Pan-Europe Revisited: Inter-War Debates and the EU's Pursuit of Geopolitical Power

KAMIL ZWOLSKI (iD)
Politics & International Relations, University of Southampton, Southampton

ABSTRACT

The European Union's (EU) transformation from a peace project to an assertive geopolitical actor reflects enduring tensions in integration theory dating back to the inter-war period. This paper develops a comparative framework distinguishing territorial integration logic, which emphasises bounded political communities and collective defence, from cooperative integration logic, which prioritises issue-specific, transnational problem-solving. It traces the EU's strategic shift from the cooperative ethos of the 2003 European Security Strategy towards the territorially oriented integration principle represented by the 2016 Global Strategy and subsequent defence initiatives, including Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Strategic Compass. It then revisits inter-war debates, focusing on Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-Europe vision, Aristide Briand's United States of Europe proposal and David Mitrany's functionalist critique. Through a systematic comparison of threat perceptions – Russian expansionism, American economic competition and the declining influence of individual European states – and integration responses across both eras, the analysis points to a recurring pattern whereby external crises activate territorial integration impulses.

Keywords: foreign policy; integration theories; international relations; international security; security and defence

Introduction

The transformation of the European integration project from one concerned primarily with creating lasting European peace to one focused on establishing the European Union (EU) as a formidable geopolitical power represents one of the most significant shifts in contemporary European politics. This transformation is almost complete, and it is not because the EU now possesses the military capabilities to effectively project its political agenda abroad but because there now exists a near-universal consensus amongst EU institutions and member states that the organisation must become a more assertive security and defence actor. As of 2025, the EU must become more 'geopolitical', even if this notion remains conceptually underdefined (Zwolski, 2020). Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 have accelerated this shift, triggering unprecedented moves towards territorial consolidation. Yet this geopolitical turn, whilst often presented as a novel response to contemporary challenges, reproduces arguments and tensions that first emerged in inter-war debates about European integration.

This paper argues that contemporary EU strategic development reflects recurring patterns in European integration thinking rather than fundamentally new responses to unique contemporary challenges. Specifically, it demonstrates that current calls for EU 'strategic autonomy' and territorial defence capabilities closely parallel arguments made by

inter-war advocates of pan-EU, particularly Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and Aristide Briand, who faced remarkably similar external threats: Russian military expansionism, American economic competition and the diminished standing of individual European states in global politics. Moreover, contemporary critiques of the EU's geopolitical turn echo warnings raised by functionalist theorists like David Mitrany, who cautioned that territorial approaches to European integration risked creating new exclusionary blocs rather than transcending competitive state dynamics.

What analytical insights emerged from comparing inter-war and contemporary European integration debates? We learn that similar external threats shape similar integration preferences. This paper offers a systematic comparison of threat perceptions and integration responses across both periods, revealing how similar external pressures consistently activate what this paper terms 'territorial integration logic', that is, approaches emphasising bounded political communities with clear membership criteria, institutional coherence and collective capabilities for addressing external challenges. This stands in tension with 'cooperative integration logic', representing approaches emphasising issue-specific collaboration that transcends territorial boundaries through practical problem-solving rather than predetermined institutional structures. The paper's methodology draws on Andrew Abbott's (2004) idea about 'putting problems in motion' rather than treating contemporary challenges as static phenomena. By examining how debates about European unity have evolved across the inter-war and contemporary periods, the analysis reveals how apparently novel contemporary concerns about strategic autonomy and geopolitical power represent recurring themes in European integration discourse, though manifested in vastly different institutional and economic contexts.

The analysis proceeds through four main steps. First, it establishes the theoretical framework distinguishing territorial and cooperative integration logic and examining how external threats activate different integration pathways. Second, it analyses contemporary EU strategic development from 2003 to 2025, showing how external pressures have shifted EU integration logic from cooperative approaches towards territorial approaches, emphasising defensive capabilities and strategic autonomy. Third, it examines inter-war integration debates, analysing Coudenhove-Kalergi's territorial vision, Briand's official proposals and Mitrany's cooperative alternative as expressions of fundamental tensions between integration approaches. Finally, it provides a systematic comparison of threat perceptions, integration responses, membership decisions and global governance relationships across both periods.

I. Competing Integration Logics: Theoretical Framework

This paper demonstrates that a consistent theoretical pattern, whereby similar external threats generate similar territorial integration responses in European strategic thinking, can be observed across different historical periods. Following Skocpol and Somers' (1980) framework for 'parallel demonstration of theory', the analysis juxtaposes inter-war and contemporary developments to show how the same underlying logic operates across different historical contexts, despite varying institutional and economic conditions. At the same time, the methodological choice reflects broader tensions within comparative historical analysis regarding the relationship between historical specificity and theoretical generalisation (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003). For this reason,

instead of attempting to derive universal causal mechanisms from the comparison of inter-war and contemporary European integration debates, this analysis treats each historical period as exhibiting its own contextual logic, even if certain patterns can clearly be identified.

