months since the war started and a new period in human history was born on our live TV screens. After the Cold War that started in Yalta, and after the victory of liberal democracy that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new era has begun: a 'new Age of Empires'. This new world order will not be based on the sovereignty of 199 individual countries, but on a brutal competition between big continental blocs — militarily as well as politically, economically and technologically. A competition not only on earth, but also in space, and not only physically, but also virtually on the internet.<sup>15</sup>

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15 Guy Verhofstadt, “EU unfit for emerging ‘new Age of Empires’, time to act”, *EUObserver*, September 27, 2022, retrievable [here](#).

## Reluctant (former) imperialists

As you would expect, Verhofstadt's vision has been heavily criticized.

First objection, the term "empire" is now buried under the dust of history; to dig this idea up now smacks either of nostalgia on the one hand or of a glaring lack of realism on the other. That's as may be – *but* it's patently evident that empires, or their modern versions, are alive and around, together with all their symbolisms and iconologies, including the manipulation of historical evidence in the South China Sea, or the explicit veneration expressed for Peter the Great by Mr. Putin.

Second critique, Europe is historically a community of nation states, born as an economic union, composed of nationalities and cultures too different to be able to nurture a unitary inclusive constituency.<sup>16</sup> Yet, historically, European empires have shown a remarkable capacity to melt nationalities and cultures together under a common umbrella, as for instance in the case of the Habsburg Empire, able to manage for a very long time the coexistence of nations having different languages, religions and cultures.<sup>17</sup> Nation-State members of the EU have, however, something that amounts to a powerful common identity, even if not all of them with the same degree of intensity: a consolidated liberal democratic political culture.

Third problem, Europeans are deeply troubled psychologically by the very concept of empire. This obviously goes back to the central role played by colonial empires in nineteenth-century European history. In some way, the above-mentioned "concert of Europe" granted a long period of

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16 Hans Kundnani, *Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project*, Hurst Publishers, London 2023.

17 See Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History*, Belknap Press, 2016.

geopolitical equilibrium on the continent, in part because the European powers were intensively engaged in building up imperial colonization in Africa and Asia, including the *de jure* (British India) and *de facto* (China) subjugation of the two ancient and glorious Empires of the continent. Notwithstanding the fact that Western Europe had herself a direct experience of what “subjugation” meant during the Second World War and the Nazi occupation, the representatives who met in Rome in 1957 were proud citizens of countries that still controlled vast empires (Belgium and France) and overseas colonies (the Netherlands, which relinquished control over Western New Guinea in 1962), or had just lost their imperial possessions (Italy and [West] Germany) or, despite the fact they did not officially have colonial possessions, were in some way implicated in colonization processes, as in the case of Luxembourg in the Belgian Congo.<sup>18</sup> The EU, a free community of countries that sought to restore peace through cooperation on the European continent successfully eliminating opportunities for future conflicts, was thus born as a creature of imperial motherlands – symbolized by the French-sponsored Algerian membership of the EEC, ended formally in 1976. Stretching the words of the British historian Alan Milward somewhat, at her birth Europe was designed to rescue *imperial* nation states.<sup>19</sup> The decolonization process (in some cases, neither easy nor painless, as in the case of the Belgian Congo and French Algeria), brought this contradiction to a conclusion. But the ghosts of imperialism and imperial sins lingered, and linger still, deep in the conscience of European liberal democracies, as do the res-

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18 <https://www.nationalmusee.lu/en/exhibitions/luxembourgs-colonial-past>

19 Alan Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State*, Routledge, London 1992.

itudes of former empires still alive and present.<sup>20</sup> This kind of objection is not easy to contest. It is possible to do so only exploring the modern meaning of “empire” in greater depth, as well as into the different forms of imperial “governance”.

### Empires of the past, Empires of the present<sup>21</sup>

In its most simplified version, the term “Empire” (directly derived from the Latin word “imperium”) defines the authority and powers vested in the bodies ruling a polity. Historically, and with the progressive expansion of the authority of one polity over another, “Empire” meant the enlargement and extension of this “power” beyond its geographical origin. This process is known as the extension of imperial rule, or also as “imperial conquest”.

