

Editorial

The EU Has Never Been a Sleeping Beauty

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1 FROM NORMATIVE TO GEOPOLITICAL EUROPE?

Geopolitics has become *the* new buzzword in debates by and about the European Union (EU). In today's world order run amok by geopolitical tensions and conflicts, European political leaders widely recognize that the EU should follow suit. In 2018, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron already broke the taboo on the establishment of an EU army. Then in 2019 Ursula von der Leyen announced the geopolitical European Commission. The European Defence Fund (2021–2027) invests enormous sums into the European defence industry. Meanwhile, High Representative Josep Borrell confirmed a certain worldview which legitimates European 'gardeners' to interfere in 'the jungle'. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the re-election of Trump in 2024 have further strengthened pleas for European unity in hard security issues. However, the seeds of militarization efforts had already been sown in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when some EU scholars cautioned that the EU's 'development of military capability',¹ its increasing 'geopolitical othering',² and the 'drive for martial potency' including military-industrial investments³ risks jeopardizing the much-lauded civilian or normative nature of the EU project.

Whenever one might situate the tipping point, it seems palpable that we are witnessing a shift from a civilian or normative towards a geopolitical power EU in the twentyfirst century. There is a significant gulf of disagreement between pessimists, who lament the EU's continuing weakness to assert itself as a great power, and optimists, who perceive several opportunities for the EU to realize the

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¹ K. E. Smith, *The End of Civilian Rower EU: A Welcome Demise or Cause for Concern?*, 35(2) *Int'l Spectator* 11–28 (2000), doi: 10.1080/03932720008458123.

² T. Diez, *Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics*, 17(2) *Cambridge Rev. Int'l Aff.* 319–335 (2004), doi: 10.1080/0955757042000245924.

³ I. Manners, *Normative Power Europe Reconsidered: Beyond the Crossroads*, 13(2) *J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y* 182–199 (2006), doi: 10.1080/13501760500451600.

long-awaited qualitative leap in foreign and security policies. However, pundits would generally agree that ‘naïve’ ideas of projecting the EU’s soft power externally now lie far behind us and that the EU has finally been embracing geopolitical postures. As elaborated in a recently published special issue, it seems that EU foreign policy has been ‘coming of age’ and going through a ‘maturation’ process.⁴

This geopolitical shift appears to be evident when looking at the policy areas that I am most familiar with, namely EU trade and development policies. Scholars widely acknowledge that trade policies have become ‘geopoliticized’ in recent years,⁵ alongside the shift towards more unilateral approaches.⁶ Similarly, in its relations with the Global South, the EU is arguably creating a ‘new paradigm for EU development policy, defined by strategic interests’.⁷ EU initiatives such as the Critical Raw Materials Act and Strategic Partnerships illustrate the growing coalescence between trade and development policies in the pursuit of geopolitical interests.⁸

But is the EU really of late becoming more geopolitical? What constitutes evidence for such a shift? And what does it say about the discipline of EU studies, if this is how we tend to see the EU? Without denying that highly relevant changes have been unfolding in EU discourses and practices, we would argue that, below the surface, important but less noticeable and frequently overlooked continuities also exist. The EU’s geopolitical desires are not completely new, even if they may manifest themselves differently. As critical researchers have shown time and again,⁹

⁴ H. Maurer, K. Raube & R. G. Whitman, ‘*Zeitenwende*’ as Coming of Age? *EU Foreign & Security Policy Through War & peace*, 33(3) Eur. Security 345–363 (2024), doi: 10.1080/09662839.2024.2376604.

⁵ S. Meunier & K. Nicolaidis, *The Geopoliticization of European Trade and Investment Policy*, 57(S1) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 103–113 (2019), doi: 10.1111/jcms.12932; C. Weinhardt, K. Mau & J. Hillebrand Pohl, *The EU as a Geoeconomic Actor? A Review of Recent European Trade and Investment Policies*, in *The Political Economy of Geoeconomics: Europe in a Changing World* (M. Babić, A. D. Dixon & I. T. Liu eds, Springer 2022). A. Herranz-Surrallés, C. Damro & S. Eckert, *The Geoeconomic Turn of the Single European Market? Conceptual challenges and Empirical Trends*, 62(4) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 919–937 (2024), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13591; S. Couvreur & J. Veselinović, *An Evermore Geoeconomic European Union? Exploring Critical Perspectives for Future Research*, J. Com. Mkt. Stud. (2025).

