

EXPERT'S INSIGHTS

The Changing World, Europe and Geopolitics

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Abstract

The text examines the accelerating transformation of the contemporary international system in the context of the recent escalation between the United States, Israel, and Iran and argues that these developments reveal deeper structural shifts in global geopolitics. The analysis identifies four major trends shaping the emerging international order: the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, the reconfiguration of great-power competition, the erosion of the post-1945 international order and its institutional foundations, and the growing predominance of geopolitical considerations over ideological divisions. Drawing on geopolitical and international relations perspectives, the article explores the implications of these trends for global stability, the functioning of international institutions, and the evolving balance of power among major and regional actors. Particular attention is devoted to the strategic challenges facing the European Union in an increasingly fragmented and competitive international environment. The paper assesses the strengths and vulnerabilities of the EU, including its economic power, regulatory influence, strategic dependencies, and internal political divisions. It argues that Europe's role in the emerging world order will depend on its ability to develop strategic autonomy, strengthen technological and energy resilience, and formulate a coherent geopolitical vision. The article concludes that the contemporary international system is entering a period of heightened uncertainty, intensified geopolitical rivalry, and the gradual replacement of rule-based international governance with more fluid and power-driven forms of international interaction.

Keywords: geopolitical transformations, multipolarity, international order, great-power competition, European Union, strategic autonomy, international security

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Disordering the world order

The war in Iran has initiated four key geopolitical processes that will shape the international environment and processes in the years to come. In the context of geopolitical instability, the world is entering a period of increasing confrontation between competing global actors, which, according to some international analysts, is taking on the characteristics of a global conflict or a kind of “third world war”. Although the hostilities are being waged in separate regions, their political, economic and military scope is global. It is worth noting that despite the limited military space, the Russia-Ukraine and US-Iran conflicts directly or indirectly involve over 80 countries through financing, military assistance, raw material supplies, logistical support and diplomacy. This shows that contemporary conflicts are less and less regional and are increasingly becoming elements of global rivalry for influence, resources and strategic control.

The attack by the US and Israel on Iran has driven the final nail into (the coffin of) the system of the unipolar world. The transition to a multipolar world order, in which regional powers play an increasingly independent and influential role, is becoming increasingly apparent. Despite the fact that the United States, after the end of the Cold War, has been accelerating the processes of redistribution of its global power, the development of international relations is not determined solely by the actions of Washington, but increasingly depends on the behaviour of regional and rising powers such as China, India, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other countries with significant influence in their geographical spaces. Conflicts in the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific region, and Eastern Europe reveal that local crises are increasingly having global consequences and directly impacting international security, energy markets, and the world economy. In this sense, the current events are not just some regional conflicts, but part of a broader process of forming a new balance of power. The world is gradually entering a multipolar era, characterized by growing competition between global powers, a greater role for regional actors, and an increasingly complex system of temporary alliances and strategic partnerships.

We observe a new dynamic in the attempt to rearrange Kissinger's classic geopolitical triangle, in the context of a new strategic logic, which some analysts define as a kind of “reverse Nixon strategy” or NOXIN. Its essence is expressed in a potential aspiration for partial rapprochement with Russia in order to distance it from the increasingly deepening strategic partnership with China. In this context, Russia is seen not only as an independent geopolitical factor, but also as a balancing element in the global competition between the great powers. Such logic suggests a long-term attempt to reformat global alliances, in which the main strategic focus of the United States shifts to systematically limiting the growing influence of the People's Republic of China. Within this perspective, the normalization of relations with Russia is presented as a possible tool for strategic rebalancing of the international system. These trends are also reflected in current strategic documents of the United States, including the new National Security Concept of December 2025 which emphasizes the need for “strategic stability” with Russia within the new multipolar reality

and the management of systemic competition between great powers. In this sense, the current geopolitical dynamics are characterized not only by confrontation, but also by the search for flexible formats for the redistribution of influence on a global scale.