This contextual approach aligns with what Abbott (2004) identifies as a fundamental narrative heuristic: the strategic decision to 'put problems in motion' rather than treat them as static phenomena. Abbott argues that 'often the best move possible is to put one's data in motion, to see long-run change rather than simple equilibrium' (p. 70). In the context of European integration debates, this heuristic serves a dual purpose. First, it addresses what Abbott describes as 'one of the central difficulties of assessing any social situation at a single moment' – namely, 'our inability to see the snapshot merely as part of a movie reel' (p. 70). By examining how debates about European unity have evolved across the inter-war and contemporary periods, the analysis reveals how apparently novel contemporary concerns about strategic autonomy and geopolitical power represent recurring themes in European integration discourse. Second, this temporal approach enables what Abbott (2004) terms 'problematising the obvious', which in this case can involve questioning taken-for-granted assumptions by examining their historical development (pp. 58–59).

Territorial Versus Cooperative Integration Logic

European integration debates consistently reveal tension between two fundamental approaches to organising political cooperation across national boundaries. These approaches differ in their core assumptions about legitimate authority, optimal institutional design and the relationship between integration and broader international cooperation. **Territorial integration logic** emphasises creating delineated political communities with clear membership criteria, institutional coherence and collective capabilities for addressing external challenges. This approach prioritises problem-solving capacity through hierarchical decision-making structures that can generate binding collective action. Territorial integration seeks to establish what Ernst Haas (1958) described as new centres of authority that command the loyalties and expectations of political actors, creating political community at a higher territorial level (Haas, 1958, pp. 16–17). This logic underlies neo-functionalist approaches to integration, which emphasise spillover effects that gradually expand the scope and authority of supranational institutions within bounded territorial units (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1998). The territorial approach generates strategic effectiveness through institutional consolidation and clear lines of authority, enabling coordinated responses to external threats and competitive pressures. However, it also involves exclusionary membership criteria and can reproduce competitive dynamics at the international level, as David Mitrany (1930) pointed out in his early critiques of regional federations. Contemporary expressions of territorial logic can be observed in approaches that emphasise the EU's need for 'strategic autonomy' and defensive capabilities against external rivals (Varma, 2024). Specific manifestations include Permanent Structured Cooperation's (PESCO) binding defence commitments or the European Defence Fund's exclusive focus on EU industrial capacity.

Cooperative integration logic, in contrast, emphasises issue-specific collaboration that transcends territorial boundaries, with integration proceeding through practical

problem-solving rather than predetermined institutional structures. This approach draws on functionalist insights about the primacy of human welfare over territorial organisation, reflecting David Mitrany's argument that 'form follows function' rather than territory determining institutional arrangements (Mitrany, 1943). Cooperative integration prioritises what Keohane and Nye (1977) termed 'complex interdependence', characterised by multiple channels of interaction, absence of issue hierarchies and diminished role of military force. The cooperative approach offers greater inclusivity and adaptability whilst maintaining what Hooghe and Marks (2002) described as a system of multi-level governance that can respond flexibly to diverse functional requirements. However, cooperative integration faces persistent challenges in generating sustained collective capacity due to its emphasis on consensus-building over hierarchical decision-making, creating what Scharpf (1988) identified as 'joint-decision traps' when unanimous agreement becomes required for effective action. Specific examples of this logic include the EU's CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) Centres of Excellence (Zwolski, 2014) or the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium.

External Threats and Integration Responses

External threats, in the context of different integration models, can be considered critical catalysts that activate different integration pathways, creating 'crisis pressures' that generate distinct patterns of European integration (Ferrara and Kriesi, 2021). These pressures function as switching mechanisms, channelling integration debates towards either territorial or cooperative approaches depending on the nature and perceived urgency of the external challenge. On one hand, geopolitical security threats consistently activate territorial integration logic. When faced with military or existential threats, such as Russian expansionism in both the 1920s and 2020s, European actors gravitate towards solutions emphasising bounded communities with defensive capabilities. Recent research demonstrates that perceptions of external military threats increase public support for EU security and defence integration, with this effect being 'as strong among Eurosceptics as among Europhiles' (Mader et al., 2024, p. 433). The Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies this pattern, triggering unprecedented moves towards territorial consolidation including Finland's and Sweden's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) memberships and EU funding of lethal weapons through the European Peace Facility. Such security crises favour exclusive membership criteria and rapid decision-making structures that prioritise collective defence over inclusive cooperation.

