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The Geopolitics of Europe: 1815-2015

What lens should we use to interpret Europe's history over the last two centuries? According to Nayef Al-Rodhan and others, using a geopolitical one isn't enough. Instead, we need to use a 'meta-geopolitical' lens that accounts for strengths and capabilities that go far beyond a state's military prowess.

By Nayef Al-Rodhan and Liliane Stadler and Ioana Puscas for ISN

Geopolitical competition has been a feature of international relations for centuries, but it was only in 1899 that the term 'geopolitics' was coined, by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen. The concept of geopolitics emerged as a product of imperialist rivalry during the late nineteenth century, and it still retains a connotation reminiscent of this *Zeitgeist*: one of power and resource politics. At this time, geopolitics was characterized by a distinctly [social-Darwinist orientation](#), because it was applied to determine the chances of survival of different states and societies.

During [the last three decades](#) of the nineteenth century, European empires conquered 20% of the Earth's surface and 10% of the world's population. Together with the scramble for territory beyond the continent, the late nineteenth century also saw the rise of nationalist sentiment and the construction of national economies in Europe. The competition between European states was initially carried out in the colonies, but increasingly, imperial tensions reflected back onto the European continent.

While critics of the classical concept of geopolitics have pronounced its demise in the European context, a *tour d'horizon* of the history of European geopolitics reveals patterns that remain informative and illuminating. This is especially true today, when - in light of this year's events in Ukraine - many former critics of geopolitics have come to reassess their opinion that power politics have ceased to be relevant on the European continent.

How, then, has geopolitical competition in Europe evolved over the past 200 years? We identify four key events that fundamentally shaped the geopolitics of Europe in this timeframe:

- 1) The conclusion of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which restored a multipolar balance of power to the continent following the Napoleonic wars;
- 2) The resignation of Otto von Bismarck as chancellor of the Second German Empire in 1890, which caused that multipolar system to unravel;
- 3) The Allied victory over the Axis powers in Europe, formalized on the 7th of May 1945, which ended

the Second World War; and

4) The Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which, some argue, removed geopolitics from European politics for good.

These events are worth exploring further to gain an understanding of the geopolitics of Europe today. Indeed, the history that these events represent reveals the need for a new approach to geopolitics that is better suited to contemporary challenges: *meta*-geopolitics.

1815: The Congress of Vienna

The Congress of Vienna established a balance of power on the European continent following the political and military upheavals of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Paul Schroeder defines a balance of power as a system in which “the power possessed and exercised by states within the system is checked and balanced by the power of others.” A balance of power system aims to preserve the sovereignty of individual states by preventing the rise of a hegemon.

A multipolar balance of power was effectively institutionalized by the Congress of Vienna, which also established a precedent for [diplomacy to be conducted](#) via congressional debate rather than bilateral negotiation. Its purpose was to prevent the political and military upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era from reoccurring. Ultimately, [it rested](#) on three pillars: the containment of France, Habsburg leadership in Central Europe, and the supporting integrity of the Ottoman Empire in the East. At first, this arrangement was maintained by the collective efforts of the European powers, but, as the century progressed, the balance of power evolved as its initial format proved unsustainable.

1890: The Resignation of Otto von Bismarck

In addition to being one of Europe’s greatest geostrategists, German chief minister Otto von Bismarck was also arguably one of the greatest architects of the balance of power system. In the [words](#) of Adam Watson, Bismarck had a “sense of *raison de système* as well as *raison d’état*”. Although largely responsible for engineering German Unification in 1871, he also recognized the threat that it posed to the system put in place at Vienna in 1815.

Victory in the Franco-Prussian war and Unification made Germany a great power, but it also inaugurated a new balance of power system in Europe that historians have termed the ‘Bismarckian system’. This new system was based on a complex network of alliances and balancing mechanisms organized around three imperatives: to isolate France (which resented German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian war), to refrain from engaging with either Austria-Hungary or Russia over the growing unrest in the Balkans, and, to construct dominant but not overwhelming coalitions – or, [in Bismarck’s words](#), “to be *one of three*, as long as the world is governed by the unstable equilibrium of five powers”.