Last but not least, the breakdown of the previous system of international relations is deepening, with the erosion of the post-war world order established after 1945 becoming increasingly evident. This process affects the two key pillars of global stability – international institutions and international law. On the one hand, a number of international organizations demonstrate limited effectiveness in preventing and managing conflicts, which leads to a weakening of their legitimacy and authority. On the other hand, there is a growing tendency towards selective application of international law and strengthening of practices of subjective rules and power politics, in which rules are increasingly interpreted through the prism of geopolitical interests. As a result, the international environment is becoming more fragmented and unstable where universal norms give way to regional balances of power and temporary coalitions. This transformation further accelerates the transition to a multipolar world, in which predictability and institutional stability are gradually weakened at the expense of dynamic and competitive geopolitical actions.

We come to the main conclusion - everything is geopolitics. This is not merely a claim, this is also the title of a book published at the beginning of the year by the Bulgarian Diplomatic Society. As we know, geopolitics analyses international relations, interactions between states, including cooperation and conflicts, reflects the rise of new players and changes in global dynamics and continues to shape strategic decisions and relationships between states. It analyses how today we use our geographical features to protect our national interests, expand our influence or participate in global and regional alliances. Geopolitics is a scientific and analytical approach that studies the relationship between geographical space (territory, resources, climate, location) and political power. It is a tool for decision making and explains why certain countries take specific political or economic actions.

Wars, confrontations, competition for spheres of influence, lack of dialogue and diplomacy – these are all elements of the erosion of the post-war world order. The supporting structures – international institutions and international law – are today neglected and often circumvented. Old structures and norms are crumbling and disintegrating, we are in a period when the great powers USA, China and Russia pursue only their own interests. The rules of interstate communication cease to operate. The force of law is being replaced by the law of might. This is the “world of *Lex fortissimum* – the law of might”.

But the erosion of the post-war order does not mean that a new one is being formulated in its place. Here we should recall Gramsci, who said that when the old order disappears and there is no new one yet, then monsters are born. Which means that in the coming years, the world will increasingly fragment. Wars have become an everyday occurrence and are becoming the main method for resolving contradictions and conflicts. If we enter the world of cinema, today's world can be likened to "Battle after Battle", the movie that won the most Oscars for 2026. Peace, dialogue, diplomacy are fading in the international vocabulary. Trust between states is absent, and dialogue is no longer a path to understanding. The absence

of trust and dialogue has greatly narrowed the scope of diplomacy, and uncertainty has become a constant feature of geopolitics.

Geopolitics is the matrix that studies the interaction between politics and ideology, and it is becoming clearer that it tends to push ideological divisions into the background. In this context, the classic ideological axes of “left-right” are gradually losing their impact, especially among the new voters – the “Z” generation and the millennials. The younger generation is increasingly formulating its expectations outside of traditional ideological frameworks, focusing on two main directions – social justice provided by the state, and a sustainable, “green” future. These priorities are integrated into a new type of political thinking, oriented not so much towards ideological oppositions, but towards specific models of social development.

One should add that the ideological struggle is increasingly reduced to a choice between geopolitical orientation and national sovereignty. This leads to the rise of far-right, populist and nationalist parties, which ever more rarely define themselves in the classic categories of “left” and “right”, but rather through their foreign policy position – pro- or anti-European, pro- or anti-establishment. This in turn confirms the fact that the main, or so-called mainstream, parties, viewed through the geopolitical prism, increasingly seem difficult to distinguish and are even interchangeable in terms of their strategic orientations. As an alternative to this ambiguity, the search for an “antidote” in the form of a revival of the nation-state and national identity as a source of security and predictability is intensifying. This dominant trend finds expression both in the European Parliament elections and in the growing support for figures such as Donald Trump, especially after his return to the political scene, as well as in the results of national elections in a number of European countries, where formations with a clearly expressed populist and nationalist profile have been occupying leading political positions.

In an increasingly fragmented world, two global ideological and geopolitical formations are taking shape – the globalists and the realists. These are both major schools of thought in international relations, which differ fundamentally, especially in their understanding of sovereignty. Realists perceive it as absolute and indivisible, linked to the classical Westphalian model of the international system, while liberals view it as relative and subject to limitation through supranational institutions and international law. In this sense, the liberal school defends the idea that international norms will gradually prevail over full state sovereignty and will lead to a more integrated global system of governance. Realists, on the other hand, insist on preserving state sovereignty as a fundamental principle of the international order, inherited from the Westphalian system, which to this day forms the basis of international law.