⁶ F. De Ville, S. Happersberger & H. Kalimo, *The Unilateral Turn in EU Trade Policy? The Origins and Characteristics of the EU’s New Trade Instruments*, 28(1) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 15–34 (2023), doi: 10.54648/EERR.2023012.

⁷ M. Furness & N. Keijzer, *Europe’s Global Gateway: A New Geostrategic Framework for Development Policy?*, 1 IDOS Briefing Paper (2022).

⁸ B. Müller, L. Ghiotto & L. Bárcena, *The Raw Materials Rush. How the European Union is Using Trade Agreements to Secure Supply of Critical Raw Materials for Its Green Transition*, Transnational Institute (2024).

⁹ See e.g., J. Galtung, *The European Community: A Superpower in the Making* (1973); P. Cocks, *Towards a Marxist theory of European integration*, 34(1) Int’l Org. 1–40 (1980), doi: 10.1017/S0020818300003957; J. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (OUP 2006); O. U. Rutazibwa, *The Problematics of the EU’s Ethical (Self) Image in Africa: the EU as an ‘Ethical Intervener’ and the 2007 Joint Africa–EU Strategy*, 18(2) J. Contemp. Eur. Stud. 209–228 (2008), doi: 10.1080/14782804.2010.486976; U. Staeger, *Africa–EU Relations and Normative Power Europe: A Decolonial Pan-African Critique*, 54(4) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 981–998 (2016), doi: 10.1111/jcms.12350; R. A. Del Sarto, *Normative empire Europe: The European Union, its borderlands, and the ‘Arab spring’*, 54(2) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 215–232 (2016), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12282>;

whether focusing on accession processes, neighbourhood policies, development cooperation, trade agreements, or other forms of international interventions: the EU has never been a naïve soft power.

Hence, the apparently newfound awakening of the EU as a weak, naïve, soft power towards a stronger, more realist, hard power may be nuanced or even problematized. This is not a new argument, as it has been a key concern by critical geopolitics and postcolonial/decolonial approaches to European and international politics.¹⁰ In this editorial, I limit myself to two key insights, again focusing mostly on EU trade and development policies.

2 EURAFRICAN GEOPOLITICAL DREAMS

First, the ‘European project’ has been geopolitical since its origins. From the start, European leaders envisioned to create a Eurafrikan bloc to counter the rise of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism, while also preserving their sphere of influence vis-à-vis the superpowers in the Cold War context. As shown in the seminal work by Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson,¹¹ Eurafrikan thinking strongly influenced the architects of