On the other hand, transnational challenges favour cooperative integration logic. Issues transcending territorial boundaries – climate change, pandemics or technological governance – typically generate calls for inclusive problem-solving and flexible institutional arrangements that emphasise functional cooperation over territorial exclusion. This approach was well summarised at the 2013 conference 'Towards a Global Network of Crisis Rooms' aimed at enhancing cooperation and coordination amongst European and global institutions concerned with crises:

> Crises and catastrophes do not respect frontiers. They do not respect spatial frontiers, temporal frontiers. They are not respecters of culture and context, of wealth, status and gender. They are genuinely international. We have got used in the last few decades to a global manufacturing industry, a global financial industry, global tourism and the like.

> What I submit we have not yet got used to is a global industry or practice of crisis detection, of crisis analysis, crisis monitoring and, most importantly, crisis response. (Hutchings, 2013)

Incidentally, this event, and the associated quote, comes from the time before Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014. This pattern reveals why similar external pressures produce remarkably similar integration debates across different historical periods. Contemporary EU strategic developments since 2014 reproduce debates about territorial responses first articulated in the 1920s pan-European proposals, suggesting that external threats consistently reactivate fundamental tensions between strategic effectiveness through bounded communities and cooperative inclusivity through functional approaches.

The analysis of contemporary EU strategic development draws on systematic examination of official EU documents (the 2003 European Security Strategy, 2016 Global Strategy, 2022 Strategic Compass and 2025 White Paper on European Defence), leadership speeches (European Commission Presidents' State of the Union addresses, High Representative speeches) and policy frameworks (PESCO, European Peace Facility, European Defence Fund). These sources were read against the territorial/cooperative analytical framework developed above, identifying passages reflecting bounded community logic (exclusive membership, collective defence, institutional consolidation) versus transboundary cooperation logic (inclusive problem-solving, functional collaboration, flexible partnerships). This approach constitutes illustrative rather than exhaustive coding. The goal is not a comprehensive discourse analysis but rather a demonstration of how the two integration logics manifest in contemporary EU strategic thinking.

II. The EU's Geopolitical Turn: The Reinforcement of Territorial Logic

In the EU of today, we can observe the gradual evolution of the EU foreign and security integration logic from more cooperative and functional towards more territorial and geopolitical. Notably, the 2003 European Security Strategy epitomised cooperative integration logic, emphasising 'effective multilateralism' as the cornerstone of EU external action. The document highlighted the value of inclusive partnership approaches, functional problem-solving across boundaries and the EU's role as a mostly civilian power promoting progressive norms through diplomatic and economic instruments rather than military capabilities. This cooperative framework prioritised working with partners if possible and building security through international institutions. The strategy's emphasis on regional stability and crisis management reflected functionalist assumptions about addressing specific problems through collaborative approaches that transcended territorial boundaries. This relatively optimistic interpretation of the EU's external environment and the position of the EU in it changed in subsequent years. External geopolitical shocks systematically activated territorial responses, beginning with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, or even the war in Georgia in 2008. The 2016 EU Global Strategy marked this transition. Whilst the 2003 document emphasised regional stability and crisis management, the 2016 EU Global Strategy painted a much darker picture of the EU's international environment, calling for a more assertive and capable EU (Biscop, 2005; Tocci, 2017). Instead of the EU promoting progressive norms – a hallmark of the 2003 document – we see the EU committing to 'principled pragmatism' in 2016 (Juncos, 2017). For example, Europe no longer holds the seemingly naive belief that its security can be

assured exclusively through reliance on the transatlantic partnership. Instead, the Global Strategy raises the importance of EU 'strategic autonomy' (Helwig and Sinkkonen, 2022).

Strategic Choices, Initiatives and Territorial Integration

Beyond strategic documents, the appointments to key positions reinforce the EU's commitment to its 'global power' agenda. Ursula von der Leyen famously began her term in 2019, promoting the 'geopolitical European Commission', however vague that term was at the time (Haroche, 2023). She oversaw the expansion of the European Defence Fund and consistently pushed for a more autonomous and military-capable EU. This agenda has further been reflected by the High Representative appointments. Josep Borrell consistently pressed for EU coherence and military expansion against the Russian threat (Hadfield and Demir, 2024). He oversaw the creation of the European Peace Facility in 2021 and promoted utilising this instrument for military assistance to Ukraine. Borrell's successor, Kaja Kallas (appointed 2024), appears even more hawkish regarding the war in Ukraine, which is unsurprising given her national background. She has been consistently calling on the EU to help Ukraine win the war against Russia and for Russia to be defeated on the battlefield (Kutnarová, 2025).