These new arrangements rendered the Vienna system effectively defunct. Yet coherence and stability continued: as long as Bismarck was in charge of the system of alliances, relations between powers were relatively smooth. This changed with his resignation on March 18th, 1890. The unraveling of the Bismarckian geopolitical system coincided with the scramble for colonial territory, resources and markets beyond Europe. The convergence of these developments produced the first global geopolitical collision in history: The First World War. Because this conflict was not fully resolved until the end of the Second World War, many, including [Robert Cooper](#), combine the two conflicts into a single Epochal War lasting from 1914 to 1945.

1945: The End of the Second World War

At the end of this confrontation, the geopolitics of Europe underwent another fundamental shift, generating the bipolar order that was to define the Cold War.

In this context, the classical concept of geopolitics re-emerged in foreign policy. A key text of Cold War geopolitical thought was George Kennan's communiqué to Washington in February 1946 from the US Embassy in Moscow, which explained that 1) the strategic culture of the USSR was driven by an incessant drive for territorial expansion and that 2) nothing could be done about it. Winston Churchill's famous "iron curtain" speech the following March not only reinforced the geopolitical mindset that Kennan's telegram had introduced, but emphasized the centrality of Europe to the Cold War.

However, it was only during the 1970s that the term "geopolitics" was re-introduced into the lexicon of international relations, outgrowing its association with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Especially through Henry Kissinger, both in his function as National Security Adviser and subsequently as an author, the term regained much of its former prominence. In effect, it became [shorthand for denoting](#) great power rivalries and the inter-state competition over strategic resources.

1992: The Treaty of Maastricht

Geopolitics experienced a severe setback with the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent end of the Cold War in 1991. Many analysts announced the irrelevance of geopolitics, both as a concept and in practice. [Robert Cooper](#), for instance, has argued that "1989 was not just the cessation of the Cold War, but also the end of the balance-of-power system in Europe". And [Neil Thompson](#) has argued that "European nations - with the dubious possible exception of Russia - have reached the point of geopolitical obsolescence".

The signing of the Treaty of Maastricht buried the geopolitical rivalries that had plagued the European continent from 1815 onwards. The Congress of Vienna and then the Bismarckian system managed to neutralize these rivalries, albeit moving from multipolarity to unipolarity. The demise of the latter unleashed a confrontation that spanned almost the entire first half of the twentieth century. The Cold War subsequently imposed on Europe a bi-polar balance of power from the outside. The end of the Cold War, however, was different: it introduced a global power constellation in which the European continent was no longer central or pivotal.

Famously, Francis Fukuyama argued that the end of Cold War struggles over ideology signaled the triumph of liberal democracy and thus the 'end of history.' But has liberal democracy really ended geopolitical competition in Europe?

The future geopolitics of Europe

Given the historical trajectory outlined throughout this article, Fukuyama's argument appears strangely out of place - even ahistorical. [Walter Russell Mead](#), for instance, has argued that, contrary to the notion of an end to history and geopolitics, applying a Hegelian view implies that "substantively little has changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century". For Mead, the fundamental principles of state survival have remained essentially unchanged since then: states must continue to adapt ideas and institutions which "allow them to harness the titanic forces of industrial and informational capitalism". In the process, significant disturbances are to be expected but states have little choice but to follow this route.

Indeed, our brief survey of the defining moments in the geopolitics of Europe indicates that over the

past 200 years there have consistently been attempts, from within and beyond the European continent, to establish a European balance of power and prevent the descent into Hobbesian anarchy. Currently, both in Europe and beyond, there is mounting pressure to revise the status quo through the kinds of territorial and statist claims that were deemed “obsolete” not long ago. This suggests that Europe (like other parts of the world) has not fully managed to settle its core geopolitical questions. Boundary disputes, military arms-racing, competition for spheres of influence and questions of self-determination endure, even if they exist in a new era of unprecedented connectivity and supranational regulation.

