TOWARD A PROGRESSIVE GEOPOLITICAL EU

PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Having coined the term "geopolitical Commission" in her maiden speech as Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen more recently declared that the EU has now matured into a geopolitical union. This purported coming of age has occurred against the backdrop of a major hardening of the global political order. Re-emerging systemic rivalries are jeopardising global supply chains and multilateralism, whilst Russia's aggression is a threat to EU and global security. All the while, the climate crisis is accelerating. However, as the tenure of the first geopolitical Commission comes to an end, competition and conflict, rather than cooperation, appear to define and frame the EU's geopolitical turn.

With the 2024 European elections on the horizon, this report formulates elements of what a *progressive* geopolitical EU could entail in the coming years. For too long, geopolitics has been primarily associated with (international) security and defence.

Yet, even in its most essential understanding – as the interplay between geography and international politics – "geopolitics as security" is all too narrow. Where, for example, does this leave trade or the environment? These are two policy areas that are profoundly influenced by the interplay of geography and politics and, at the same time, require progressive policymaking to ensure equitable and fair outcomes.

Forging a fair and sustainable international order calls for consistent and vigorous application of progressive principles to a geopolitical EU; there is a need to reclaim the word "geopolitics", infuse it with new content and take into account policy fields beyond defence and security.

In this study, we put forward a set of principles that can serve as a basis for a broader understanding and discussion on progressive EU geopolitics. These principles do not supersede a values-based EU foreign policy. Rather, taken together, they provide for a dynamic, applicable framework that serves as a basis for practical engagement and policy formulation.

We then apply these principles to specific initiatives in two policy areas: climate change and international trade. We identify how a progressive approach might have been applied retrospectively to the cases of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the EU-MERCOSUR Association Agreement.

The set of principles include the following:

1) de-othering foreign policy;
2) empathetic cooperation;
3) equal-to-equal cooperation;
4) prevention as security (or pragmatic pacifism); and
5) multilateralism.

Based on the retrospective analysis of the two cases, we formulate the following key recommendations:

1) upstream consideration of the interests and socio-economic environment of developing countries, when evaluating and formulating the external dimensions of any EU policy;

2) transparency on negotiation red lines and processes, and a much more anticipatory approach to sequencing and consultation internally throughout the process; and

3) continuous engagement implies resources and commitment to a sustained dialogue and interaction with civil society organisations, as well as at the level of officials.

1. INTRODUCTION

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The EU has faced a series of major successive and overlapping crises in recent years. Some, regrettably, also of its own making. Academics and politicians alike suggested the EU and the world have entered an era of "polycrisis".

As Adam Tooze (2022) aptly put it, the shocks that have rippled through Europe and the world interact in such a way that the whole is much more overwhelming than the sum of its parts. Another defining element of the polycrisis moment is that discrete shocks are not only connected, but they rarely occur on a national or regional scale alone. They span continents and are, in effect, *global* in nature. The financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate emergency, of course, are all cases in point.

For the EU, dealing with these multiple crises requires tackling issues in a comprehensive, interconnected manner, whilst simultaneously addressing them as global challenges that need to be solved through cooperation and in solidarity with peoples and countries beyond Europe and across the globe. Meanwhile, the global political order has hardened. The re-emergence of systemic rivalries is jeopardising global supply chains and multilateralism, whilst Russia's aggression is a threat to EU and global security.

It is against this backdrop that Ursula von der Leyen introduced her ambition for a geopolitical Commission in her maiden speech as Commission president. She spoke of promoting and protecting Europe's interests and pledged to "strengthen our partners through cooperation, because strong partners make Europe strong too" (von der Leyen 2019). Four years on, competition and conflict, rather than cooperation, increasingly seem to define and frame the EU's geopolitical turn.

As the tenure of the first purported *geopolitical* Commission comes to an end, we embark on an effort to formulate elements of what a *progressive* geopolitical EU could entail in the coming years. Firstly, we formulate a set of principles that can serve as a basis for a broader understanding and discussion of progressive EU geopolitics. We then apply those principles to specific initiatives in two inherently geopolitical policy areas: climate change and international trade. We identify how a progressive approach might have been applied retrospectively to the cases of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the EU-MERCOSUR Association Agreement (AA). In doing so, the study does not shy away from engaging with the inherent tensions between competition, conflict and cooperation in geopolitical matters.

Thus, this report has a dual quality of both conceptually fleshing out a number of principles for a progressive approach to a geopolitical EU, whilst at the same time applying them to real-world examples in a bid to expand the understanding among policymakers and analysts alike of what can be considered *geopolitical* issues, even for those topics that ostensibly do not fall under this umbrella.

2. TOWARDS THE FIRST GEOPOLITICAL COMMISSION

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Traditionally the remit of member states exclusively, the EU and its institutions have only recently started to contemplate their position and role from a geopolitical perspective. One idea through which this is explored is "(open) strategic autonomy" (Damen 2022; Van den Abeele 2021). First introduced in 2013, it described the need for a "European defence technological and industrial base", able to "enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to act with partners" (European Council 2013). The EU was to develop its capacity to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on third parties – in a number of concrete and strategically important policy areas and especially when it came to external action.[1]

With Russia seizing Crimea in 2014 and tensions between China and the USA on the rise, Walter Russell Mead (2014) asserted that the world was witnessing the "return of geopolitics". The collective "West", he argued, needed to wake up to the realities of the "end of the End of History". When in 2016 Federica Mogherini, then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, presented the blueprint for the EU's external action, the EU Global Strategy, it was a tacit endorsement of Mead's vision. It declared that "we live in times of existential crisis" and that the "Union is under threat" (EEAS 2016, 1). The document signalled a return to a more pessimistic world view, after the 1990s and 2000s, amongst EU foreign policy elites, despite the assertion that "these are also times of extraordinary opportunity" (ibid.).

Mead's ideas, however, also represent a classic, yet conservative, notion that associates "geopolitics" with (international) security and defence issues, therefore considering it as "high politics". As such, it is viewed through the remit of states' national policies and intergovernmental cooperation. Yet, even in its most essential understanding – as the interplay between geography and (international) politics – it is clear that this reading of "geopolitics as security" is too narrow and, in effect, essentialist. Where, for example, does this leave (international) trade or the environment? These are two policy areas that are profoundly influenced by the interplay of geography and politics.

Nonetheless, historically, supranational institutions, such as the Commission and, more recently, the European External Action Service (EEAS), were granted only limited formal power in this area. The EU, of course, has supranational authority in international trade, but in political and defence areas, the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy remain almost entirely intergovernmental. Consequently, the global strategy was always treated very sceptically by member states (and the Commission) (Biscop 2021).