In addition to new strategy documents and appointments, concrete policy initiatives have further reinforced the shift towards the territorial logic of integration, emphasising EU security and defence capacity against external threats. In March 2025, the European Commission (2025) unveiled a Joint White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030. In her announcement of the White Paper, von der Leyen stated: 'The era of the peace dividend is long gone. The security architecture that we relied on can no longer be taken for granted. Europe is ready to step up. We must invest in defence, strengthen our capabilities, and take a proactive approach to security'. This sentiment aligns with the official Commission discourse at least since 2019, but von der Leyen's predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, equally promoted the 'EU as power' agenda in his 2018 State of the Union address:

> The geopolitical situation makes this Europe's hour: the time for European sovereignty has come. It is time Europe took its destiny into its own hands. It is time Europe developed what I coined 'Weltpolitikfähigkeit' – the capacity to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs. Europe has to become a more sovereign actor in international relations.

Whilst the Commission does not have formal competences in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), its President has been advocating the EU defence agenda through the 'single market' angle, promoting the European defence industry and common defence market (Sabatino, 2022). The lines become increasingly blurred, however, given that the White Paper emphasises the urgency of increased EU military assistance to Ukraine – a strategic decision that clearly belongs to the prerogatives of the member states.

Of course, the European Commission leadership has not been the sole institution driving the 'Europe as a geopolitical power' agenda, although the shift of this institution in this direction is notable. Importantly, the EU's recent policy initiatives reflect predominantly territorial integration logic through several mechanisms. The Lisbon Treaty created

conditions for the EU and member states to pursue defence and military integration, notably through establishing PESCO – an opportunity that EU member states took advantage of by formalising cooperation in this field in 2017 (Blockmans and Crosson, 2021). PESCO embodies territorial logic by establishing exclusive membership criteria, binding commitments amongst participating states and coordinated defence capability development within bounded EU membership.

The Strategic Compass, adopted in 2022 and arguably the EU's first military strategy, further reinforced and pushed forward the ambition to turn the EU into a formidable security actor, even if the practical realisation of this objective remains underwhelming (Sus, 2023). For example, whilst the document's flagship EU Rapid Deployment Capacity force of 5000 is apparently operational as of 2025, it is unclear whether member states will ever agree as to when and how to deploy it. Also, given that the outbreak of the war in Ukraine served as a key geopolitical context for the Strategic Compass, it is unclear how its provisions could relate to the more traditional roles like deterring a territorial invasion by a nuclear power. Regardless of these shortcomings, the Strategic Compass reinforces the territorial pattern through its emphasis on collective EU threat assessment and coordinated response capabilities. Overall, even though the actual EU capacities are better conceptualised as 'crisis management' rather than aspiring to perform any meaningful deterrence roles, the EU has been consistently moving away from the 'civilian power' role and towards a military actor role.

III. EU Security Integration Logic in the Literature

This empirical trend in European integration has naturally been recognised in the scholarship, which has been grappling with the issue in several ways. One strand of the literature has been working through the problem of the tension between the EU's normative identity and its increasingly interest-driven policy. The underlying question in this literature concerns the EU's uniqueness on the global stage: is it still a special kind of power? Another strand has been following the EU's progress along and encouraging its 'geopolitical power' agenda, calling upon the EU to strengthen its military capacity in response to external threats and challenges. Other strands of the literature have been approaching the problem more technically, discussing various aspects of the EU's security and defence policy agenda or cautioning that the EU should be careful about its militaristic course. This list is not exhaustive, but it is fairly representative of the nature of debates. The remainder of this section offers a brief overview of the arguments raised in these scholarship strands.

The question of whether the EU remains a special kind of power (or, indeed, whether it has ever been one) has become a cornerstone of the study of the EU's global role and it is largely thanks to Francoise Duchêne (1972) and Ian Manners (2002). Whilst many, including to an extent the EU itself, have become comfortable with defining the EU as a normative power, there is also growing recognition that things have changed since that foundational Manners (2006) publication, with the author himself also recognising the shift. For example, Pänke (2018) argues that the EU can be defined as a 'liberal empire', promoting liberal norms, whilst at the same time pursuing geopolitical objectives similar to more traditional powers. He draws on discourse theory and critical geopolitics, pointing out that the EU's seemingly normative rhetoric supports its more strategic

actions. Somehow similar, Smith (2011) depicts EU foreign policy as 'liberal grand strategy' that is perfectly capable of pursuing progressive norms on the global stage but also acting in the EU's strategic interest when deemed necessary, especially when dealing with great powers. This tension has particularly been observed in case studies involving the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. Notably, Seeberg (2009) argues that the EU struggles to maintain its normative principles when dealing with a country such as Lebanon, depicting the EU as a 'realist actor in normative clothes'. Ruffa (2011) sees a similar problem with the EU policy in Lebanon but concludes that it is unhelpful to contrast the normative lens with the realist lens; instead, the EU can be seen applying both sets of standards in this particular foreign policy instance. More recently, Sezal (2024) revisits the issue of EU global strategy contradictions, noting how normative ambitions clash with geopolitical realities in ENP, specifically looking at Central Asia.