The extension of imperial rule has historically taken place in two ways. One that is relatively peaceful, for instance through voluntary aggregations of polities and territories under a superior entity – frequently through non-violent events such as for instance dynastic marriages, but also purchases (as for example happened fairly frequently in US. history). The second more aggressive mode is usually perpetrated by violence and through military means. The European imperial push in Asia and Africa belongs to this second mode of imperial conquest.

The different ways in which imperial rule is extended to other polities influence in their turn what is called “imperial governance”, that is, the manner in which the relationship

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20 See Quinn Slobodian, “The delusion of a new European empire”, *The New Statesman*, June 2023, retrievable [here](#).

21 This section has as main references Jane Burbank, Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History. Powerland and Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2011 and Krishan Kumar, *Visions of Empire. How Five Imperial Regimes Shaped the World*, Princeton U.P. 2017.

between the central authority and those subjected to it is structured. The typical nineteenth-century overseas colonial empires of European origin were based on conquest, had frequently a quite clear purpose, in general (but not only) of an economic nature, and were based on an asymmetrical power relationship between colonizers and colonized. Other Empires, born from aggregations in which polities submitted themselves voluntarily to a superior authority, enjoyed a different kind of governance, in general much less asymmetrical, their reason for existing being based not on exploitation but on mutual benefits derived from coexistence.<sup>22</sup>

In a (heavily criticized, but evocative) book published at the end of 1998 Geir Lundestad used the term "Empire by integration" to describe the policy of the US. towards the process of European integration in the period following the Second World War, during the years of the Cold War up until 1998.<sup>23</sup> What the Norwegian historian had in mind was the fact that European integration was taking place freely but in a US.-dominated Atlantic space. This "Empire" was thus based on mutual convenience, but also on shared ideologies, both in economic (capitalist) and political (liberal democracy) terms.

Can Europe transform herself from being either a "suzerain" US. offshoot, or a pure aggregation of economic convenience, into something else?

Here we may take guidance from the words of the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba who, interviewed by the New York Times in June 2022, reverted once again to the term "empire", referring to the European Union. In his explanations to the interviewer Mr. Kuleba gave a particularly

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22 Niall Ferguson, "Empires with Expiration Dates", *Foreign Policy*, October 2009, retrievable [here](#).

23 Geir Lundestad, *Empire by integration. The United States and European Integration, 1945-1997*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1997.



telling account of the kind of empire he had in mind, and why indeed an “empire”. In his own words, the European Union could be seen as “the first ever attempt to build a *liberal empire*”, that is, a supranational institution endowed with powers superior to those of its individual “provinces” and based on democratic principles. Something very different from at least two of the Empires which in the near future will rank among the World’s greatest powers.

I understand that people do not like the word empire, but this is how history is written... You have to show that different things of a similar scale can be built on different principles: those of liberalism, democracy, respect for human rights, and not on the principle of imposition of the will of one on the rest.

## Scale matters

In the Ukrainian minister’s words there are two important concepts to be stressed here: the idea of a liberal empire, and the concept of “scale”, which refers both to imperial structures *and* to great power competition. The logic is here altogether compelling. After the Russian invasion of a sovereign State, one that is now applying to join the Union, Europe has already moved one step beyond being the sort of economic union best suited to post-Cold War hyper-globalization. As discussed above, it is now leveraging on her superior economic strength in order to resist threats of a geopolitical nature. This may not be enough, especially if the EU seeks to add to her own *raison d’être* other goals, going beyond the general economic welfare of her member states and of herself as a whole. Other goals might mean for instance the preservation of the concept of liberal democracy in a global order in which autocratic, imperial regimes loom large. To fight for these values, though, “scale” matters. And “scale” means not only economic might

but also the willingness to move (reversing Edward Luttwak's formula) from geoeconomics to geopolitics.<sup>24</sup> This was substantially the same view that Gideon Rachman, FT columnist and expert in international and European politics, somewhat prophetically expressed in 2019.<sup>25</sup> The essence of Mr. Rachman's argument is summarized in his own words:

The EU once dreamt that the whole world would move towards a law-based system, similar to the EU method. But a World order shaped by Xi Jinping's China and Trump's [or Biden's] America will be based on power rather than rules. (...) Small European countries can no longer rely on international rules to protect them. They need the bulk and the heft that the EU provides. (...) The EU used to be called a peace project. In the modern world, it is more of a power project – and rightly so.

A view which has been recently reiterated in a (unusually, for European bureaucrats) quite straightforward way by the EU's chief diplomat, Josep Borrell during a very recent visit to China:<sup>26</sup>

The war in Ukraine has converted us into a geopolitical power, not just an economic one (...). And we want to talk with China from this approach: don't look at European Union relations through the lens of relations with others.

## Is the EU ready?

For many (inside and outside the Union) the simple idea that EU can turn herself into a great power fit to run in the future geopolitical race, verges on the ridiculous. Critics stress

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24 Edward N. Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce." *The National Interest*, no. 20, 1990, pp. 17–23.

25 Gideon Rachman, "The EU needs to be a power project. The emerging world order will increasingly be shaped by might, rather than law", *Financial Times*, October 7, 2019, retrievable [here](#).

26 Joe Leahy, "Borrell calls on China to treat EU as a 'geopolitical power' in its own right", *Financial Times*, October 14, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

how EU is, instead, dramatically *unfit*, and absolutely *not* ready. Some point to the EU's chronic inability to speak with one voice, and her divisions about the future enlargement of its borders.<sup>27</sup> Others stress the European nature of an "asymmetrical great power", endowed with economic might and soft power, but weak by dint of its dispersed military power (and even more after Brexit) in a phase in which war is back on the continent.<sup>28</sup> Some even mock the EU, dismissing it as the "illusory giant of geopolitics":

The EU is dependent on the US militarily. Despite its size and its wealth, it cannot support the financial aid flowing to Ukraine unilaterally. Its ambitions are reduced to that of a single market, a customs union, an agricultural policy and a single currency (...) An image springs to mind from my early childhood – from a German children's book, more than half a century ago. One of the minor characters in it was an illusory giant – who looked huge from a distance, but became smaller the closer you got to him. The EU is the illusory giant of geopolitics. Make sure you don't get too close.<sup>29</sup>

A slightly more "optimistic" perspective sees EU as fundamentally ill-suited, but a fair distance down the path to becoming a necessary "multipolar stabilizer",<sup>30</sup> ultimately playing the role of the "alter ego" of the US.<sup>31</sup>

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27 Lily Lynch, "The EU great power delusions. Predictions that the invasion of Ukraine will breathe new life into enlargement are based on wishful thinking", *The New Statesman*, September 28, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

28 Michael Kimmage and Hanna Notte, "The Age of Great Power Distraction. What Crises in The Middle East and Elsewhere Reveal About the Global Order", *Foreign Affairs*, October 12, 2023.

29 Wolfgang Munchau, "The EU is the "illusory giant" of geopolitics. Despite its wealth and ambition, the European Union is limited as an actor in the great conflicts of our time", *The New Statesman*, October 16th, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

30 Benjamin Martill and Lisa Brinke, "Europe in a Multipolar World", LSE IDEAS, June 9, 2020, retrievable [here](#).

31 Michael Lind, "The case for an Atlantic Union. In a world of great-power rivalry, Europe and America need each other", *The New Statesman*, December 2, 2023

These are well-formulated critiques, and highlight how the EU is on the eve of an epochal U-turn in its history.<sup>32</sup> To survive as a “liberal empire”, “forging a closer union of values in a world increasingly less hospitable to them”,<sup>33</sup> the EU has indeed to take steps of a purely geopolitical nature, acknowledging the crude fact that geographical dimensions are a crucial factor in great power interaction (I’m deliberately avoiding here the term “competition”). In this sense, geopolitics as the projection of political control over finite spaces and realms of power, is dramatically back, and with it, geography as its underlying driving force.<sup>34</sup>

### A (bumpy) road ahead

To get ready, the EU needs to take a number of steps, at different levels, or, in a word, to embark upon a holistic transformation process of her identity and governance. The following steps are not necessarily exhaustive, but, nonetheless, are essential premises.