M. Langan, *Budget Support and Africa–European Union Relations: Free Market Reform and Neo-colonialism?*, 21(1) Eur. J. Int’l Rel. 101–121 (2015), doi: 10.1177/1354066113516813; P. Pasture, *The EC/EU Between the Art of Forgetting and the Palimpsest of Empire*, 26(3) Eur. Rev. 545–581 (2018), doi: 10.1017/S1062798718000224; M. Hoijtink & H.L. Muehlenhoff, *The European Union as a Masculine Military Power: European Union security and Defence Policy in Times of Crisis*, 18(3) Political Stud. Rev. 362–377 (2020), doi: 10.1177/1478929919884876; M. E. Odijie, *Unintentional Neo-colonialism? Three Generations of Trade and Development Relationship Between EU and West Africa*, 44(3) J. Eur. Integ. 347–363 (2022), doi: 10.1080/07036337.2021.1902318; F. Ejodus, *Anxiety, Dissonance and Imperial Amnesia of the European Union*, 19(73) Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi 49–64 (2022), doi: 10.33458/uidergisi.1085564; L. Luciani, *Where the Personal is (Geo) Political: Performing Queer Visibility in Georgia in the Context of EU association*, 70(2) Probs. Post-Communism 197–208 (2023), doi: 10.1080/10758216.2021.1937228; E. Polonska-Kimunguyi, *The Myth of Peace and Statehood in European Integration Theory: The Imperial Legal Order of the Rome Treaty*, 28(2) Eur. For. Affairs Rev. (2023); A. S. M. Alcazar III, C. Nessel & J. Orbie, *Decolonising EU Trade Relations With the Global Souths?*, 19(2) J. Contemp. Eur. Res. (2023), doi: 10.30950/jcer.v19i2.1295; A. S. M. Alcazar III, *Everything but Arms: The European Commission and Its Geopolitical Discourse on Preferential Trade for ‘the Most in Need’*, in *The EU in a Globalized World* (T. Hoerber, A. Bohas & S. Valdemarin eds, Routledge 2024); F. Barbieux & D. Bouris, *Decentering European Union Foreign Policy: Addressing Colonial Dynamics in EU–Algeria Relations*, J. Com. Mkt. Stud. (2024); A. Oleart & J. Roch, *The Colonial Imaginary of ‘Europe’ in the EU’s Asymmetrical Response to the Russian and Israeli Aggressions: Ukraine as a Member of the ‘Family’ Whilst ‘Othering’ Palestine*, J. Com. Mkt. Stud. (2025).

¹⁰ For some recent overviews, see e.g., V. Bachmann & L. Bialasiewicz, *Critical Geopolitics*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies* (D. Bigo, T. Diez, E. Fanoulis, B. Rosamond & Y. A. Stivachtis eds, Routledge 2020); M. Boatcă, *Thinking Europe Otherwise: Lessons from the Caribbean*, 69(3) Current Soc. 389–414 (2021), doi: 10.1177/0011392120931139; J. Orbie, A. S. M. Alcazar III, A. Bougreu, S. Nagy, A. Oleart, J. C. Paz, R. W. Sebhatu, T. G. Williams & I. Wódzka, *Decolonizing Rather than Decentering ‘Europe’*, 28(1) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 1–8 (2023), doi: 10.54648/EERR2023001; A. Oleart, S. Nagy, J. Orbie, J. Paz, R. W. Sebhatu & I. Wódzka, *Researching EU External Action Through Decolonial Knowledges: The EU’s ‘Geopolitical Turn’ and Its Coloniality*, in *Handbook on EU External Action and Policies* (L. Delcour ed., forthcoming); Couvreur & Veselinovič, *supra* n. 5.

¹¹ P. Hansen & S. Jonsson, *Eurafrika: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2014).

European integration. When the European Economic Community (EEC) was negotiated, four Member States still had colonies. They explicitly aimed to preserve their geopolitical influences outside Europe through what Kwame Nkrumah called ‘collective imperialism’ and ‘collective neocolonialism of the European Common Market’.¹² For Germany, this was an opportunity to gain access to the French and Belgian colonial territories.¹³ The EEC Treaty provided ‘association’ with the Overseas Countries and Territories, which was ‘coded language’ for colonies,¹⁴ and included Algeria as the de facto ‘seventh member state’,¹⁵ while discriminating the indigenous peoples in the colonies from social and mobility rights, and without foreseeing any possibility for independence. Quite the contrary, the ‘founding fathers’ of the EEC seemed to believe or at least hope that this Eurafrikan bloc would help dampen anti-colonial sentiments while strengthening Western Europe’s international position.

In light of the present juncture, it is interesting to note that this geopolitical project arose in a historical context of widespread pessimism on Europe’s weakness in the world. In the 1950s, influential thinkers and European federalists, such as Denis de Rougemont and Henrik Brugmans, wailed Europe’s decline in culture and civilization, but they still left a little room for hope by advancing geopolitical unity and cultural self-confidence in Europe. The 1950s was characterized not only by the Cold War context where Europe appeared to be squeezed between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also by the (imminent) loss of Western Europe’s colonial territories. The latter unraveled in the face of French defeat in the First Indochina War and the beginning of the Algerian independence war in 1954, the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955, the humiliation of French and British colonial powers in the Suez Crisis of 1956, and the rising of anti-colonial and Pan-Africanist thinking that would, for instance, entail the independence of Ghana in 1957. It is in this geopolitical context that Western European powers negotiated the foundational Treaty of Rome.