Perceptions started to change markedly in 2019, in response to a number of global developments; in particular the rise of trade protectionism, the erosion of multilateralism and the worsening "great power competition" between the USA and China (Koenig 2019). Incoming Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared that she would lead a "geopolitical Commission". It was widely reported as a historic statement not only because she recognised that the EU is not operating in a global vacuum and only engages tangentially with countries and regions around the world, but also because she underscored the need to engage strategically with other actors across the globe; the emphasis was on cooperation (Leonard 2019).

Indeed, it marked a clear departure from the above-mentioned assumption that geopolitics and foreign

policy were the primacy of member states (but, crucially, not that of framing geopolitics squarely in security and defence terms). In other words, the Commission, as a political actor, was intent on embracing its global influence and responsibilities to seize the opportunity to engage in a geopolitical project, inspired by the norms and values that underpin the European project.

Beyond the political statements of intent, different yet interconnected developments globally have spurred von der Leyen's "geopolitical turn" since her maiden speech. Importantly, these developments also helped widen policymakers' understanding of which topics or policy areas could be considered "geopolitical". The Covid-19 pandemic put the spotlight on vulnerabilities in supply chains, with a growing political recognition that the fields of economics and security were intertwined. Many of the Commission's traditional single-market-related policy responsibilities, such as trade, competition, technology or finance, but also climate and migration, are now all becoming in reality more (geo-) strategic in nature. Meanwhile, perceived changes in the global balance of power, with China seemingly on the rise and the USA in purported decline, have led to renewed great-power competition (systemic rivalries) and even increasingly greater risk of (armed) *conflict*. And then, Russia's war on Ukraine, in particular its brutal escalation in February 2022, has dramatically changed approaches to security and defence in Europe and recast European enlargement in geopolitical terms.

Josep Borrell has called this period Europe's "geopolitical awakening" (Borrell 2022a). Until now, he argues, Europe was a – at times politically naive – commercial power: "Now we want to become a geopolitical actor, going beyond economic relations and fully entering power relations" (Borrell 2023). He frames this transformation in terms of survival: "Europe will be geopolitical, or it will not be" (ibid).

The suggestion that Europe changed from "simply a normative power to a geopolitical one" (Laïdi 2023) – that it has emerged from an age of innocence to one of geopolitical significance – somewhat ignores the legacy of the EU's (external) actions as

a normative and commercial power. In other words, the EU may have discovered "the language of power" (Borrell 2020, 2022a) and its own vulnerability, but many across the globe have their own experience and views of how the EU (or some of the member states) exercises power. This plays out, for instance, in relations with states across the African continent or the slight unease amongst some of the ASEAN countries about the EU's geopolitical ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region (Grare and Yeo 2023; Mahbubani 2023). Double standards and instrumentalisation loom large here, in the way the EU projects its newfound geopolitical credentials. In turn, this may jeopardise the EU's capacity to be an effective geopolitical actor, able to secure the cooperation it needs.

Moreover, the image of an "awakening" also silences how the EU's political choices have compounded its vulnerabilities. Russia's aggression in Ukraine from 2014 onwards cannot be seen as separate from the stranglehold it held on the EU's energy supply. At the same time, the energy crisis that hit the EU in 2022 has its roots in a historical dependence on fossil fuels, which continues to fuel the flames of the climate crisis. In another example, the financial and economic crises of the late 2000s and early 2010s, and the EU's responses, led to growing inequalities in the EU, with far-right populist parties channelling resentment into scapegoating minorities and migrants, stoking hatred and distrust in government. Meanwhile, the lack of solidarity over the migrant management crisis in 2015 entrenched the EU's path-dependent trajectory towards more securitisation of asylum and refugee policy, potentially leaving the EU more exposed to "weaponisation" of migration flows (Léonard and Kaunert 2021), which further worsens the humanitarian crisis.[2]

Nonetheless, it is clear the EU now has to find its way in a newly emerging multipolar world order as a geopolitical actor. Clearly, taken together, the developments of the past few years constitute a fundamental evolution that has the potential to reshape the EU's very nature, and not just its external action. As such, the EU as a whole, not just the Commission, should assert its role as a geopolitical actor.

3. CONTRIBUTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

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This brings us to the crux of our endeavour. It is, of course, one thing to say that we now have a "geopolitical Commission", or even an EU that acts – or at least tries to act – as a geopolitical actor. Yet, this raises immediate questions as to what this actually entails, what its principles are, and which challenges and opportunities this raises in the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. In this study, we put forward a *progressive* formulation of what a geopolitical EU could entail, firstly, by exploring its conceptual foundations and, secondly, by applying the said principles to specific initiatives in two inherently geopolitical policy areas.

The aim of this study is therefore two-fold. Firstly, we briefly review existing theoretical approaches to conceptualise what progressive geopolitics is or could be. It combines insights from academic scholarship, notably critical and progressive perspectives in geopolitics and foreign policy literature, including feminist frameworks (Aggestam et al. 2019) and postcolonial studies (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis 2021), as well as more policy-oriented work, to inform a series of principles that can guide the practice of a progressive geopolitical EU.

This feeds into the second aim of this study, distilling what these principles imply for practice, by applying them to two real-world examples: CBAM and the EU-MERCOSUR AA. These two examples pertain to EU policy areas of climate change and international trade that have an inherently – albeit not always acknowledged – geopolitical dimension and in which the EU's executive plays a significant role. Our exploration of the existing scholarship is required to show how these cases are to be understood as geopolitical in nature.

CBAM was proposed by the European Commission in 2021, with the Council and the Parliament approving the policy in April 2023 (Official Journal of the European Union (OJ) 2023). It can broadly be defined as a tariff based on the carbon content of certain goods imported to the EU. The key objective is to mitigate the risk of carbon leakage, which is the possible outsourcing of production capacities to third countries with laxer environmental standards. But questions remain around the impact on countries with less financial and institutional capacity than the EU, and how they can best be supported in developing the mechanisms to facilitate sustainable industrial production in their countries. Investigating the geopolitical aspects of the EU's climate action is a theoretically and empirically relevant undertaking (van der Meer 2021).

The second case study is the EU-MERCOSUR[3] AA, which is still in the process of being ratified. The trade part of the AA, finalised by the Commission in July 2019, has generated a lot of pushback from farmers in the EU, but also serious concerns from some member states and civil society organisations and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) because of the chapters on environmental and social standards. However, in a geopolitical environment, there is a renewed emphasis on the EU-MERCOSUR AA to counterbalance the growing influence of China and the need to strengthen cooperation with the region for political reasons (Borrell 2022c). The EU-MERCOSUR AA represents a relevant case study for examining tensions between political considerations and the goals of sustainable development and equity in trade agreements between two regional blocks.