The territorial/cooperative distinction developed in this paper cuts across rather than replaces the normative/interest-based dichotomy central to normative power Europe debates. Normative commitments can manifest through either integration logic: cooperative integration pursues normative goals (human rights, democracy, climate action) through inclusive, functional mechanisms transcending territorial boundaries, as envisioned in Manners' (2002) original formulation. However, normative rhetoric can equally serve territorial integration, justifying exclusive European community-building and collective capabilities as necessary to defend 'European values' against authoritarian rivals. The 2016 Global Strategy's 'principled pragmatism' illustrates this instrumentalisation: normative language legitimises territorial consolidation and strategic autonomy instead of necessarily generating cooperative, inclusive global governance. This suggests normative power is not inherently cooperative; it can be mobilised within territorial logics to justify bounded community formation and external differentiation. The key distinction lies not in whether norms matter, but in whether they generate inclusive transboundary cooperation or exclusive territorial consolidation.

The second strand of the literature identified earlier can be seen as presenting a somewhat opposite argument. Rather than reflecting on the strain put on the EU's normative credentials by the often-messy geopolitical realities around the world, this literature encourages the EU to do more and faster. Howorth and Menon's (2015) call for Europe to 'wake up' is representative of this strand, arguing that strategic incoherence and political indecision are affecting the EU's ability to act not only on the global stage, but also in its immediate neighbourhood – the paper was published shortly after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. In a similar geopolitical context, Biscop (2019) reiterated his own long-standing call for the EU to become more strategic and more realistic (if not realist) about its international environment, also calling upon the EU to integrate its defence and military capabilities and finally start 'thinking big', instead of getting endlessly bogged down in processes, plans and procedures. We could also include in this category the strand of the literature studying the EU as an international security actor by applying different criteria of 'actorness' (Kaunert and Zwolski, 2013). The normative element in this literature is relatively more implicit, but a constatation that the EU is insufficiently coherent or capable often indicates that the EU *should* improve its performance. In addition to academic authors, there is a

number of research institutes and think tanks that regularly publish analyses prompting the EU to get serious on security and defence. These include, for example, the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) or the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). These and similar institutions can be considered an integral part of the 'euro-strategist' discourse coalition.

In addition to these two strands of the literature, there are also less normative and more analytical contributions, focusing on the study of different aspects of the EU's global role, with Smith's (2014) monograph *European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World* as a prime example. Scholars have also been excelling in the analysis of various aspects of the EU's security and defence integration, including contributions by Juncos and Pomorska (2014, 2024). Finally, there are contributions which call on the EU to exercise caution regarding the direction it is heading. For example, even though Biscop(2024) made his name studying and promoting the idea of the EU as a strategic actor, in his latest book, he cautions the EU that whilst recognising the international environment as 'geopolitical' is good, adopting 'geopolitics' as the sole lens to conduct strategy is not. And it certainly will not serve the EU well. In a somehow similar fashion, Zwolski (2020) also cautioned against the European Commission becoming 'geopolitical', pointing out that the institution's strengths lay in a more progressive, multilateral and human security-oriented approach to security.

Despite their different approaches, these strands of scholarship share one fundamental quality and several underlying assumptions. The quality is their relatively ahistorical character. Whilst each contribution fills an important gap of some sort or offers a novel interpretation of the EU's foreign and security role, their 'context window', to borrow from the world of artificial intelligence, begins with the establishment of the European Communities in the 1950s. This is not a criticism, merely an observation; after all, the historical scope of a publication must match its intended purpose. As for the shared assumptions of this literature, they stem from its ahistorical character. First, most analyses focus on EU polity, or European integration more broadly, rather than imagining other forms of integration. This focus is reasonable given the remarkable progression of the European integration project since its humble beginnings in the 1950s, coupled with the compartmentalisation of academic research into established disciplines. Second, most scholars in EU studies assume that European integration – conceived as a form of territorial unification embodied by the EU – is generally a good thing, especially when contrasted with the 19th-century system of sovereign nation-states. There is a general inclination in the scholarship toward 'more EU' rather than 'less EU'. Finally, much of the literature assumes that the EU must become stronger, more coherent, more capable and more strategic (indeed, more 'geopolitical') in response to a challenging external environment. At the time of writing, Russia has effectively constituted itself as the most urgent security threat to the EU; China is increasingly seen as a longer term challenge; and the United States under the Trump administration emerged as another catalyst for the EU to 'wake up'. All these assumptions have been shaping our theoretical, empirical and methodological choices and influencing the new generations of scholars fascinated by the EU's growing role in global security. The remainder of this paper, therefore, aims to open up some of these assumptions by revisiting the vigorous debates, together with associated policy initiatives, about the shape and purpose of European integration that date back to the first half of the 20th century.