Similarly, today, Emmanuel Macron exemplifies prevalent anxieties about the EU’s shrinking clout in the world. In his famous Sorbonne speech of April 2024, the French President’s central message was that ‘Europe is mortal’ and ‘Europe

¹² K. Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* 19, 43 (Nelson 1965).

¹³ Of course, the agendas also differed depending on the Member State. For instance, the Italian government considered it important not only to access colonial territories, but also to solve problems of unemployment and overpopulation. The Netherlands were more ambivalent in their support of the Eurafrikan project. On the latter, see R. De Bruin, *Indonesian Decolonisation and the Dutch Attitude Towards the Establishment of the EEC’s Association Policy, 1945–1963*, 23(2) *J. Eur. Integ. Hist.* 211–226 (2017).

¹⁴ H. Eklund, *Peoples, Inhabitants and Workers: Colonialism in the Treaty of Rome*, 34(4) *Eur. J. Int’l L.* 831–854 (2023), doi: 10.1093/ejil/chad060. See also J. Silga, *From Political to Migration-based Conditionality in the EU Development Policy: Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*, in *Colonialism and the EU Legal Order* (H. Eklund ed., Cambridge University Press 2025); J. Solanke, *Decolonial Theory and Diversity in the European Commission*, in *Why the Social Sciences Matter* (J. Michie ed., Palgrave 2025).

¹⁵ M. Brown, *The Seventh Member State. Algeria, France, and the European Community* (Harvard University Press 2022).

could die'. European civilization risks crumbling down because of internal divisions and geopolitical tensions. Europe may thus disappear, but fortunately there is still a spark of hope: when Member States join forces and act concertedly through strong policies. This is also a 'cultural and civilizational combat' in which Europe needs to retrieve its 'self-esteem'.¹⁶ Macron's message should also be read in the context of France's waning international influence, not least in the Sahel region, and the new assertiveness of African leaders who strategically leverage China's mounting role in global politics. It illustrates what Toni Hastrup, Niall Duggan and Luis Mah have called the 'ontological insecurity' in Africa–EU relations.¹⁷

Specifically, parallels can be drawn between the discursive legitimization of the Eurafrican project in the 1950s and current attempts to justify European agendas in Africa through the Global Gateway. Eurafrican ideology revolved essentially around five key dimensions.¹⁸ First, Europe and Africa are organically linked and form a coherent political, economic and cultural bloc. Second, in this interregional relationship exists a clear hierarchical division of labour whereby Africa provides raw materials to the more modernized Europe, or as arguably stated by the pioneer of European federalism, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, 'Europe is the head' and 'Africa its body'.¹⁹ Third, to guarantee such a successful trade and investment relationship, European powers need to unite and engage in joint efforts. Fourth, for Europe, this endeavour is all the more urgent given geopolitical competition with rival powers in America and Asia. Last but not least, harnessing Africa–Europe ties will ultimately also benefit the development and civilization of African peoples.

Today's Global Gateway discourses rearticulate surprisingly similar logics. First, Africa is a special partner and ally of the EU, given our shared history; it is Europe's 'twin' and 'sister' continent.²⁰ Second, Africa can provide the EU with the raw materials needed for the green transition, for instance, through the Critical Raw Materials Act and its Strategic Partnerships. Third, this is a significant undertaking for which EU members need to unite ('Team Europe' being another new buzzword in Brussels). Fourth, strengthening EU unity is particularly pressing given geopolitical competition with China, Russia, and other unruly powers. Finally, leveraging Africa–EU relations will not only be a 'win-win' for both

¹⁶ E. Macron, *Europe Speech* (24 Apr. 2024), <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech> (accessed 24 Feb. 2025).