By exploring and comparing the two cases, we can see how the finalised policy might have been different if guiding principles were given more consideration. We can also inform policymakers how the policy under development can be guided by

these principles for a more effective and equitable outcome.

The research involved extensive content analysis on various publicly available sources, including, but not limited to, position papers of the European progressive parties and their affiliate organisations, policy analyses and papers, and parliamentary debates. Furthermore, to gain additional insights into how the concept of progressive geopolitics is currently perceived and interpreted, and what values or principles may be constitutive of a progressive international policy, we have conducted multiple interviews with European policymakers (including MEPs and European Commission employees), policy analysts in international relations and environmental policy experts.[4]

We recognise that the choice to focus on less-evident and seemingly less-pressing cases, instead of more obvious ones, such as the EU's evolving relationship with China, the war in Ukraine or the conflict in Gaza, may raise questions. However, the current geopolitical situation develops rapidly in these areas, which makes it difficult to assess them and make timely recommendations that are not obsolete by the time they are published. Most importantly, however, we argue that progressive geopolitics encompasses more than just security and defence, and should be considered in all policy areas where the EU has the authority to act. Defence and security are extensively discussed topics in academic and policy circles, and often dominated by realist accounts or framed by right-wing discourses. This occurs while other issues, such as development and ecological degradation, despite being deeply intertwined with peace and security, are often overlooked.

If the European social democratic and progressive community is serious about working relentlessly and forging a fair, sustainable, value-based international order, then progressive principles should be consistently and vigorously employed in a geopolitical approach, and the word "geopolitics" should be reclaimed and infused with new content that takes into account policy fields beyond defence and security. After all, what makes the policy fields that we study here particularly fruitful for a

geopolitical analysis is their distinct interconnected nature. Changes in one area have compounding effects on others. This study aims to generate a discussion on what this could be. And these case studies represent our modest attempt to show empirically how this can be accomplished in two distinct fields, where the European Commission has competence and authority.

With this study, we show what a progressive approach to geopolitical challenges and opportunities would entail. The conceptual work done here can provide a normative anchorage for apprehending the term and what it implies in practice, while the empirics of our case studies can help to formulate best practices as these policy fields develop and evolve in a rapidly transforming geopolitical landscape. In doing so, it offers an alternative to the framing of the term "geopolitics", which sits awkwardly with the values of EU foreign policy, as inscribed in the Treaties. If, according to Borrell's adviser, Zaiki Laïdi, a geopolitical Europe is best defined as a "sea change in the EU's perception of the world" (Laïdi 2023), our approach defines it not in defensive terms, as a reaction to a perceived passed naivety of the EU, but one that fully accounts for both its vulnerabilities in a more unstable world, but also its responsibilities, born of its relative power in world politics.

4. WHAT IS A PROGRESSIVE GEOPOLITICAL EU?

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4.1 Literature review

Our principles of a progressive geopolitical EU derive from existing scholarship and literature, both academic and policy-oriented (e.g. from think tanks or practitioners). The first is the literature on (critical) geopolitics; the second is that on (progressive and feminist) foreign policy. However, it is important to note that the design of our principles does not solely rely on a deductive – top down – approach that exclusively builds on scholarly research. The interviews that we have done have also greatly informed our conceptual thinking.

As mentioned above, academic and policy discussions on geopolitics are often framed in the most essentialist way possible, when it comes to the interplay between geography and (international) politics. Indeed, narratives around defensiveness, or great-power competition over "scarce" natural resources in an anarchic world, are often dominant. *Geopoliticisation* (i.e. the framing of a political or policy issue as being "geopolitical"), therefore, often leads to *securitisation*. It is thus treated, by the actor who is interpreting the event or action, as a security issue, a perceived threat or challenge to its very existence (Buzan et al. 1998; Waever 1995). This has much to do with the history of the academic field. It also means that, in practice, when a foreign policy is cloaked in geopolitical discourse, it is often claimed and dominated by conservative politicians and policymakers.

The study of "geopolitics" was first established to capture the relationship between geography and the (international) politics of Western imperial states (Criekemans 2022). Mackinder (1904) first established geopolitics as a veritable field of study in the early 20th century. But the Mackinderian approach to geopolitics, from the outset, has been highly state-centric, if not to say that it helped shape a normative nationalistic and imperialist agenda (Ó Tuathail 1986).

As the Cold War and decolonisation came to dominate world politics, geopolitics described the contest between the USA and the Soviet Union for influence and control over states and strategic resources (Ó Tuathail et al. 1997). Today, conventional geopolitics remains particularly concerned with "exploring and explaining the role of geographical factors (such as territorial location and/or access to resources) in shaping national and international politics" (Dodds 2005, 1; see also Högselius 2019, 7).

In opposition to historical conventional geopolitical thinking, in the field of critical geopolitics, scholars understand geopolitics as a social construction that is iterated through varying and competing discourses of state and non-state actors (Agnew and Crobridge 1995; Dalby 2008; Dodds 2005; Mamadouh 1998; Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992; Ó Tuathail et al. 1997). Rather than accepting geopolitics as a neutral and objective practice of surveying global space, "geopolitics engages the geographical representations and practices that produce spaces of world politics" (Ó Tuathail et al. 1997, 2).

This scholarship shows how certain tropes are (re-)produced as legitimate power relations (Huber 2015, 330). In other words, the term "geopolitical", in policy circles, is often used as if it is politically "neutral". Ontologically, the assumptions about power and security are not (always) made explicit. Yet, the primary focus in political, media and public discourse on geopolitical competition, rather than geopolitical *cooperation*, refutes this assumption of

neutrality and underscores how geopolitics is also constructed.

For the development of our principles, we heavily lean on a number of key elements of critical and progressive geopolitics (Kearns 2008). The first, as explained, is that the primary agents which matter in world affairs are not necessarily exclusively states. Other actors matter too. Secondly, the primary relations that structure the world are not necessarily those of competition and conflict. Cooperation can be a driving force as well. Thirdly, geopolitics is not "fixed"; it is produced through practices and discourses and, therefore, can also be "made".