IV. Inter-War Integration Debates: Coudenhove-Kalergi and His Critics

Largely forgotten in EU Studies, the memory of Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi was recently revived by Martyn Bond (2021) in his *Hitler's Cosmopolitan Bastard: Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and His Vision of Europe*. In his book *Pan-Europe*, Coudenhove-Kalergi (1923) was concerned about the very same big three challenges Europe arguably faces today. First, Coudenhove-Kalergi observed the diminished standing of individual European states due to the devastating effects of the Great War. Contrary to the illusions of many European leaders at the time, the Euro-centric great power system was over; a new world-power system had emerged in which no individual European state could claim a leading place. This argument closely corresponds to the modern idea that, in order to matter in the 21st century, European nations must channel their influence through a single, coherent EU foreign policy.

Second, he warned of the threat of Soviet Russian military expansionism. Coudenhove-Kalergi argued that a divided, fragmented Europe would be helpless against a potential Russian attack. His critical view of Soviet Russia was shaped by personal experience with Bolshevik terror in Bavaria, where '[s]hops were looted; hundreds of innocent citizens were imprisoned; hostages were taken (…)' (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1953, p. 72). This position has clear parallels with Europe's situation today, further amplified by the fact that Soviet Russia did invade part of Europe in 1920 (until being miraculously defeated by Poland at the Battle of Warsaw). Like Coudenhove-Kalergi, many of today's political leaders in the EU lived their formative years in countries occupied by Soviet Russia, which predisposes them to advocate a strong and assertive EU policy towards Russia.

Third, Coudenhove-Kalergi was concerned about American economic competition and the impact it would have on European economies if they failed to unite. The question of American economic competition (tariffs) and the country's broader reliability as a European ally is more relevant today than at any time since World War 2 (WW2). The similarities between Coudenhove-Kalergi's insights in 1923 and European dilemmas in 2025 extend to the proposed solution, that is, the urgent call for Europe to 'wake up', integrate and take its predicament seriously. Whilst Coudenhove-Kalergi actively promoted his vision of the 'political and economic consolidation of all the states from Poland to Portugal into a federal union', today's 'euro-strategists' likewise want to see the EU similarly unified.

V. The Briand Plan: Making It Official

As noted, Russia is not the only link between today's European integration debates and those of the 1920s; another is the role of the United States. In 1929, *Foreign Affairs* published a paper by a French academic André Siegfried (1929), who reflected on the impact of American tariffs on Europe. He observed that, unlike earlier US tariffs with which Europe had no capacity to counter, the new tariffs America was about to impose would be met with greater resistance from Europe, including a heightened sense of unity amongst European nations. Whether this was an accurate assessment or wishful thinking from a French perspective is another matter. The fact is that in 1929, the French Foreign

Minister Aristide Briand famously presented the official French call for the United States of Europe at the League of Nations meeting in Geneva (Whitton, 1930).

In the inter-war period, this moment was the peak of the European integration movement and it was when the idea attracted the most attention and criticism. It had been easy to dismiss Coudenhove-Kalergi's advocacy, and indeed, *The Guardian* at the time derided his writings as 'incessant, voluminous and semi-lyrical outpouring, unrelated to any economic or political realities' (Nelsson, 2019). By contrast, the reactions to Briand's proposal were numerous. They were summarised by the French Prime Minister Édouard Herriot in another *Foreign Affairs* article on European integration at the time, simply called 'Pan Europe?' (Herriot, 1930). Herriot (1930) recounted arguments from European newspapers, including *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, which cautioned that the proposed pan-EU would represent 'a military machine built up against the United States, against Great Britain, against Russia' (p. 241).

VI. Mitrany's Critique and Functional Integration

The chief argument against the pan-EU was that it would be institutionally disconnected from the League of Nations – a concern highlighted in the official British response, with other governments expressing similar misgivings (Nelsson, 2019). The worry was that an international body (the League) already existed with objectives similar to those proposed for the pan-EU (creating a political community amongst countries and reducing trade barriers). David Mitrany famously not only criticised the potential duplication of institutions but argued that the League was the preferable vehicle for integration:

> The one [pan-EU] would proceed in the old way by a definition of territory, the other [League of Nations] by a definition of functions; and while the unions would define their territory as a means of differentiating between members and outsiders, a league would select and define functions for the contrary purpose of integrating with regard to them the interests of all. (Mitrany, 1930, p. 476)

Mitrany's functionalist approach emphasised issue-specific cooperation transcending territorial boundaries, directly challenging the territorial logic of pan-European proposals. His core insight centred on what he termed 'technical self-determination' – the principle that 'the functional dimensions, as we have seen, determine themselves. In a like manner the function determines its appropriate organs' (Mitrany, 1943, p. 35). This represented a fundamental departure from territorial approaches that prioritised predetermined institutional structures over practical problem-solving.

