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## BLOG — POST

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# Thinking about and teaching European geopolitics



The war in Ukraine, technological rivalries and energy tensions have brought geopolitics back to the forefront of European debate. Yet, whilst the European Union increasingly speaks of ‘strategic autonomy’, the intellectual dimension of this autonomy is rarely examined. The place of geopolitics in higher education is, however, a key issue for Europe’s cognitive sovereignty and strategic capacity.

### I • Strategic autonomy also requires intellectual autonomy

For several years now, the idea of ‘European strategic autonomy’ has been gradually gaining ground in political debates. It refers to the European Union’s ability to act independently in key areas such as defence, energy, industry and technology. This autonomy is generally conceived in terms of material capabilities: military budgets, technological sovereignty, energy diversification and industrial policy. But one fundamental dimension is often overlooked: the intellectual frameworks that enable Europe to understand the transformations of the international system. Can strategic autonomy truly be developed without cognitive autonomy?

In this context, the place of geopolitics in European higher education deserves particular attention. Universities and grandes écoles play a central role in training political, administrative and economic elites. They help shape the way in which future decision-makers analyse power relations and international dynamics.

## **II • A European discipline with an ambivalent past**

Geopolitics has deeply European roots. At the end of the 19th century, thinkers such as Friedrich Ratzel and Halford Mackinder developed spatial analyses of power that had a lasting influence on global strategic thinking. However, the discipline is also marked by a problematic legacy. The Nazi regime's instrumentalisation of Geopolitik led, after 1945, to the lasting discrediting of geopolitics in many European academic circles. Its rehabilitation came later, notably thanks to the work of Yves Lacoste, who redefined geopolitics as the study of power rivalries over territories. This approach enabled the discipline to regain scientific legitimacy. However, this reconstruction took place mainly within national frameworks. European geopolitics thus re-emerged in a fragmented manner, without any real intellectual structuring at the continental level.

## **III • A rapid but incomplete expansion**

Since the 2000s, geopolitics has seen significant expansion in European higher education. It now features in numerous programmes related to international relations, political science, European studies, international security, international trade and geoeconomics. Geopolitical analyses are now used to understand issues such as energy dependencies, economic sanctions, global supply chains and technological rivalries. This development reflects a broader transformation: economic, industrial and technological dynamics are now deeply intertwined with international power relations.

This rise can also be attributed to growing demand from younger generations, who are increasingly aware of the instability of the world in which they will have to live and work. Successive crises—health, energy, climate, military and technological—have heightened students' interest in analytical frameworks capable of making sense of contemporary upheavals. In France, where geopolitics was introduced into secondary schools during the 2019 baccalaureate reform through the History-Geography, Geopolitics and Political Science specialism, its popularity clearly illustrates this trend. The growing success of this course shows that geopolitics is no longer merely a matter for experts or diplomats: it is becoming a key intellectual expectation among the younger generations.

Despite this growing popularity, geopolitics remains rarely a fully institutionalised discipline in European universities. It most often functions as a cross-disciplinary tool rather than as a structured academic field.

## **IV • Persistent fragmentation of the European academic landscape**

The European academic landscape remains heavily influenced by national strategic priorities. In Central and Eastern Europe, geopolitical analyses focus largely on security issues and relations with Russia. In the Nordic countries, issues of global governance, climate and sustainability take centre stage. Southern European countries pay greater attention to Mediterranean dynamics and migration. This diversity reflects the strategic realities of the continent, but it also contributes to maintaining intellectual fragmentation. Furthermore, the dominant theoretical frameworks in international relations remain largely Anglo-American. The work of authors such as Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer and Andrew Moravcsik continues to shape much of the academic debate.

This situation is not in itself a problem, but it raises a strategic question: can Europe develop strategic autonomy whilst relying primarily on analytical frameworks produced elsewhere? And more importantly: can it claim to be a true strategic power without seeking to develop a common geopolitics, that is to say, a distinctly European way of thinking about the world, its conflicts, its dependencies and its interests?

## **V • Geopolitics in the face of new power matrices**

Contemporary shifts in global power also call for a rethinking of the discipline's scope. Traditionally centred on territorial and military rivalries, geopolitics must now incorporate new forms of strategic competition. Key areas include: access to critical resources and rare earths, technological competition in artificial intelligence, data sovereignty, energy transitions, and control of critical infrastructure. Power in the 21st century is increasingly played out within technological, economic and informational systems. In this context, geopolitics can no longer be confined solely to political science faculties. It must engage in dialogue with other disciplines, notably economics, engineering, environmental sciences and digital studies.

## **VI • Three avenues for strengthening European geopolitics**

In light of these developments, several initiatives could help strengthen the role of geopolitics in European higher education. First and foremost, supporting European research in geopolitics. The European Union could encourage more interdisciplinary research programmes dedicated to contemporary geopolitical transformations. Another avenue would be to develop transdisciplinary courses. Geopolitics should be integrated more widely into courses related to technology, economics or environmental sciences. Finally, fostering European strategic thinking. European universities and research centres could be encouraged to develop analytical frameworks capable of better integrating the continent's specific geopolitical characteristics.

## VII • A challenge for European sovereignty

Geopolitics now occupies a growing place in European higher education, but its academic structuring remains incomplete. In an international context marked by competition between powers, strengthening European geopolitical thinking could help improve the European Union's ability to understand its strategic environment and define its priorities. The issue therefore goes beyond the mere organisation of academic disciplines. It touches on a more fundamental question: Europe's ability to develop its own interpretation of the world and to act accordingly.