

Is 'hybrid geopolitics' the next EU foreign policy doctrine?

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The EU has faced a diverse range of criticisms over its actions during the Ukraine crisis. While some observers have accused EU states of being too weak in the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea, others suggest that the crisis itself emerged from a misguided attempt by the EU to push for an Association Agreement with Ukraine. [Richard Youngs](#) highlights that the crisis has encouraged the EU to become a different kind of policy actor, with less emphasis on promoting EU norms and rules, and a greater focus on the potential geopolitical impact of different policy options.



EU-Ukraine summit 2016: EU Council President Donald Tusk (left), Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko (centre), and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. Credits: [EEAS](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Most assessments of the EU's response to the Ukraine-Russia conflict have been highly critical. Criticisms have come from diametrically opposed directions. While many analysts admonish the EU and its member states for having been overly weak and insipid, others accuse European governments of intruding clumsily into the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region without thinking through Russia's likely reaction or interests. In a [new book](#), I stake out a different line, showing that the eastern crisis has pushed the EU towards a new kind of geopolitics.

From late 2013, the common call has been for the EU to get more 'geopolitical' in dealing with the Ukraine conflict and other crises in its neighbourhood. While commanding widespread assent, however, this plea in itself does not add a great deal of precision, as several different types of strategy can be classified as 'geopolitical'.

In my book, I offer a typology of different kinds of possible geopolitical strategies and argue that EU policy responses in the Eastern Partnership region can be defined as a hybrid or *liberal-redux geopolitics*. This conveys the idea of an upgraded EU diplomacy mixing offensive and defensive tactics, and of the union using its distinctive tools aimed at deepening cooperation with EaP states, interdependence and political transformation, both more instrumentally and more variably to further immediate-term security interests. The category is 'redux' liberal in the

sense of the EU using core liberal-cooperative practices in ways that are more selective and calibrated than in previous European policies, and superimposed with a layer of geo-strategic diplomacy.

The EU's emerging liberal-redux geopolitics includes a number of components that have gradually taken shape in the last three years. The EU has offered some elements of stronger strategic backing to EaP states, while also keeping the region as a 'middle-land' between it and a more abrasive Russia. Elements of EU responses suggest at least some implicit acceptance of Russia's view that the region should be geo-strategically managed – juggled in an east-west balance, sometimes not sitting easily with what citizens in EaP states might prefer.

In the triangular relationship between the EU, Russia and EaP partners, a *geopolitics of asymmetry* has taken root. European governments have adopted some new elements of strategic policy in response to Russian actions and developments in the EaP states. But they have not sought to mirror the Russian understanding of geopolitics – nor has the EU as a whole understood security challenges in the same way as the EaP partners. The EU's response to Russia has shifted from a logic of inclusion to one of partial exclusion. Although the EU has used restrictive measures elsewhere in the world, this is the most notable case of sanctions being used as a central pillar of European statecraft.

Sanctions are off-set by selective accommodation and a very modest form of strategic balancing. In parallel to restrictive measures, some European governments have focused on more classical forms of diplomacy that seek trade-offs with Russia outside the scope of EU institutional instruments. And EU policies to the east now build in 'the Russia factor' in a way that the EaP had conspicuously not previously done.

The EU has not allowed its Russia policy entirely to dictate its EaP policy, but neither has its EaP policy entirely taken precedence over its Russia policy. Many in the EU and member states have veered toward the logic of joint negotiation with Russia over core issues in the region. The EU's new preference is for *bounded containment*. This mixes elements that unwind interdependence with those that actually solidify the logic of inclusion in terms of talking with Russia on Ukraine's trade arrangements, internal political arrangements and conflict mediation issues.



‘Euromaidan’: Ukrainians protesting their government’s decision to suspend the signing of the association agreement with the EU. November 2013 Kiev, Ukraine. Credits: [Mstyslav Chernov](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The EU has offered stronger support for the six EaP partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), but there has been no effort to gain strategic primacy in the EaP space. The EU has not undertaken the kind of geopolitical ‘tactical retreat’ that ‘defensive realists’ advocate. Indeed, the EU has upgraded its commitments to the EaP. Yet neither has the EU moved far in the other direction of seeking to assert greater tutelage over the region as the best way of protecting its interests. Russia’s presence within contested zones in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine has dissuaded many EU member states from any dramatically upgraded commitments to these countries.

The EU has declined to offer EaP states full protection or assume responsibility for their security and territorial integrity. It has offered neither the prospect of EU accession, nor major new benefits short of membership. Overall, European financial support to EaP partners has increased, but not dramatically. If the EU has not fully retreated from the region, neither have its efforts sufficed to gain significantly more strategic influence over EaP states.

The EU has been both more insistent that its geopolitical advantage lies in its focus on democratic reforms in EaP partners and less rigid in the tactics through which it pursues that focus. The reform-oriented dimension of EU policies is now framed and calibrated more instrumentally as a tool of purposive power – sometimes enhanced for this use, at other times set aside where this is judged to be geopolitically optimal.

In terms of direct involvement in the on-going Donbas conflict, member states have been extremely wary and the EU as a whole appears willing to accept a degree of implicit ‘defeat’ in eastern Ukraine and allow Russia to take practical control not only of Crimea but also limited parts of the Donbas region. This is judged to be an outcome less damaging to European interests than open conflict with Russia. The geopolitical script is one of indirect conflict containment rather than direct measures of conflict transformation. Ukrainians are strongly critical of this passivity.

Overall, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has contributed to making the EU a different kind of foreign policy actor. The EU has shifted towards a more *consequentialist-utilitarian* foreign policy, less clearly driven by the union’s institutionally embedded norms and identity.

The most powerful European foreign policy dynamic prior to the crisis was that of a somewhat automatic, isomorphic roll-over of internal EU rules and norms into the EaP space. After the crisis, this dynamic has ceded ground to more consequentialist balancing of the geopolitical impact of different policy options. Certain member states have also become more predominant actors relative to the EU institutions. Most member states express deep unease with the German and French lead and positions in the Minsk peace process. Yet the other member states have themselves ceded power to Germany and France to limit their own exposure and commitment to the crisis.

The EU’s half-new eastern policy has been half-effective. The EU has not been able to resolve the crisis nor prevent tragic loss of life, but it has, at best, managed to uneasily contain instability and conflict from spiralling more seriously out of control. Its own power stands attenuated, but the crisis has equally revealed the limits to Russian power.

Looking longer-term, liberal-redux geopolitics may be set to infuse multiple areas of external policy. It may not be a consciously and coherently applied EU foreign policy doctrine yet, but it is becoming, more loosely, something akin to an EU geopolitical style. And as it does so, traditional ways of conceptualising the EU as a foreign policy actor need revising and updating.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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