In his seminal work 'A Working Peace System', Mitrany (1943) articulated his vision of international cooperation through what he called 'natural selection' of common interests, where each would be 'organized separately according to its nature and conditions' (p. 4). Rather than creating bounded political communities, functional agencies would operate across territorial boundaries based on the practical requirements of specific tasks. As Mitrany (1943) explained, 'activities would be selected specifically and organized separately, each according to its nature, to the conditions under which it has to operate, and to the needs of the moment' (p. 33). This approach promised greater inclusivity and

adaptability whilst avoiding the exclusionary implications of territorial approaches, though it raised questions about strategic coherence and collective capacity for sustained action against external threats.

VII. Comparative Analysis: Recurring Patterns and Contemporary Implications

Having established the theoretical distinction between territorial and cooperative integration logic and examined both contemporary EU strategic development and inter-war integration debates, this section now discusses how similar external pressures activate similar integration responses across different historical periods. The analysis points out that the same underlying pattern, whereby geopolitical threats generate calls for territorial integration through exclusive European unity, operates in both the 1920s and 2020s, despite vastly different institutional and economic contexts.

Threat Perceptions and Integration Responses

Both the 1920s and 2020s feature remarkably similar external threat configurations that consistently activate territorial integration logic, pointing to recurring patterns in European responses to strategic challenges. Coudenhove-Kalergi (1923) identified three fundamental challenges that mirror contemporary European concerns: the diminished standing of individual European states following the Great War, the military threat of Soviet Russian expansionism and American economic competition. The continuity in Russian threat perception proves particularly striking. Coudenhove-Kalergi's warnings about Soviet military expansionism were shaped by direct experience with Bolshevik terror in Bavaria but also by his reflections on the trajectory of Soviet foreign policy. As early as 1920, this historical threat materialised when Soviet Russia invaded Poland, demonstrating actual expansionist capabilities. Contemporary Europe faces analogous concerns following Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, which have fundamentally transformed EU security identity and strategic calculations. Notably, the Russian invasion triggered unprecedented territorial consolidation including Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership and EU funding of lethal weapons through the European Peace Facility.

American perceived unreliability represents another persistent concern across both periods, further prompting the trend towards pursuing European self-sufficiency. American economic pressure in the 1920s partly motivated Aristide Briand's 1929 proposal for European political union and contemporary parallels with the impact of the Trump administration are notable. The parallels emerge through Trump administration's 'America First' policies and broader American strategic pivot towards Asia-Pacific, prompting European reactions of the kind described earlier in the paper. It is notable that these external pressures consistently generate similar integration proposals emphasising territorial consolidation over more transnational, functional and cooperative approaches. Both Coudenhove-Kalergi's pan-European vision and contemporary 'euro-strategist' discourse prioritise bounded European community with defensive capabilities rather than pursuing the 'lofty' goal of relatively more inclusive global cooperation. One advantage of recognising these recurring patterns relates to helping us understand why contemporary EU strategic development faces coordination problems despite widespread political consensus on strategic necessity.

Membership and Exclusion

Related to the issue of threat perceptions is the parallel concern over dividing the world into exclusive territorial blocs. At the time of the Briand proposal, British League of Nations official Arthur Salter expressed this view:

> With the division of the world into a few large blocs, 'European, panAmerican, British Empire (with perhaps a Russian Asiatic to follow)', Salter wrote, 'we should have, more remotely but ultimately on a larger scale, the same kind of danger which comes from "alliances" endangering the League's overriding authority.' (in Boyce, 1980, p. 35)

This critique subsequently appeared in the official British response note, which warned of the danger of inter-continental rivalries (Nelsson, 2019). Germany and the Netherlands, at the time, expressed similar worries. Another sticking point for some countries – Britain amongst them - was France's insistence that political unification must precede economic integration. This stance made sense for France and was unsurprisingly welcomed by Poland, which was anxious about the security of its western border (Whitton, 1930). Still, the overtly political and security-oriented profile of the proposed union raised scepticism about its impact on the world order. The nature of Coudenhove-Kalergi's pan-European movement, which partially inspired Briand, reinforces the question of the inter-continental divisions.