Against this background, Donald Trump's supporters often label the globalist approach as a form of the “deep state”, understood as a supranational structure of influence that limits the sovereign decisions of individual states. Historically, a prototype of the globalist vision can be found in Woodrow Wilson's “Fourteen Points”, which after World War I put forward the idea of the active role of the United States in promoting a liberal international

order. In contrast, the realist approach is associated with the Monroe Doctrine - "America for the Americans", which emphasizes limiting foreign commitments and prioritizing national interests.

Today, the dispute between the two schools is deepening in the context of the weakening post-war international order. Both camps realize that the existing system is entering a final stage of transformation, in which the risk of verbal and political conflicts escalating into military clashes is increasing. That is why the key geopolitical issue of our time is the management of this escalation and the prevention of an uncontrollable global conflict.

The shortest definition of geopolitics, according to the founder of the Stratfor analytical centre, George Friedman, is memory. ("Geopolitics is about memory. It is about remembering patterns of behaviour and understanding why those patterns repeat themselves"). In this sense, geopolitics represents a kind of historical DNA – a set of history, culture, customs, religion and civilizational experience of different peoples and wider territories, which a number of political scientists define as "wide spaces". Historical memory often becomes both a factor of identity and an obstacle to diplomatic understanding and sustainable international agreements, including in relations between the United States, the West and Russia. In this context, differences in historical experience and collective memory have a direct impact on the perception of international crises and military conflicts.

This point is exemplified by the following example: In the American case, it is often emphasized that the limited historical accumulation of direct external military experience on the territory of the continental United States has contributed to a specific public sensitivity to international conflicts. This is complicated by the role of the media and the information environment, which in the digital age transform citizens into active interpreters and often "producers" of meaning, rather than just recipients of information. In this process, public perception is not always formed on the basis of balanced analysis, but through filtered interpretations, which a number of researchers, including those from the RAND Corporation, describe as a process of "truth decay" – a gradual blurring of the line between fact, interpretation and propaganda.

Similar processes are also observed in Russian society, where historical memory has a strongly structuring role for political culture and public consciousness. In this context, it is emphasized that different ethnic and national historical optics lead to different interpretations of the same events. As a number of analysts (including Joe Lauria of Consortium News) have noted, the lack of mutual understanding between societies often stems not only from political differences but also from deep historical narratives – including different perceptions of World War II and the Soviet Union's role in it, as well as contemporary conflicts in the post-Soviet space.

Thus, geopolitics manifests itself not only as a politics of interests, but also as a politics of memory, in which historical narratives, collective traumas, and civilizational interpretations play a key role in shaping the international behaviour of states.

Geopolitics: Europe at a crossroads

Describing these challenges is important because the European Union also faces them and they are indispensable in analysing the role of the EU as a current and future geopolitical factor. In the global geopolitical game, Europe was once a leading player with a clearly defined strategy. Today, unfortunately, the continent increasingly appears as a participant without its own vision, re-acting rather than leading. Dependence on external forces, the lack of a single foreign policy, and internal disagreements call into question its ability to defend its interests. The steady erosion of the norms on which Europe has come to rely is only exacerbated by weak leadership, especially in the so-called “Euro Troika” – Germany, France and the United Kingdom. We can conclude that **the “Happy Era”, made possible by the 80-year Pax Americana after World War II, is officially over.**

Added to these challenges is the growing tension between the processes of European integration and the rise of national sovereignty in a number of member states. It is evident that the European Union's strategic decisions are becoming hostage to different national interests, making it difficult to form a unified position on key issues such as security, migration, energy policy and relations with global powers.

At the same time, the EU is facing a serious test of its economic competitiveness. Lagging behind in high-tech sectors, dependence on external supply chains, and growing competition from the United States and China are calling into question Europe's ability to maintain its economic and technological sovereignty.

In the area of security, Europe has not yet managed to build full strategic autonomy. Despite efforts to strengthen its defence capabilities, European security remains largely dependent on transatlantic mechanisms and the commitment of the United States. In a changing international environment, this raises questions about the EU's ability to respond independently to crises. An additional factor is the deepening crisis of democratic legitimacy in the European Union. Low public trust in European institutions, the rise of populist and Eurosceptic movements, and increasing political polarisation weaken the internal stability of the EU. This creates a favourable environment for external influence.