¹⁷ T. Hastrup, N. Duggan & L. Mah, *Navigating ontological (in) security in EU–Africa Relations*, 7(4) *Global Aff.* 541–557 (2021), doi: 10.1080/23340460.2021.1981144.

¹⁸ This is based on Hansen & Jonsson, *supra* n. 11; E. Polonska-Kimunguyi, *The Myth of Peace and Statehood in European Integration Theory: The Imperial Legal Order of the Rome Treaty*, 28(2) *Eur. For. Affairs Rev.* (2023), doi: 10.54648/EERR2023010; Oleart, Nagy, Orbie, Paz, Sebhathu & Wódzka, *supra* n. 10.

¹⁹ As cited in Hansen & Jonsson, *supra* n. 11, at 18.

²⁰ M. Langan & S. Price, *The Frustrations of Free Trade and the Africa–European Union Samoa Agreement*, 41(1) *J. Dev. Societies*, 7–34 (2025), doi: 10.1177/0169796X241304455.

‘partners’ but also fuel the EU’s ‘green’ transition and sustain its value-driven approach to external relations. Thus, as recently argued by Peo Hansen, the so-called ‘geopolitical awakening’ of the EU is not a ‘break with the past’ but a ‘reunion with the past’.²¹

3 CREATING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Second, even after the formal decolonization wave of the early 1960s, EU trade relations with so-called developing countries have continued to display geopolitical elements.²² The Yaoundé Conventions of the 1960s were designed to further the exclusive historical relations with the former colonies. Key bureaucrats in the European Commission’s Directorate General responsible for development policy had previous careers in French colonial administrations.²³ While the Lomé Convention was lauded as ‘revolutionary’ and ‘a turning point in history’, archival research shows that through the agreement the ‘former metropolises aimed at maintaining their sphere-of-influence’ in the newly created group of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.²⁴ Subsequent Lomé Agreements essentially sustained a system of ‘collective clientelism’ whereby the European ‘patron’ sustained exclusive relations with elites in the ACP.²⁵ In the same vein, the EEC’s policy of Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP) has since 1971 not only globalized Western Europe’s trade and development relations beyond the ACP group but also kept colonial/modern relations intact with other ‘Third World’ countries in need of ‘development’ through special and differential treatment in nonreciprocal trade.²⁶

Again, in 2000, the Cotonou Agreement trumpeted a radical break. While introducing new principles and modalities, the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) also continued geopolitical interferences by insisting on penetrating domestic

²¹ P. Hansen, *The Return of the Repressed: The Colonial History of the EU’s Geopolitical Turn*, J. Com. Mkt. Stud. (forthcoming).

²² We elaborate this in S. Couvreur & J. Orbie, *The European Union’s Geoeconomic Turn in Trade: Continuity or Change in the EU’s Strategic Trade Relations With the Global South?*, Paper presented at the twelfth Biennial Conference of the ECPR Standing Group on the European Union (19–21 Jun. 2024).

²³ V. Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (Palgrave 2014).

²⁴ L. Drieghe, *The first Lomé Convention Between the EEC and ACP Group Revisited: Bringing Geopolitics Back in*, 42(6) J. Eur. Integ. 783–798 (2019), doi: 10.1080/07036337.2019.1682566.

²⁵ J. Ravenhill, *Collective Clientelism: The Lomé Conventions and North-South Relations* (Columbia University Press 1985).

²⁶ A. S. M. Alcazar III, C. Nessel & J. Orbie, *Decolonising EU Trade Relations with the Global Souths?*, 19(2) J. Contemp. Eur. Res. (2023), doi: 10.30950/jcer.v19i2.1295; A. S. M. Alcazar III, *Brussels’s Burden: (Un)making the Global Souths in the European Union’s Preferential Trade Policy*, Doctoral Dissertation (Central European University 2024).

