

European Strategy in times of geopolitical interdependence

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(*) Originally published in Europe Defence Matters, Issue 11, 2016.

Russian revisionism represents a direct threat to many eastern and central European countries. In turn, the ripple effects of instability in Syria, Iraq or Libya continue to be felt throughout Europe, not only through successive waves of refugees and migrants, but also through terrorism and mounting insecurity.

Following the publication of the EU's Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) in June 2016, and NATO's July summit in Warsaw, most discussions on European strategy appear to be revolving around the following questions: (A) how to bring security to Europe's immediate neighbourhood and (B) how to balance attention and resources between Eastern Europe, North Africa/Sahel, and the Levant. When it comes to strategy, prioritization is essential. And it does make sense for Europeans to put their own neighbourhood first, given the proliferation of crises and instability along the continent's eastern and southern peripheries. However, a world that is increasingly characterized by the rise of Asia and the multiplication of centres of economic activity is one that calls for a truly **global approach to foreign and security policy**.

Europeans should be careful not to make too strict a distinction between the neighbourhood and what is beyond – and avoid confusing a “neighbourhood-first” with a “neighbourhood-only” approach to strategy and foreign policy. Two reasons stand out in this regard. The first is the geography of the European peninsula, and its contiguity with the rest of the great Eurasian landmass. The second relates to the fact that economic globalization and advances in military technology (including the proliferation of precision-guided weaponry and systems) have led to greater global geopolitical and **strategic interconnectivity**. For instance, the increasing number, survivability and range of Beijing's missile inventory, as well as **China's** rapidly expanding subsurface fleet, have already extended the reach of China's so-called “anti-access and area denial” capabilities to cover much of the Indian Ocean region. This suggests that **Asian powers** can greatly impact the geostrategic balances of the Persian Gulf and, by extension, parts of the immediate European neighbourhood, such as the Levant and even the eastern Mediterranean.

What does this increasing geostrategic interdependence mean for the future of European strategy? It means Europeans should perhaps pay more attention to those regions or “middle spaces” that connect Europe and its immediate neighborhood to the rest of the Eurasian landmass all the way to the Asia Pacific, i.e. the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and the Arctic. These geographical spaces are increasingly relevant because countries like China, India, Japan and South Korea are reaching westwards, all the way to the Middle East, Africa, and even to Europe, in order to satisfy their need for energy, other resources and export markets. And they are doing that primarily through the Indian Ocean and Central Asia – and perhaps also increasingly the Arctic in the future.

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The extra-regional outreach of Asian powers is primarily economic and diplomatic, but it is beginning to have geopolitical and strategic ramifications, both in the middle spaces and in the European neighbourhood itself. In this regard, Europeans should perhaps think harder about the geopolitical implications of China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, or the ongoing proliferation of so-called Anti Access/Area Denial bubbles in the Indian Ocean region. It is increasingly unclear how Europeans would be able to secure their interests in their immediate neighbourhood, while simultaneously ignoring adjacent regions whose economic, political, and strategic developments will no doubt impact the security of Europe and its immediate neighbourhood.

Presumably, the very same logic that leads Europeans to conclude that ‘developments in their neighbourhood affect the security and prosperity of Europe itself’ should lead them to also think that developments beyond their immediate neighbourhood can affect the stability of their own neighbourhood – and of Europe. Therefore, it seems that Europe’s ambitions should be global in nature.

Having said this, **Europeans need to be realistic about their own limitations**, given the need to attend to current crises in their immediate backyard.

Against this backdrop, a few final observations can be offered.

Firstly, Europeans should remain ambitious in their immediate neighbourhood. In terms of goals, that means **the primacy of European power and values**. That goes for eastern and southeastern Europe, as much as it goes for the Mediterranean basin. In this sense, the idea of accommodating revisionist powers and accepting different spheres of influence in Europe’s immediate neighbourhood – let alone in Europe itself – should be resisted.

Secondly, Europeans need to increase their contribution to “Western” primacy in the so-called ‘**global commons**’, such as air and maritime domains, as well as space and cyberspace. Admittedly, when it comes to the security of the global commons, the lion’s share of the burden will continue to fall on the United States. However, Europeans can and should contribute more to the security of the air and sea-spaces of Europe’s

extended neighbourhood – including the Gulf of Guinea, the Mediterranean and Red Seas, the western Indian Ocean, and the Arctic. In this regard, they should step up their efforts in terms of military-technological innovation and also contribute to the security of outer space and cyber-space, alongside the United States.

Thirdly, Europeans should aim to contribute to the preservation of a **balance of power in the “middle spaces”** and in the Asia-Pacific region. That would require being in geostrategic sync with the United States and other key regional partners.

These three geographical levels of analysis are very much intertwined, in that preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon in the Asia-Pacific region is directly linked to the preservation of Western strategic primacy over the global commons and to the security of the “middle spaces”. That, in turn, is the key to preserving the balance of power globally and the stability of the international liberal order.