- 1) First of all, Europeans must start to think of “empires” not as political entities from the past. Like all things in the continuous flow of history, they can disappear, but they can also come back under certain conditions. Imperial history must therefore be studied, understood and offer useful comparisons for the present. In addition to this, far from being relics of the past, imperial entities should

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32 Caroline de Gruyter, “Europe’s Very Long Road to Geopolitics. The EU has quickly moved from economic talk shop to military player – but still has a way to go”, *Foreign Policy*, July 18, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

33 Teresa Eder and Jason C. Moyer, “The European Union’s U-Turn: Emergence of a Great Power”, Wilson Center, March 2, 2022, retrievable [here](#).

34 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography. What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, Random House, 2013.

be considered also in their historical contribution to stability in a multipolar world, yesterday and today. Historically, the collapse of imperial entities, yesterday and recently, has coincided with geopolitical instability, ethnic conflicts and long-lasting traumas and revanchism (one may here rightly quote Mr. Putin's definition of the dissolution of Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century").<sup>35</sup>

- 2) Second, Europeans must understand that in present times, and given the current geopolitical revolution under way, there is a need to call for a deep rethinking not only of the governance of the Union, of the mechanisms through which she is governed and of the manner in which the member states interact. It is in fact her intrinsic nature that is under discussion. An economic Union, based on European cooperation, can be a very good solution in phases characterized by international liberalism, cooperation, and expanding global integration, as happened both during the Cold War and even more after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The present seems to put this perspective seriously in question, and the EU must become something different from the mere sum of national economic spaces. Europeans must recognize the need for a political entity able to defend what is even more important than economic growth, that is, liberal democracy. In this sense, the term "liberal empire", evoking a polity respectful of national cultures and traditions, is probably the correct ideological way to approach the problem.

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35 Robert D. Kaplan, "The Downside of Imperial Collapses. When Empires or Great Powers Fall, Chaos and War Rise", *Foreign Affairs*, October 4, 2022, available [here](#).

- 3) Third, Europeans must somehow come to terms with their imperial legacy. The opportunity lies in a sort of paradox: the imperial colonial powers (with the unfortunate exception of the most imperialist one, which had left the Union in 2020 in part on the grounds of “imperial nostalgia”) of the past have the opportunity to recreate a solid political entity of the size of an Empire, this time based not on asymmetrical exploitation through colonial power but on a liberal, respectful and harmonious relationship between its multiple identities.
- 4) Fourth, at the institutional level the EU should recognize that some imperial attributes are already there, but others are not, or are perhaps halfway there. Let’s cite Mr. Scholz’s own words:

“(…) the way is open and the goal is clear: an EU that will consist of over 500 million *free* citizens, representing the largest internal market in the world, that will set global standards on trade growth, climate change and environmental protection, and that will host leading research institutes and innovative businesses – a family of stable *democracies* enjoying unparalleled social welfare and public infrastructure” (*emphasis added*).<sup>36</sup>

This sentence highlights the aspect of economic might, of the control over key technologies, and of soft power and influence. Other attributes, such as political stability (indeed, the governance of a multinational supranational entity) and military might will require intense action at the political level.