markets and playing ‘divide-and-rule’ tactics.²⁷ The former involves strong pressure upon ACP governments to sign reciprocal market access agreements, thus perpetuating patterns whereby the EU can easily extract primary commodities and export its high-value products while also dumping the EU’s agricultural overproduction. The latter implies a redesign of the ACP group into six regional blocs, thereby disregarding and even jeopardizing existing regionalization schemes in Africa, while also weakening the collective negotiation power of the ACP as a group. The EU’s insistence on introducing a most favoured nation clause in the EPAs appears in line with free trade logics, but also undermines the creation of South–South trade agreements and strengthens the EU’s position in the hub-and-spoke system. Furthermore, ACP negotiators and non-governmental organizations accused the EU of ‘bullying tactics’ and ‘dirty tricks’ to ‘arm-twist’ former colonies into signing agreements they did not really want.²⁸ While Samoa Agreement, signed in November 2023, was welcomed by the European Commissioner as a ‘new dawn’,²⁹ it also insists on further implementing the EPA agenda.³⁰

Further afield, in terms of nonreciprocal trade relations, the EU uses its ostensibly normative GSP policy to discipline the adherence of ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ countries to the eurocentred international rules-based order. In doing so, coloniality permeates GSP relations by rendering the Global Souths as sites that need EU intervention to inculcate international norms on human rights, rule of law, labour standards, and climate mitigation/adaptation through preferential trade.³¹ Should the EU’s presumed others fail to acquiesce to its normative demands, the EU threatens to sanction its unruly ‘beneficiaries’ by withdrawing GSP all the while claiming to act benevolently for the

²⁷ S. G. Kamga, *Economic Partnerships Agreements: Another Tool for the Scramble for Africa or a Viable Undertaking for the Continent’s Development*, in *Unite or Perish: Africa Fifty Years After the Founding of the OAU* (M. Muchie, V. Gumede, P. Lukhele-Olorunju & H. T. Demissie eds, Africa Institute of South Africa 2014); Y. Tandon, *Trade Is War: The West’s War Against the World* (Or Books 2015); S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf* (Routledge 2021); M. Langan & S. Price, *Migration, Development and EU Free Trade Deals: The Paradox of Economic Partnership Agreements as a Push Factor for Migration*, 7(4) *Global Aff.* 505–521 (2021); R. W. Sebhatu, *Applying Postcolonial Approaches to Studies on Africa-EU Relations*, in *The Routledge Handbook on EU-Africa Relations* (T. Haastrup, L. Mah & N. Duggan eds, Routledge 2021).

²⁸ O. Elgström, *From Cotonou to EPA Light: A Troubled Negotiation Process*, in *Beyond Market Access for Economic Development: EU-Africa Relations in Transition* (G. Faber & J. Orbie eds, Routledge 2009); L. Sheahan, N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *Benign Partner or Benign Master? Economic Partnership Agreement Negotiations Between the European Union and the Pacific Islands*, 15(3) *Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev.* 347–366 (2010), doi: 10.54648/EERR2010025.

²⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_24_970. See also M. Carbone, *The rationales behind the EU-OACPS agreement: Process, Outcome, Contestations*, 26(2) *Eur. Foreign Affairs Rev.* (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2021018>.

³⁰ M. Langan & S. Price, *The Frustrations of Free Trade and the Africa–European Union Samoa Agreement*, 41(1) *J. Dev. Societies* 7–34 (2025), doi: 10.1177/0169796X241304455. For similarly critical analysis of another EU trade agreement, see A. Herten-Crabb, *Perpetual imperialism and the MERCOSUR-EU trade negotiations*, Doctoral Dissertation (London School of Economics and Political Science 2024).