The scholarly and policy literature on what can broadly be considered the field of "progressive foreign policy" has also been instrumental in developing our principles (Held and Mepham 2007 Jackson 2022, 2023; Walzer 2018; Wertheim 2022; Duss and Wertheim 2023; Gilmore 2023). Some, such as Jackson (2022) and Gilmore (2023), have also sought to provide some underlying principles to conceptualise what this specific form of foreign policy looks like and how it distinguishes itself from other foreign policy approaches.[5] Jackson (2022) applies his ideal types of progressive foreign policy to the real-world case of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine to analyse what different progressive reactions are/could be. Another issue is that most of the progressive foreign policy literature is focussed on the USA. Again, this has to do with the fact that the EU, historically, has not had much formal authority in foreign policy, which continues to be primarily conducted at the member-state level.

Another approach to foreign policy, which, in recent years, has also gained much traction in policy circles, is "feminist foreign policy" (FFP). FFP emphasises the need for the representation and inclusion of women. Critical feminist perspectives challenge the political rhetoric that frames action and categories of the state, identity or sovereignty through the prism of gendered stereotypes.

In practice terms, Aggestam et al. (2019) put forward a theory of FFP grounded in an ethics of care: "embedded in feminist notions of foreign and security policy is an ethical commitment to the care and nurturing of distant others, who reside beyond the confines of one's own political community" (ibid., 30). They draw on the works of Tronto (1994) and Robinson (1999), who both underline the political dimension of an ethics of care. Tronto defines care as "everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto 1994, 103).

This approach emphasises the relational dimension of foreign policy practice, which calls for active listening and dialogical engagement across borders and with marginalised groups. Active listening entails seeking to "uncover the stories of others", especially those that are seldom heard or with whom one is not used to engaging. It is also transformative insofar as it presumes "positional slippage" of the listener, that is, a capacity for "empathetic" understanding of the views and concerns of others that leads to a shift in one's own approach to cooperation (Sylvester 1994).

In 2014, Sweden's social democrat foreign minister, Margot Wallström, announced the world's first explicitly FFP. Since then, multiple countries have followed suit, including Germany's current coalition government. Aggestam et al. (2019), in their assessment of Sweden's policy, acknowledge that "the question [of] how a state, claiming to pursue a feminist foreign policy, handles tension between ethical considerations and national military security interests" is not easily resolved (ibid., 28). No one proclaims that the pursuit of an ethical FFP is easy. Nevertheless, whilst feminist demands may only partially be realised, "the mere fact of official policy referencing feminism challenges traditional ways of thinking and political patterns, encourages reassessment of political priorities and their coherence, and drives political innovation" (Zilla 2022).

To summarise, based on an examination of the literature, a progressive geopolitics entails that the EU's strategic *engagement* with global political actors includes, but is not limited to, sovereign states, (transnational) social movements, multinational corporations, and international institutions. Strategic engagement does not exclude values and their active

promotion. Indeed, these progressive principles are pursued, actively promoted and underpin any active engagements. It is a normative and *transformative* framework, as it questions and seeks to redefine global institutions, social and power relations, and calls them into question by reflecting on their origins and whether, and how, they can be subject to change. In Section 4.2, we outline the principles that permeate domestic and international levels, while actual translation into specific policy areas is a bottom-up process that includes deliberation with and input from all sorts of relevant stakeholders.

4.2 Principles of a progressive geopolitical EU

Here, we offer a coherent framework of principles. These principles derive from the examination of the literature in Section 4.1 and offer an approach and avenues for what the practice of progressive geopolitics may entail.

To be clear, these principles do not supersede a values-based EU foreign policy. Nevertheless, if external action is to be driven by ethics and values, rather than perceptions of the international order that are fundamentally about competition and conflict in an anarchical world, then there is a need to grapple with what it means in practice. Moreover, this should not be interpreted as an exhaustive list of principles. Rather, it is an attempt to formulate a dynamic, applicable framework that serves as a basis for practical engagement and policy formulation.

1) **"De-othering" foreign policy**. This entails a shift away from a bordered understanding of foreign policy to fully acknowledge the shared and interdependent nature of geopolitical challenges and their solutions. This enables moving beyond the rigid and defensive insider-outsider paradigm that too often drives foreign policy. It means that the EU must include equity and solidarity norms (e.g. ones that originate from environmental governance), such as those of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR) and proportionate burden sharing.

2) **Empathetic cooperation** refers to engagement that is meaningful and critical. A term rooted in FFP, it first calls for actors (here, the EU) to assess their own position within existing power relations. From a position of power, actors need to consider the impact of their actions and historical position in relation to others, but also be attentive and responsive to the needs of those around them. Thus, policymakers should address their own position, historical relationship to and political motivations in the policies they develop. Secondly, it also highlights how engagement should be considered as a *process* and not a one-off outcome. A longer-term, continuous process of engagement facilitates and nurtures meaningful dialogues with a better prospect of enduring cooperation.

3) **Equal-to-equal cooperation** seeks to deal with partners on an equal footing, explicitly departing from an approach that entrenches and self-perpetuates real and perceived distinctions between a hierarchy of first-rank great powers (and their competition), second-rank middle powers and third-rank "small" states. In the geopolitical environment, there are structural inequalities between states and regions that stem, notably, from historical legacies and trajectories. Equal-to-equal cooperation requires that the EU, in any engagement, accounts for structural inequalities with a view of *acting upon* them, rather than *according to* them.

4) **Prevention as security (or pragmatic pacifism)**. The cornerstone to a secure EU is preventing crises from happening and escalating. Proactive engagement, therefore, is key in areas where risk of (armed) conflict is great. Climate mitigation, for example, could also be seen in this light. It is much better to anticipate and mitigate climate change now, rather than wait and have to deal with the consequences of droughts and famines (e.g. migration) later on. Pragmatism reflects the fact that not all crises and conflicts can be prevented. Pragmatism also speaks to the principle of empathetic cooperation in that engagement should be

considered a *process*. Circumstances on the ground may change, contextual factors may alter, yet engagement should not be discontinued, or it may come at the expense of peaceful outcomes. Moreover, peaceful outcomes require ongoing commitment and attention, even after conflicts no longer make headlines.[6] And diplomacy must continue, even after escalation of a conflict.

5) **Multilateralism** creates an environment where geopolitical actors can deliberate and prevent and solve conflicts with other means than violence. Multilateral organisations can take on a role and create a context to transform and rebalance power dynamics amongst states and other geopolitical actors. Actors in a more marginalised position can create coalitions amongst themselves to build more strength amongst their international relations. Just like equal-to-equal cooperation and the method of empathetic reflexivity, multilateralism helps in deconstructing (neo-)colonial relations.