Our survey, however, also shows how Mead’s view is flawed. While some recurring patterns are evident in the geopolitics of Europe, the idea that little has changed since the beginning of the 19th century is disputed by the evidence of the last few decades. The current era of transnational exchange, market integration and political cooperation represent profound institutional and normative change in Europe which cannot be dismissed or brushed aside.

These developments require a new conception of geopolitics. History teaches that each period of calm and stability is eventually undermined from within or without. There are good reasons not to be complacent about the current context of European integration, just as we cannot realistically expect a full return of 19th century geopolitics. Rather, we appear to be at a new juncture, where the concept of [Meta-geopolitics](#) offers more explanatory power.

More attuned to “the diffuse and shifting nature of today’s security threats”, meta-geopolitics differs from traditional concepts of geopolitics, because it proposes a multidimensional view of power. Establishing a balance of power may well be a recurrent imperative for Europe. However, the resources that define power now lie with capabilities that are more complex than those recognized by classical versions of geopolitics. The concept of meta-geopolitics allows us to deconstruct the balance into its constituent factors, and proposes a multidimensional view of state power, comprising both soft and hard tools, and taking into account [seven state capacities](#): social and health issues, domestic politics, economics, the environment, science and human potential, military and security issues, and international diplomacy.

Case Study: The Meta-Geopolitics of Europe

In the context of the European Union, the following tables outline [the broader range](#) of geopolitical realities and imperatives that the concept of meta-geopolitics embraces:

Table 1: [Geopolitical](#) Realities and Dilemmas of the European Union

Issue Area	Geopolitical Realities and Dilemmas
1 Social and Health Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ageing population and associated rising health-care costs • Social cleavages that result from rising hostility towards immigration
2 Domestic Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of overarching political authority • Democratic deficit • Rise of populism jeopardizes integration • Rise of Euroskepticism, especially in the United Kingdom and France
3 Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverging rates of economic growth • After-effects of the 2008-2009 Financial Crisis • Centralization of decision-making of the European Central Bank • Rising unemployment

4 Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air pollution especially through ozone and particulate matter • Rising emissions of greenhouse gases, especially due to coal consumption
5 Science and Human Potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly skilled labour force • Resistance to attracting highly skilled labor from beyond the EU • A world leader in science and technology, including space programs • Relatively low investments in Research and Development
6 Military and Security Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A guarantor of peace in Europe • European Security and Defense Policy is difficult to implement • Overlapping capabilities with NATO • Duplication of national capabilities within the EU
7 International Diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remarkable soft-power capabilities • Economic weight does not translate into political weight • Promotes the strengthening of global institutions and international law • Trade negotiations towards transatlantic free trade agreement ongoing • Reluctance to engage with China over free trade

Table 2: [Geostrategic Imperatives](#) and Future Trajectories of the European Union

Issue Area	Geostrategic Imperatives and Future Trajectories
1 Social and Health Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate immigrants into European societies by promoting multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism • Eliminate inequalities and xenophobia towards immigrants, especially in education and the workplace • Adjust to challenges with regard to the aging population, especially in areas of taxation, subsidies and health care costs
2 Domestic Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote renewed faith in the EU project among European citizens • Open up channels for more public input in policy-making processes • Ensure inclusive political statements through the media and entertainment industry
3 Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinvigorate economy and create new jobs • Prevent rise of economic nationalism and protectionism in member states • Stimulate growth in indebted countries with country-specific savings programs
4 Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote innovation in clean technologies • Cut greenhouse-gas emissions in conjunction with European energy security strategies
5 Science and Human Potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve cooperation between research institutions of individual member states • Increase R&D investment, especially by the private sector • Address skills shortages, particularly in the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Netherlands • Strengthen integration of highly skilled foreign workers • Strengthen primary and secondary education

6 Military and Security Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an effective security policy to deal with arms control, international organized crime, disease control and illegal migration • Streamline military cooperation • Exert greater control over arms manufacture and arms trade • Tackle energy dependency
7 International Diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue enlargement process • Develop a consistent policy towards the European neighborhood • Assert rightful place as a great power in the international community • Re-assess the value of economic protectionism

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