Soccer Meets Geopolitics

What EU Leaders Should Learn From the Euro 2024

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Two competitions are currently predominating Europe's agenda – the UEFA Euro 2024 in Germany and the brute reality of geopolitics with tensions rising due to China's economic and military ascent, Russia's aggressive maneuvers, and Trump looming in the background. While the former will decide over Europe's next soccer champion, outcomes of the latter will arguably shape whether Europe will champion the new geopolitics of the 21st century. To win this competition, we argue that the European Union (EU) does not need a unified military force, but rather a new defense commissioner who would act as a *dual security manager*, bringing together the EU's global entanglements with its economic clout to enhance the military power of its Member States. Just as the world-class striker Mbappé needs a skilled midfield to create scoring opportunities, military strength is geopolitically most effective when backed by economic and diplomatic power. Hence, rather than replacing, the EU should complement the NATO's capabilities with its regulatory capacities.

The best manager coordinates and synergizes the individual qualities of the players

The traditional measure of power – military strength – seems more pertinent than ever. But is either "dying" or "strengthening European sovereignty" really at stake? Does today's EU, *without* a unified military force at its own disposal, have to surrender to the brute reality of geopolitics? We argue "no, not at all". Instead, a smart geopolitical approach by the EU would combine a rigorous focus on creating global complementarities with like-minded international organizations (IOs) with regulatory policies and budgetary instruments that strengthen the military power of EU Member States.

While military strength remains a crucial element of global power, the EU's true comparative advantage on the new geopolitical playing field lies elsewhere, namely in its ability to weaponize the combined economic and military power of its Member States. This strategy goes beyond simply encouraging increased defense spending; it requires a coordinated effort to use the EU's economic clout and regulatory power to enhance the military capabilities of its Members in ways that complement, rather than duplicate, NATO's role. Achieving this ambitious goal will require abandoning the illusion of an independent EU military force capable of unilaterally coercing adversaries. The vision of a European army distracts and thus weakens the EU's efforts. Instead, the new Commission must adopt a genuinely geopolitical approach, focusing on synergy with NATO.

A key figure in this effort should be a newly appointed defense commissioner. Creating such a dedicated position is not simply a matter of replicating a traditional defense minister, but rather creating a *dual security manager*. What do we mean by that? The ideal candidate will have a feasible and practical strategy, capable of orchestrating the complex interplay between the EU's economic and regulatory instruments, its existing partnerships with organizations such as NATO, and the specific military capabilities of individual Member States. Just as each manager of the national teams currently competing in the European soccer championship must coordinate and synergize the individual qualities of his players, a new defense commissioner should act as a dual security manager, bringing together the EU's global entanglements with its economic clout to enhance the military power of its Member States.

Far from being a setback for the pan-European project, abandoning the idea of a supranational army is a wise decision in favor of the EU's true strengths. Just as the twenty-three Euro teams that play without Kylian Mbappé had the chance to win the soccer competition, the EU has the chance to prevail in the geopolitical competition without the creation of a supranational military force. In fact, the opposite is true. Given the peculiar nature of the new geopolitics, the EU can field a formidable team on the global political pitch – one that is particularly well equipped with an underestimated arsenal: Economic clout and regulatory prowess combined with strategic coordination with NATO. These internal and external assets, if used smartly, can make the EU perform like a formidable geopolitical actor: first, by weaponizing vulnerabilities of adversaries; and, second, by weaponizing the military strength of EU Member States.

Complementarities, not duplication, make a great team

To avoid falling behind in the coming geopolitical contests with Russia and China, the EU must not only extend but also improve its well-established cooperation with NATO. While some perceive this partnership as unbalanced, focusing solely on NATO's military strength, it is essential to recognize the complementary capabilities both organizations bring to the table. Much like the players in the most successful soccer teams of this year's Euros, NATO and the EU complement each other perfectly. While NATO focuses on military readiness and defense, the EU skillfully wields its economic instruments and diplomatic channels to tackle current security challenges. This ability to compensate for military shortcomings through strategic partnerships is akin to a team that combines a powerful striker (NATO's military muscle) with a creative playmaker (the EU's economic and diplomatic tools). Together, they form a formidable squad capable of effectively addressing traditional and non-traditional security risks like hybrid threats including disinformation campaigns or sabotage, or cyber-attacks.