5. CASE STUDIES

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5.1 The CBAM

CBAM: Past, present and future

CBAM was proposed by the European Commission (2021) and approved by the European Parliament and the Council in May 2023. CBAM is a levy based on the carbon content of certain goods imported to the EU. The key objective of this instrument is to mitigate the risk of carbon leakage, which refers to the possible outsourcing of production capacities to third countries with laxer environmental standards. This measure eases pressure on European firms that manufacture carbon-intense goods, like steel and cement, whose production costs are subject to increasingly more stringent EU climate action.

The policy tool would provide a level playing field for domestic and international competitors on the European market by forcing importers to pay for environmental pollution, as do European producers, through the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS). Purchasing the carbon credit ("certificate"), necessary for importers, which corresponds to one tonne of CO_2 emission, is equivalent to paying the price of an EU ETS allowance (pollution permit). The levy increases in proportion to the carbon intensity of the product. The production emissions of goods shall be calculated according to EU, or equivalent third country, standards, requiring importers to implement advanced greenhouse gas (GHG) emission monitoring systems and procedures. Alongside combating carbon leakage, CBAM also incentivises trading partners towards more environmentally sustainable production. The goods that are part of the scheme also cover the EU ETS' sectoral scope: iron; steel; cement; aluminium; fertilisers; electricity; and hydrogen.

CBAM is putting pressure on the EU's existing political and trade relationships, and could possibly lead to geoeconomic and geopolitical tensions with trading partners. BASIC countries have already publicly raised concerns (South African Government 2021). They see it as protectionism disguised as green or climate policy, and therefore, incompatible with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. China and India have also raised concerns over CBAM with the WTO. Advanced economies, geopolitical allies even, including the USA, have argued against CBAM, albeit in a less vigorous way (Nardelli et al. 2023). They are now seeking to negotiate exemptions through steel and aluminium trade deals. Others, such as the UK, are taking similar measures to protect the industry while greening the economy (Millard and Pickard 2023).

From a geopolitical point of view, there are two major design elements that affect how CBAM is perceived by international trading partners: (1) the decision as to which countries would participate in the system (geographic and economic scope); and (2) the use of revenue generated by the policy. Below, we discuss both consecutively.

Firstly, in line with the Commission's proposal, no exemptions have been granted. From a climate justice perspective, it is particularly concerning that the least-developed countries (LDCs), which have extremely limited ability to absorb costs and very limited access to green technology, are expected to pay the same price levels for pollution as advanced economies. The price for poorer countries is thus proportionately much higher, due to the higher reliance on coal in their energy mix and their less-advanced monitoring systems for GHG emissions. This can result in increasing imports of all CBAM products, except electricity, from developed countries and significantly decreasing import volume from developing nations (UNCTAD 2021). Importantly, it runs counter to the multilateral spirit of WTO's Special and Differential Treatment regime, as well as international climate cooperation. After all,

it clearly erodes the principle of CBDR, as enshrined in all major climate agreements since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

Incorporating indirect emissions, meaning emissions not emitted directly by the industrial plant during production, but resulting from its activities, such as purchased electricity, into the scope of CBAM puts double pressure on LDCs' competitiveness. Firstly, the carbon intensity of their industrial production is higher than that in most advanced economies. Secondly, they lack the necessary infrastructure to monitor and verify product-based emissions. Both these factors will weigh against developing countries when purchasing CBAM certificates, even if imports from LDCs to the EU are marginal compared to that of bigger trading partners, such as China and the UK. None of the ten countries most affected by CBAM, in terms of import volume, are LDCs (Kardish et al. 2021). Yet, this also means that the environmental benefits from imposing CBAM on LDCs are limited as well.

Nonetheless, for some developing countries or LDCs, CBAM may create a *quasi*-insurmountable hurdle, laying an unfair burden on their industries, as their exports to the EU represent a considerable percentage of their production capacities. Case in point: 96% of Mozambique's aluminium export goes to the EU (Hakeenah 2022). In other low-income countries, such as Moldova or Zimbabwe, 2% of the domestic workforce are exposed to the effects of CBAM. Generally, the adverse effects of CBAM on wages and employment are greater in developing countries, where the capacity to reduce the carbon intensity of production is far more limited by financial resources (Magacho et al. 2023). A small and largely symbolic gesture of granting LDCs exemptions would not impose a high financial, economic or environmental burden on the EU. Importantly, it would likely even be compatible with WTO rules.

One may argue that CBAM applies to products – and thus, companies that need to buy certificates, and not to government themselves – so it cannot be punitive to LDCs. Indeed, multinational companies producing carbon-intensive products should be scrutinised, regardless of their geographic location. Moreover, from an ecological perspective, including all countries is the most effective way to ensure environmental effectiveness of policy. This point was raised by Mohammed Chahim, the S&D rapporteur in the European Parliament for the CBAM legislative package, in his reflections on COP28 in the UAE (Chahim 2023). Yet, from a geopolitical point of view, this argument overlooks industrial and economic policymaking in developing countries. Success in industrial development within these countries relies on state capacity encompassing the quality of institutions and economic resources allocated to infrastructure development and other factors.

How the (expected) generated revenue is allocated is another crucial question.[7] Possible answers range from enriching state and common EU budgets, to providing climate finance to developing countries, in keeping with the pledges in the Paris Agreement. The Commission proposed using revenue to finance the EU's own social projects, while the final policy, due to pressure by the European Parliament, included a vague indication that some share of the budget could be directed towards LDCs' decarbonisation efforts, but no specific details were outlined (OJ 2023). Revenues will be allocated as follows: member states will retain 25% of the CBAM revenues. The remaining 75% are made available to the EU budget (European Commission 2023). The only material commitment in the legislation is that "The Union should provide *technical assistance* [authors' emphasis] [...] to developing countries and to least developed countries as identified by the United Nations".

The budgetary implication of CBAM is limited, particularly in light of the EU total budget. The crucial political question is then how these funds can be allocated. By politically committing the revenue (partly) towards developing countries' mitigation and adaptation policies, the policy could (1) directly address equity issues and demonstrate international solidarity and support of climate justice by respecting the principle of CBDR; (2) facilitate compliance with the WTO's rules by demonstrating that revenue-neutral CBAM is a genuine environmental measure, which could

further support the maintenance of a norms- and rules-based international order and multilateralism, currently under siege by autocratic regimes; and (3) positively change how CBAM is perceived by major trading partners, thereby countering the argument that the policy is protectionist. It appears that none, nor any combination, of these advantages was appealing enough politically to EU policymakers to ring-fence funds for international climate finance.