If Europe wants to remain a significant geopolitical player, it must first of all re-define its geopolitical interests. These are: its own strategy (that is, a clear vision of the interests and goals of the European Union), instruments of influence - economic, technological, military and diplomatic, as well as the ability to make autonomous decisions without excessive dependence on external forces. Moreover, the European Union should strengthen its internal unity, increase its competitiveness and build more effective crisis response mechanisms. Only by combining political will, strategic leadership and real resources can Europe defend its own interests and values in an increasingly competitive and multipolar international environment.

Where is Europe in this game and does it have the necessary cards? The answer is positive!

First: Economic power – the European Union remains one of the largest economies in the world, with a huge internal market, a high level of development and significant influence on international trade and financial processes.

Second: High standards in the field of human rights, technology and *diploGlomation* – Europe continues to be a global bearer of democratic values, the rule of law and international cooperation, which provides it with significant “soft power” in world politics.

Third: Regulatory power – through its rules and legislation, the European Union influences not only its Member States but also global markets, often setting international standards in areas such as data protection, competition, digital technologies and environmental policy.

Fourth: A broad network of partnerships and alliances – the EU has diplomatic, economic and political ties in almost all regions of the world, allowing it to defend its interests through multilateral cooperation and dialogue.

Therefore, the problem facing Europe is not the lack of resources or potential, but the ability to unite them in a common strategic vision and turn them into an effective instrument of geopolitical influence. Here it is necessary to note that Europe unfortunately also has weak cards that limit its geopolitical effectiveness. First of all – military dependence on the United States - despite efforts to develop a common European defence policy, the security of the continent continues to be largely based on the guarantees and military capabilities of NATO, respectively, on the American leadership in the Alliance.

Lack of political unity – the different historical traditions, economic interests and strategic priorities of the member states often make it difficult to form a unified foreign and defence policy, which weakens the EU's ability to act quickly and consistently.

Limited influence in crisis and conflict regions – despite its economic weight and diplomatic presence, the European Union often remains a secondary factor in resolving conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and the Indo-Pacific region, where the initiative is usually taken by other global powers.

Energy and technological dependencies – dependence on external sources of raw materials, energy resources and key technologies creates additional vulnerabilities in the context of increasing geopolitical competition.

These weaknesses show that the European Union has not yet converted its significant economic potential into a comparable political and strategic force on the international stage.

And yet, what are the opportunities before the European Union? Four main directions can be outlined:

Strategic autonomy – by building more independent economic, defence and diplomatic instruments, Europe could defend its interests more effectively and act as an independent centre of power in an increasingly multipolar world.

Energy independence – diversification of supplies, development of renewable energy sources and investment in new energy technologies can reduce external dependencies and strengthen the resilience of European economies.

Technological development – strengthening investment in innovation, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence is a key condition for Europe to remain competitive in the global race for technological leadership.

And last but not least, a **common foreign policy** – closer coordination between member states and the formation of unified positions on strategic issues would increase the weight of the European Union in international relations and would allow it to respond more decisively to global challenges.

Ultimately, the question is not whether Europe has the necessary potential, but whether it will find the political will to turn it into a strategic advantage. The world is entering an era of intensified competition between great powers, in which economic power, technological leadership and political unity will determine the place of states and alliances in the international system. If the European Union can overcome its internal divisions and forge a common geopolitical vision, it can establish itself as one of the key pillars of the new world order. The future of the union will depend on its ability to formulate a long-term geopolitical strategy based on clearly defined interests, political leadership and institutional effectiveness. Without such a strategic reorientation, Europe risks gradually turning from a subject into an object of global politics, adapting to or dependent on the decisions of other global powers, instead of actively participating in their formation. To change this, we need to create our “winning cards” through unity, vision and concrete actions. Or as former Italian Prime Minister and President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi noted in his Report on the Future of EU Competitiveness: “To meet today’s challenges, the European Union must transform itself from a spectator – or at best a supporting actor – into a protagonist.” Only then will Europe be not just an arena for others to play on, but an active architect of the future world order.