³¹ Alcazar III, *supra* n. 26.

interests of countries ‘most in need’. Yet the European Commission’s double standards undermine this normative imposition by sanctioning some ‘least developed’ countries (e.g., Cambodia) but not others (e.g., Burma/Myanmar) all in the name of protecting the EU’s political economy interests overseas.³²

The EPAs and GSP have often been critiqued for their neoliberal substance and for the almost missionary zeal with which the EU has pursued reciprocal and/or conditional free trade agendas. While this is true, it does not distract from the observation that both the EPAs and GSP have at the same time also always had a geopolitical dimension. Contrary to conventional wisdom, neoliberalism and geopolitics are not necessarily opposite tendencies. Colonial projects have always coincided with the pursuit of free and preferential trade – albeit in highly selective and hypocritical ways. Trade has always followed the flag-planting of European colonial powers overseas, although the modus operandi has differed over the past decades and even centuries. The EPAs and GSP illustrate at least two concrete ways in which free and preferential trade has been advanced, namely through exclusive agreements with artificially created regions and through hierarchical relations of power. The same could be said about investment flows and the role of the European Investment Bank since the creation of the EEC in 1957.³³ Another continuity is how these geopolitical trade agendas have been legitimized through discourses of values, norms, and win-win partnerships yet remained steeped in exploitation and coloniality.

4 GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

Beyond and beneath the much-stressed newness of EU ‘partnerships’ and the apparent changes in how they presumably address international challenges, geopolitical continuities can be seen. We can and should have long discussions on what ‘geopolitics’ means. This would allow for more sophisticated analyses that hopefully find their way in this journal.³⁴ But to the extent that the geopolitical relates to the realist and pragmatic pursuit of hard power interests in territories that the EU sees as its traditional spheres of influence, the geopolitical turn may not be so

³² Alcazar III, *supra* n. 9; C. Cao, *EU-Topia in Cambodia Post 2017: EBA: A Postcolonial Critique of Europe’s ‘Stick’ in the Global South*, Doctoral Dissertation (University of Leicester 2024).

³³ A. Bougrea, *The European Investment Bank in Sub-saharan Africa: constrained expansion*, 28(1) J. Econ. Pol’y Reform 12–36 (2025), doi: 10.1080/17487870.2024.2352543.

³⁴ Example, N. Helwig & V. Sinkkonen, *Strategic autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term*, 27 Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. (2022), doi: 10.54648/EERR2022009; L. Lonardo, *The Contribution of Geopolitics to the Study of EU Foreign Policy Illustrated Through the Example of Empires and Colonialism*, 27(4) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. (2022), doi: 10.54648/EERR2022031; I. Marinova, *The EU at a Strategic Crossroads: A Geopolitical Player in Great Power Games?*, 28(2) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. (2023), doi: 10.54648/EERR2023007; J. Veselinovič, *A Knowledge Regime Fit for Geoeconomics? The Changing Production, Consumption and Practices of Policy Knowledge in the EU*, 29(2) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. (2024).

new after all. The creation of an EU army, and more widely the militarization of European politics, constitute key changes. For one thing, it means that the EU is no longer choosing to behave like a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’.³⁵ However, such a sea-change in strategy also constitutes continuity in preserving the colonial-capitalist underpinnings of the ‘European project’.

As in the 1950s, the European powers may manage to reinvent themselves again through greater unity, this time through more forceful military integration and a joint scramble for African resources. In the context of polycrises, the EU has often displayed chameleonic features, in that it pragmatically adapts to new internal and external situations. While this may be good news for Europhiles, prominent questions will remain on how this then contributes to a fairer international system. Perhaps the EU’s recognition of its geopolitical agendas – not as a new phenomenon enforced by the external context, but as a key part of its supranational DNA – would be a good starting point for having such discussions. Europe was already at war since the early days (think of France and Algeria or Belgian military interference in Congo), and it has played geopolitics in various ways ever since.³⁶ Instead of endorsing former High Representative Josep Borrell’s language of ‘Europe’s geopolitical awakening’, we should rather acknowledge that the EU has never been a sleeping beauty.