A progressive geopolitics perspective

1) As evidenced, the current design falls short of applying the main principles of progressive geopolitics. Historical emissions show that it is the EU and other large, industrialised economies which have played the largest role in creating the climate crisis. Moreover, these developed countries' (the collective "West") capacity to decarbonise their respective economies far exceed those of developing countries (Corvino 2023). Offloading the costs of climate action to poorer countries means blatantly refuting the principle of international solidarity. Or, in other words, it constitutes a **clear violation of the CBDR norm**.

2) Furthermore, by imposing costs unilaterally on vulnerable countries, unmitigated by policies that address equity concerns and facilitate a prosperous low-carbon transition, such as compulsory licensing and transfer of environmentally friendly technologies, the EU sends a clear message that it **does not consider the Global South countries to be equal partners** (African Climate Foundation and LSE 2023). It simply ignores their limited cost-absorption capacity, lack of access to affordable low-carbon technologies and their different stages of industrial development. Nurturing a nascent industrial base, however, should be regarded as essential for economic development and ensuring secure and well-paying jobs.

3) Undoubtedly, CBAM, lauded for its likely positive environmental impact through direct emissions reduction, and its greening of trading partners' industrial practices, is a huge political achievement, particularly in this increasingly challenging geopolitical landscape. The mechanism sends a clear message of leadership, demonstrating the EU's commitment to climate action and its formidable regulatory innovation capacity in environmental policy. Furthermore, the policy may create positive spillover effects in the economies of its trading partners, and thus, contribute to the emergence of more sustainable global industrial regimes. Nevertheless, the EU needs to bring other countries along on its journey towards climate neutrality. Inclusivity is not only an imperative from an environmental point of view, as halting climate change requires the concerted, coordinated efforts of all countries, but it can demonstrate to partners in the world that the EU puts its own principles into practice. The implementation of **CBAM,** which **goes against the principles of fairness, solidarity, partnership and climate justice**, could erode the political capital of the EU and lead to a loss of support from developing nations. This, in turn, could make it more difficult for the EU to achieve ambitious climate objectives. **Lack of consultation** with trading partners and presenting them with *"devant le fait accompli"* is very concerning. The measure seemingly ignores the interests and preferences of the LDCs, and thus, **makes equal-to-equal cooperation a hopeless project**.

All in all, CBAM represents a crucial instrument in the EU's future climate policy portfolio, embedded in an increasingly complex system of economic, security and diplomatic ties with third countries. In addition to accomplishing basic policy objectives, such as greening the economies of its trading partners and accelerating the industrial energy transition in Europe, it is of utmost importance that the EU incorporates the value of solidarity into the final policy design to deliver equitable and fair outcomes to all parties. Considering CBAM's novelty and EU's strategic role in climate

diplomacy, CBAM can represent progressive politics in action, and thus, become a positive example for other countries in the near future.

4) Despite the challenging backdrop, it may still be possible to change the design of CBAM to deliver a more equitable outcome for all parties. As the test period commenced in October 2023, without immediate financial implications, there is still time to make necessary adjustments and improvements during the testing phase, which is expected to take three years. Hence, European policymakers have the opportunity to gather additional data and insights by the end of the test phase. This information will aid in evaluating the extraterritorial consequences of this unilateral measure. This evaluation period allows for adjustments that might better accommodate the needs of international partners, while aligning with the EU's geopolitical interests. As the fight against environmental degradation will only intensify in the upcoming decades, with far-reaching consequences on the continent's prospects for security, peace and prosperity, EU climate policies will be a key pillar in its relationship with other countries. If the EU succeeds in demonstrating how climate protection can be successfully conjoined with economic prosperity, it will inspire other powers and developing nations to follow suit.

5.2. EU-MERCOSUR AA

EU-MERCOSUR AA: Past, present and future

The EU-MERCOSUR AA epitomises the tensions in practice between an external policy driven by geopolitical concerns and support for a multilateral order and intra-EU demonstrations against a trade regime that potentially fuels environmental degradation and weakens food standards. Despite major reservations on the trade part of the agreement in certain EU countries, notably from farmers' associations, and serious concerns from environmental NGOs, the EU is looking to push ahead with ratification because of geopolitical considerations. This comes amidst growing geopolitical concerns over the influence of China in Latin America and, following Russia's aggression on Ukraine, the need to actively strengthen political cooperation with ally regions. MERCOSUR countries, such as Brazil and Argentina, also have major reserves of raw minerals.

The EU's High Representative, Josep Borrell, has strongly advocated for signing the AA on geopolitical grounds, arguing that a deal is better than no deal, including for the preservation of biodiversity (Borrell 2022c). Indeed, in the event of inconclusive trade negotiations, the prospect of bilateral trade deals between individual MERCOSUR countries and China does not bode well for environmental standards (El País 2021). Nor does the perception of a protectionist and hypocritical EU serve its relations with Latin American partners (Harris 2023; Nolte 2023). In a report written for the European Parliament, Professor Andrés Malamud also concludes that the EU-MERCOSUR AA "[...] should be evaluated by its opportunity costs rather than by its prospective benefits. In other words, what it may prevent is probably more consequential than what it may produce" (Malamud 2022, 23).

Following the election of Lula in Brazil and with Spain's rotating presidency of the Council from July to December 2023, momentum for ratification of the AA grew.[8] Key member states have signalled a shift towards support, notably for geostrategic reasons (see, for example, German Bundeskanzler Scholz's comments) (Marsh and Misculin 2023; von der Burchard 2024). However, at the time of finalising this study, the window of opportunity for signing the AA was fast closing, not least due to farmers' protests across Europe in early 2024 (Mendoza et al. 2024).

Currently, the EU risks serious discontentment internally in some member states and with farmers organisations, as well as undermining its pledges for sustainability and equity in trade relations. Moreover, signing a deal in a bid to "send a signal" (symbolic reasons) runs the risk of retaining empty words and failed objectives if, in the years following

ratification, implementation and collaboration are not seriously prioritised politically. In turn, this could lead to detrimental outcomes for the environment and/or adversely impact marginalised groups. Principles of a progressive geopolitical framework, we argue, may (have) mitigate(d) these risks.

The relations between the EU and MERCOSUR are currently structured by the Interregional Framework Cooperation Agreement (IFCA), signed in Madrid on 15 December 1995, under the Spanish presidency of the EU. It entered into force on 1 July 1999. Its objective was "to strengthen existing relations between the Parties and to prepare the conditions enabling an interregional association to be created". The AA is a late delivery on such a promise – it took nearly 20 years of on-off negotiations to reach an agreement. If ratified, it will replace and upgrade the IFCA.

The AA between MERCOSUR and the EU has two components: a trade and trade-related matters part ("trade part") and a political dialogue and cooperation part ("political part"). The trade part was negotiated by the European Commission (DG TRADE) and finalised in Brussels on 28 June 2019, while the political part was negotiated by the EEAS and agreed upon on 18 June 2020. Both parts complement each other and should form a single package.