Consider the current scenario in Ukraine where the declared objective of both, EU and NATO is to increase the cost of Russia's ongoing military actions. Just as winning a soccer match in the Euros requires both a skilled passer and a reliable striker, the EU's economic influence and NATO's military prowess are equally vital in coercing Russia. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO-EU cooperation has intensified, evident in regular high-level consultations and joint "progress reports" outlining concrete deliverables. This collaborative approach underscores the EU's capacity to offset its military limitations through strategic partnership. Weaponizing Russia's vulnerabilities requires both economic and military power; rather than a duplication of both. There is no need for two or more Kylian Mbappés, but instead for players who complement his undisputed strengths.

Improving team performance by strengthening individual players

Beyond complementarities with like-minded IOs, internal security management focuses on making individual players, i.e. Member States, better in order to improve the overall team performance, i.e. the EU's aggregate military power in relation to adversaries such as China or Russia. Most significantly, the EU's existing power lies in its ability to use regulatory and budgetary tools to enhance the military capabilities of Member States. For meanwhile fifteen years, the EU has employed significant regulatory power over the European defense industry to improve its competitiveness. By setting standards for the procurement and transfer of military equipment, the EU indirectly influences the military capabilities of its Member States. More and even smarter initiatives are under way. "The European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act" exemplifies this strategy, pre-defining specific military capabilities to better arm Europe's armed forces.

Internally, the EU's main strength lies in its role as both team manager and team sponsor for the security of its Member States. The EU not only sets many of the rules that guide Member States' "security training," it also "seed funds" some of their equipment. Through budgetary innovations such as the European Defense Fund (EDF), the EU provides money to encour-

age Member States to acquire specific weapon systems and develop capabilities in line with its security objectives for the Union as a whole. This is not just about cash; it is about designing the team's tactics: The EU uses its sponsoring to shape and integrate its Member States' military structures and helps to "Europeanize" defense spending. Here, too, smarter initiatives are underway. In March 2024, the EU agreed on a "European Defense Industrial Strategy" (EDIS) which leverages parts of the EU's budget to incentivize members "to make steady progress towards procuring at least 50% of their defense investments within the EU by 2030 and 60% by 2035."

Weaponizing Member States requires regulatory expertise combined with the use of budgetary instruments in a way that exploits the security-economy nexus of the new geopolitics. Just as Didier Deschamps trains individual players to provide Kylian Mbappé with scoring opportunities, the European Commission is cleverly helping EU Member States to improve their individual military strength.

The way forward: unleashing the EU's potential as a geopolitical team manager

Relying on economic and regulatory power rather than direct military intervention is not without its challenges. Balancing economic interests with security concerns requires careful calibration. To realize its full potential, coordination among Member States and existing regulatory frameworks need to be improved. The EU can become a "geopolitical champion" by increasing its investment in the economic and technological strength of Member States, rather than duplicating existing military structures. This "smart investment" in critical sectors such as advanced manufacturing and renewable energy empowers states and strengthens the EU's collective influence, enhancing its team performance in the geopolitical contests ahead. A dedicated defense commissioner should play a crucial role in this process. This position will not resemble a traditional defense minister, but rather a dual security manager who will orchestrate the EU's indirect means of geopolitical influence. The vision would be to enhance Europe's security without an army. The fact that this does not sound familiar is a great opportunity rather than a constraint.

Think of the old soccer saying that will certainly be proven after the Euro 2024's finals: Strikers like Kylian Mbappé may win matches, but only with a formidable defense you will prevail in long tournaments like the Euro 2024.

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