This metaphor refers to Frantz Fanon, who in ‘The Wretched of the Earth’ expresses the hope that Europe will contribute to ‘rehabilitate man’ while adding that ‘it is obvious we are not so naïve as to think this will be achieved with the cooperation and goodwill of the European governments’. He then appeals to the:

crucial help of the European masses who would do well to confess that they have often rallied behind the position of our common masters on colonial issues. In order to do this, the European masses must first of all decide to wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of Sleeping Beauty.³⁷

In short, the idea that the EU would be ‘coming of age’ or ‘maturing’ should be nuanced and qualified.³⁸ Another popular metaphor that may be problematized, used by Josep Borrell as well as Emmanuel Macron, is that of Europe being a ‘herbivore’ in a world of ‘carnivores’.³⁹ Staying within culinary spheres, Borrell had already stressed that Europe ‘must develop an appetite for power’, as it still needs to ‘learn to use the language of power’.⁴⁰ Such discourses perpetuate a

³⁵ Galtung, *supra* n. 9.

³⁶ See also Hansen, *supra* n. 36.

³⁷ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 61–62 (Grove Press 1961).

³⁸ Maurer, Raube & Whitman, *supra* n. 4 at 345–363.

³⁹ P. Wintour, *Migration Could Be ‘Dissolving force for EU’, Says Bloc’s Top Diplomat* (The Guardian 22 Sep. 2023); N. Vinocur, C. Caulcutt & B. Moens, *Macron to Europe: We Need to Become ‘Omnivores’ After Trump’s Victory* (Politico 7 Nov. 2024).

⁴⁰ P. Bock, *EU Must Develop ‘Appetite for Power’ Says Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell* (Euronews 16 Feb. 2020).

teleological story that has long dominated EU studies, that European integration keeps growing towards something more political despite (or rather thanks to!) recurrent crises.⁴¹ However, we have suggested in this editorial that the EU was created for geopolitical ambitions and that ever since it has been playing power politics quite forcefully.

That said, our arguments are based a relatively small amount of secondary literature. While much academic production has analysed current events and recent changes, much less research energy has been invested into understanding historical continuities, which involves laborious archival research.⁴² For further research, it would also be of key importance to hear and genuinely consider anticolonial perspectives, including those of Pan-African thinkers and activists. While the colonial entanglements of the European project may have been a new discovery (pun intended) for many political scientists and historians from the geopolitical North over the past two decades, anticolonial voices have never flinched and expressed any doubts about Europe's (including the EEC's) geopolitical ambitions. To cite one example, it remains puzzling why Kwame Nkrumah's 'Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism'⁴³ and Walter Rodney's 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa',⁴⁴ have barely been mentioned in EU studies seminal handbooks, let alone taken seriously in our formal curricular thought and praxis, despite their historical contributions to 'European integration' thinking.

Such knowledge gaps also tell us something about a particular kind of geopolitics that Europe has successfully employed, namely what Walter Mignolo has called the 'geopolitics of knowledge'.⁴⁵ Some ways of knowing have indeed been deemed legitimate and authoritative more than others, also in scholarship on EU foreign policies. We hope that this journal can contribute to being a platform for alternative perspectives on Europe's global role.

⁴¹ M. Gilbert, *Narrating the Process: Questioning the Progressive Story of European Integration*, 46(3) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 641–662 (2008), doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5965.2008.00795.x.

⁴² For notable exceptions, see Dimier, *supra* n. 42; L. Drieghe, *The First Lomé Convention Between the EEC and ACP Group Revisited: Bringing Geopolitics Back in*, 42(6) J. Eur. Integ. 783–798 (2019), doi: 10.1080/07036337.2019.1682566; L. van de Grift, R. de Bruin, W. van Meurs & C. Hoetink, *The Unfinished History of European Integration* (Amsterdam University Press 2018); Alcazar III, *supra* n. 26.

⁴³ K. Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (Nelson 1965). For exceptions, see M. Langan, *Neo-colonialism, Nkrumah and Africa-Europe*, in *Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism* (R. Rabaka ed., Routledge 2020); and L. Govaert, *Neocolonialism in Disguise? The European Commission's Trade and Sustainable Development Discourse*, 29(3) Eur. Foreign Aff., Rev. 331–360 (2024), doi: 10.54648/EERR2024015.

⁴⁴ W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications 1973).

⁴⁵ W. D. Mignolo, *The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference*, 101(1) South Atlantic Q. 57–96 (2002), doi: 10.1215/00382876-101-1-57.