Geopolitics, notably the geoeconomic competition between the EU and the USA, drove the EU-MERCOSUR interregional negotiations in the 1990s (Malamud 2022). The EU approached negotiations with MERCOSUR in the early 1990s as an alternative to the Washington Consensus, pushed by the US administration, and as part of a multilateral agenda for cooperation between regional organisations.

The suspension of negotiations in 2004 followed the failure of the Doha Round at the Cancun ministerial summit in August 2003, concerning broad agricultural liberalisation (Diz and Bergamaschine 2022). Furthermore, in the mid-2000s, the EU shifted its political focus away from interregionalism and more towards bilaterals with individual member states, notably Brazil. Further deepening of interregional

collaboration came up against the lack of political commitment from both sides (Torres Jarrín and Daza Aramayo 2023).

The renewed push towards adoption and ratification of a new AA between MERCOSUR and the EU since 2022 is driven by geopolitical considerations, notably in light of the new EU approach to China – the "systemic rival", according to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (Reuters 2021) – and the need to diversify sourcing, in particular of raw materials. According to analysis carried out by Bruegel (Baltensperger and Dadush 2019), the share of extra-MERCOSUR exports to the EU has declined in the past 25 years ("from 25 percent to 16 percent between 1997 and 2017"), whilst China has substantially grown in economic importance in the balance of trade with the region: "exports to China were 4 percent of extra-MERCOSUR exports in 1997, 12 percent in 2007 and 25 percent in 2017, making China the most important export destination for MERCOSUR countries" (Baltensperger and Dadush 2019, 5). Quantifiable economic gains from the AA, if ratified, are likely to be small for MERCOSUR countries and even smaller for the EU (Baltensperger and Dadush 2019). The major driver for speeding up ratification is political.

Inside the EU, there have been some serious concerns about the AA with MERCOSUR. Firstly, a number of member states have pushed back. For instance, France and the Netherlands published a non-paper (France and the Netherlands 2020) on the Commission's approach to trade agreements just after the agreement with MERCOSUR on the trade part was publicised in 2019. In this paper, they called for more ambitious trade and sustainable development chapters; a greater emphasis on the differentiated impact of social-economic aspects of trade agreements across different countries and sectors inside the EU, including responsible business conduct plans; and ensuring strict adherence to the Paris Agreement. The interests of farmers, in particular beef farmers, in various EU member states, are also echoed by national governments (Ireland and France). The impact of trade liberalisation on agriculture in the EU has long been a bone of contention in the EU-MERCOSUR

relations. The negotiations on strengthening the relations between MERCOSUR and the EU broke down in the mid-2000s, in part, because of the EU's refusal to open its agricultural markets and its aggressive requirements for liberalisation in services in the Doha rounds of negotiations. The same issues around the opening of agricultural markets are major stumbling blocks in 2024.

Furthermore, there is widespread concern over the chapter on sustainable development and trade in the agreement (see a study for Greens in the European Parliament by Ghiotto and Echaide 2019; Kehoe et al. 2020). The political dialogue and cooperation part is currently being revised, in an attempt to palliate some of the concerns over the protection of biodiversity and deforestation, but is still falling short, according to environmental NGOs.

Sustaining environmental and social standards internally and promoting these externally, via trade agreements, appears in opposition to geopolitical concerns. This is not specific to the EU-MERCOSUR AA. In their study on the geopolitics of EU trade, Meunier and Nicolaidis (2019) showed how the EU dropped the requirements on labour standards for the Japan agreement because of strategic concerns and the sense that the deal needed to be signed and adopted swiftly. From a purely bargaining perspective, there is a trade-off between seeking a swift agreement and the degree of compromises. But if trade agreements are increasingly going to be framed in geopolitical terms and not only economic terms, albeit with increased environmental and social standards attached, then much more consideration needs to be given to how the so-called "geopolitical" drivers are discussed and accounted for internally inside the EU. We turn to this in the next section.

A progressive geopolitics perspective

1) Any external dimension to trade agreements has an internal dimension: there is a need to maintain/be attentive to social cohesion and democratic legitimacy internally to sustain effective external action. More broadly, a geopolitical EU can only be successful if it maintains and strengthens dialogue and accountability internally too, fully accounting for the fact that trade agreements may (also) be driven by geopolitical considerations. Trade agreements are contested inside the EU, by specific interest groups (farmers), civil society organisations (environmental organisations) or parliaments (Wallonia on CETA), because of risks to undercutting environmental and labour standards. The example of the EU and MERCOSUR is no exception. However, in this particular case, interinstitutional competition inside the EU, born of geopolitical considerations, has had detrimental consequences. As pointed out by Pierre Haroche (2022), the Commission's so-called geopolitical turn has emerged at the EU level partly because of interinstitutional turf battles between the EEAS and the Commission.[9] In the case of the MERCOSUR agreement, the trade dimension was negotiated by the European Commission and finalised in July 2019. The political dimension of the MERCOSUR-EU agreement was negotiated by the EEAS services and concluded in 2020. The political part has been kept entirely under wraps, and the substance has not been made public.[10] Malamud goes as far as stating that "rather than the lack of enforcement mechanisms, its [AA] weakest point is the secrecy with which it was negotiated first and kept confidential later" (Malamud 2022, 23). Not only has this lack of transparency undermined the legitimacy basis of the agreement, but it has weakened the potential for successful application.

Transparency on negotiation red lines and processes, and a much more **anticipatory approach** to sequencing and consultation internally throughout the processes, notably regarding the Political Cooperation Agreement, **would have supported more inclusive and fruitful negotiations**.

2) In terms of substance, there must be mechanisms which ensure that increasing trade liberalisation does not undermine environmental standards and destroy natural

and cultural heritage and violate the rights of indigenous populations. Furthermore, **in line with an approach derived from FFP**, the agreement must also be assessed according to the implications for women and other marginalised groups.

3) It is crucial that commitment to cooperation be taken seriously: there is a real risk that, in a context where there is a "need to be seen to be forging alliances", this could lead to a situation where *signalling power* and alliances overshadows any serious reflection or commitment to the investment needed to make it a successful interregional agreement in practice. Indeed, the first generation of the EU-MERCOSUR agreement, which was also born of geopolitical considerations at the time, has not delivered on some of the promises – MERCOSUR has remained largely an intergovernmental organisation, and there is still a deadlock over opening EU agricultural markets.