- 5) Fifth, the study of imperial history shows that, by contrast with nation states, empires are dynamic entities that tend to expand, and contract, over time. Imperial aggregations

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36 Scholz, *The Great Zeitenwende*, cit.

of the past expanded, and contracted multiple times – see for instance the fate of the Ottoman Empire. As emphasized above, expansion may take place in different ways, by conquest, or by centripetal attraction. Once it is recognized that “size”, in its multiple meanings, is fundamental for survival, the EU should grasp that she must be ready to undertake and govern this expansion in an efficient way, both answering to the demand for inclusion of new members, but also recognizing that getting bigger means, despite the problems, inherent risks and costs, getting better.<sup>37</sup> As one writer has influentially stated, “Leaders considering the union’s future shape should remember that enlargement has been its most successful policy”.<sup>38</sup>

- 6) Sixth, enlarging the liberal empire means investing money and political capital – which should indeed not be an issue given the geopolitical stakes on the table – but Europeans must be convinced that a transition from an economic union to a geopolitical entity is fundamental for the survival of economic freedom European style (among other things).<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, it will require a radical reform in the EU’s inner governance, and basically in the area of decision-making, for instance introducing, as proposed, qualified majority voting instead of unanimity in major (read: strategic) decisions.<sup>40</sup>

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37 Amanda Coakley, “The EU Needs to Get Bigger if It Wants to Get Better. Brussels’s continued balking over new members only plays into Russian hands”, *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

38 “The war in Ukraine is a powerful reason to enlarge – and improve – the EU”, *The Economist*, September 28, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

39 Martin Sandbu, “The EU is poised for a giant leap towards further integration”, *Financial Times*, September 4, 2023, retrievable [here](#).

40 Stefan Lehne, “Making EU Foreign Policy Fit for a Geopolitical World, Carnegie Europe, April 14, 2022, retrievable [here](#).

## Conclusion: history lessons for a postimperial Empire

The six recommendations above may sound like onerous challenges for the future of the Union. To face some of them, however, it's worth referring back to history, and once again to the lessons provided by the history of recent, and less recent, empires.<sup>41</sup>

As suggested above, not all the imperial entities shared the same "efficiency", one measure of which is expansion and survival. Colonial empires based on exploitation have in general been far less successful in surviving than have continental empires born out of centripetal attraction and relatively peaceful expansion. Empires based on asymmetrical power and gaps between colonists and colonized have been markedly less efficient than those able to reduce, instead of emphasize, the differences among the Empire's subject populations. Empires like the Habsburg and the Ottoman dissolved in ashes during the Great War. However, even when crumbling, they still had been empires that had lasted for many centuries. Another continental empire, the Russian, survived the war and, in various different guises, endured until 1989, outliving most of its Western European rivals.

There were dark sides to these imperial multilingual, multi-religious, multi-national constituencies – namely, a constant internal struggle. There were considerable regional differences, for instance in terms of economic standards. But precisely these issues highlight the effects of good governance mechanisms on the efficiency levels of these supranational entities. The Habsburg Empire lasted from the early sixteenth century to 1918, that is precisely four hundred years

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41 Similar considerations have been put forward by Caroline De Gruyter, "Habsburg Lessons for a Resilient, Democratic EU", Reconnect, April 2022, retrievable [here](#).



(the Ottoman, even longer). Just before the outbreak of the Great War, the Habsburg Empire included a dozen different nationalities, among whom the Germans, Hungarians and Czechs were the largest in size, and five different religions. Vienna acted for a long time as a clearing house for the tensions between the nationalities, while the Empire was pervasively present thanks to a capillary bureaucracy. Nationalities bargained among themselves, but under the coordination of a respected central power (which produced documents in all the Empire's languages). More subtly, in terms of inner governance, starting from the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the monarchy started to embrace constitutionalism and a parliament (Reichsrat, or Imperial Council) was created, which was (largely) based on the proportional representation of nationalities according to the tax revenues of the different States.

Overall, these long-lasting empires were able to balance expansion and inclusion, central authority and respect for nationalities – also due to the impending threat of rival powers laying claim to the loyalty of subject populations, something that today's EU has to consider carefully when thinking over the problems and perils of a (much needed, or, better, unavoidable) future enlargement.

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