An approach that takes seriously the principles for a progressive geopolitics, grounded in **equal-to-equal collaboration and empathetic cooperation**, can guard against simplistic assumptions or measures of success that fail to fully account for the lived experiences and governance structures of the MERCOSUR signatory countries. This requires sustained attention and engagement that takes into account the legitimacy basis of the co-signatory region (Malamud 2022). Continuous engagement implies resources and commitment to a sustained dialogue and interaction with civil society organisations, as well as at the level of bureaucrats/civil servants between the two regions, that goes beyond monitoring.

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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As the first case study demonstrated, the EU's action on sustainability increasingly affects countries around the world. Whilst this impact is clear for CBAM, as the most visible foreign-policy-oriented instrument in the European Green Deal, the depth and geographical reach of future sustainable policies will expand due to aggravating environmental degradation. More stringent policies will be inevitable.

Considering the interests and socio-economic environment of developing countries, when evaluating and formulating the external dimensions of any policy, is not just a normative imperative but swiftly becomes political necessity. For example, as the shift from fossil fuels accelerates in the EU, reliance on critical minerals, needed for the energy transition, creates new risks from a supply chain perspective. Relationships with countries supplying these minerals must be grounded in equal-to-equal cooperation and mutually beneficial exchanges.

Avoiding the perpetuation of a neocolonial exploitation of raw materials, which could only fuel political anger, distrust and alienation, must be understood as a top priority, to nurture and protect emerging forms of interdependence. Overlooking the tough political and economic situations faced by developing countries, and their limited capacity to make necessary social-ecological transitions, could undermine how the EU is seen as a reliable development ally. This, in turn, might weaken its ability to present an attractive developmental path forward to a significant part of the world, where it competes with other approaches offered by emerging actors like China. In an evolving global political landscape, where the significance of "middle powers" is increasing under the shadow of new multipolarity, fostering strong ties with these nations becomes all the more important for the EU to effectively strengthen multilateralism.

- **Recommendation 1**: Upstream consideration of the interests and socio-economic environment of developing countries, when evaluating and formulating the external dimensions of any EU policy.

The second case study is a reminder that any external dimension to trade agreements has an internal dimension too: there is a need to be attentive to social cohesion and democratic legitimacy internally to sustain effective external action. More broadly, a geopolitical EU can only be successful if it maintains and strengthens dialogue and accountability internally too, fully accounting for the fact that trade agreements may (also) be driven by geopolitical considerations. *Transparency* on negotiation red lines and processes and a much more *anticipatory approach* to sequencing and consultation internally throughout the processes would support a more inclusive negotiation. In turn, this decreases the likelihood of "false hopes and promises".

- **Recommendation 2**: Transparency on negotiation red lines and processes and a much more anticipatory approach to sequencing and consultation internally.

Finally, an approach that takes seriously the principles for progressive geopolitics, grounded in equal-to-equal collaboration and empathetic cooperation, can guard against simplistic assumptions or measures of success that fail to fully account for the lived experiences and governance structures of signatory countries. Continuous engagement implies resources and a commitment to sustained dialogue and interaction with civil society organisations, as well as at the level of officials, that goes beyond monitoring.

- **Recommendation 3**: Continuous engagement implies resources and commitment to a sustained dialogue and interaction with civil society organisations, as well as at the level of officials.

7. CONCLUSION

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The world is in turmoil, and the EU has arrived at a critical crossroad, compelled to determine its role in an unfamiliar global geopolitical environment. Cooperation and solidarity are among the values that the EU's politically progressive forces claim are central to their role as responsible partners in world politics. In this study, we have outlined a set of principles encapsulating progressive geopolitics and have applied it to two case studies. Our aim has been to develop a critical and transformative framework that conceptualises progressive geopolitics and provides policymakers with guidelines for practically enforcing those values and norms in their relationships with partners around the world.

It is important to emphasise that this is a transformative, yet dynamic, framework, which invites think tanks, academics and policy practitioners to debate and further develop the set of principles we propose here. Our objective is to collectively build a framework readily applicable across a diverse set of policy domains. We believe future deliberations would greatly benefit from incorporating perspectives about the political and policy implications from diverse trading partners worldwide. This would enhance our understanding of how these partners perceive the EU's dual objectives of progressive norms and engaging in realpolitik. Aligning these perspectives could contribute to consistency, nurturing a higher level of mutual respect and understanding.

Equally important, we aim to take a modest step towards reclaiming the discourse on geopolitics from the dominance of realist and conservative approaches. These viewpoints often limit the term to defence and security contexts, overlooking the broader significance and the historic opportunity born from the current crises. We envision the EU actively participating in shaping an international order, which relies on equal-to-equal cooperation, and fostering continuous dialogue across a global landscape.

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ENDNOTES

1   See also a 2023 op-ed in the *Financial Times* by French President Emmanuel Macron, one of the major proponents of the idea, which he re-branded as "European sovereignty" (Macron 2023).

2   In an example of how entrenched securitisation has become, the 2019 PES election manifesto (PES 2019, 10) explicitly and exclusively framed the need for a new EU-African partnership in terms of the challenges associated with migration from Africa to the EU. This is a problematic approach to EU-Africa relations. It frames Africa, and migration from the continent to the EU, only as a (potential) threat that needs to be dealt with. Meanwhile, Josep Borrell's metaphor (for which he later apologised) on Europe being a "garden", while the rest of the world is an invasive "jungle", conveys the same external threat, and led to the EU's head of diplomacy being accused of using racist terminology (Bishara 2022; Borrell 2022b).

3   The four countries constituting MERCOSUR are Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

4   A full anonymised list of interviewees can be made available upon request.

5   Jackson's (2022) paper spurred an interesting discussion forum on the pages of the academic journal *Security Studies*. Unfortunately, however, an in-depth discussion of all the publications responding to the original piece falls outside the scope of this study.

6   For instance, Israel's war on Hamas and open rejection by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahou of the two-state solution, called "unacceptable" by Borrell and others, comes after years of waning diplomatic efforts to implement the Oslo Accords.

7   Estimates differ significantly, yet according to the original Commission proposal, expected revenue in 2030 is €2.1 billion (European Commission 2021).

8   The Portuguese presidency of the EU in the first half of 2021 had unsuccessfully pushed for ratification of the agreement, underlining its geopolitical importance.

9   "The geopolitical Commission should be understood as the result of the interaction between exogenous factors – the intensification of global power competition and the rise of geoeconomic strategies – and endogenous factors, *such as the rivalry between the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS)* and the functional link between the Commission's traditional economic powers and international security issues" (Haroche 2022, 2).

10 At the time of finalising this study, February 2024.

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