In *Pan-Europe*, Coudenhove-Kalergi made clear that the union should exclude both Russia and the UK – albeit for different reasons. Soviet Russia was seen as a threat to European security, and the proposed pan-EU would only consider Russian membership if Russia became democratic. Thus, quite explicitly, the pan-EU union was conceived as a security instrument *against* the Russian threat, rather than an organisation *to anchor* Russia within Europe. French Prime Minister Herriot expressed a similar sentiment when commenting on Briand's proposal: 'Pan-Europe cannot be solidly organized so long as Russia is left isolated. But the day is destined to come when the country at present monopolized by the Bolsheviks will enter the concert of world activity. It is a question of time – only time' (Herriot, 1930, p. 245). In the end, however, excluding Russia (and Turkey) from the proposed EU was another reason for countries such as Germany and Italy to reject the proposal.

Fast forward 100 years, and the same dilemma of European security and defence integration permeates our discussions today. The question remains whether accelerating EU defence integration strengthens the prospects for peace in Europe, or whether it might undermine them. Arguing the latter is difficult now for two reasons. **First**, it means taking a stance against the position held by an overwhelming majority of stakeholders. **Second**, one risks being accused of amplifying Russian propaganda – a heavy moral burden given the atrocities Russia continues to commit in Ukraine. Long before the Russian invasion, however, David Long (1999) argued that indeed, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy bears certain risks whereby the EU

> must look for problems and threats in order to justify itself. But, as it concentrates on security interpreted as defence against outsiders, the implied exclusiveness and territoriality jeopardizes the EU's openness and the prospects for international cooperation and thus (ironically) the EU's own security! (Long, 1999, p. 127)

Long's critique closely reflects the views of David Mitrany (1965), who in 1965 was criticising in this very journal the arguably territorial and bureaucratic turn that European integration had taken with the EEC.

Global Governance and Regional Integration

Finally, our comparison shifts towards the question of how the world should be organised institutionally and the compatibility of regional blocks with universal organisations. During the inter-war period, most countries responding to Briand's proposal raised concerns about the compatibility of the proposed pan-EU with the League of Nations, with the UK being amongst the most vocal about this. Today, the argument about the superiority of the United Nations (UN) over the EU is most strongly raised by Russia and to a lesser extent China. In 2024, both countries issued a joint declaration defining their vision of the world order, which emphasised their 'commitment to building a more just and stable multipolar international architecture, fully respecting and abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter unconditionally and safeguarding true multilateralism' (Norton, 2024). This statement aligns with Russia's earlier expressions of the same view, including President Medvedev's 2008 Berlin speech in which he advocated using the UN – rather than exclusive regional organisations – as the primary framework for international cooperation. Naturally, it is easy to dismiss such proclamations coming from Russia. Moscow not only flagrantly violates the UN Charter by illegally invading other countries, but it also has a vested interest in favouring the UN over the EU or NATO, given its privileged position in the UN and lack of membership in either of those regional groupings. However, there is no logical basis to dismiss the question of the EU's place within the UN system solely because a non-credible actor raises it. The question itself should be separated from the motivations of the actor raising it and assessed on its own merits.

That question is as follows: what is, and what should be, the relationship between the EU and the broader UN framework, including the UN Charter? Briand in 1929 had addressed this concern by assuring that his proposed EU would operate within the League framework (under Article 21 of the League Covenant) so that the two organisations would be complementary (Whitton, 1930). In the modern context, the EU can claim to fall under Article 52 of the UN Charter, which encourages regional arrangements for dispute resolution. However, that claim would arguably have been easier to make in the case of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which genuinely aimed to overcome and permanently resolve the threat of war amongst western European countries. Given the EU's evolution away from internal conflict resolution and towards a 'global actor' agenda, it is reasonable to ask whether Article 51 of the UN Charter (collective self-defence) might now be a more fitting framework for the EU than Article 52. After all, the Lisbon Treaty includes a mutual defence clause. This shift, in turn, raises questions about the impact of the EU acting as a mutual defence organisation alongside the transatlantic alliance (NATO) on the broader pan-European and Eurasian security architecture.

This raises the question of the division of labour, which suggests functional specialisation across overlapping jurisdictions. NATO remains the primary collective defence provider under Article 5, possessing credible deterrence capabilities against existential military threats. The EU's territorial logic manifests primarily through industrial, financial and institutional enablers: the European Defence Fund develops joint capabilities, the

European Peace Facility provides financial resources and PESCO coordinates capability development, but without independent operational capacity for major territorial defence. The EU's cooperative logic persists in transboundary regulatory and resilience functions, including cyber governance, critical infrastructure protection, climate adaptation and economic sanctions coordination. The UN framework theoretically provides overarching legitimacy, though its effectiveness remains constrained by Security Council paralysis. This layered architecture creates both complementarity (different organizations addressing different functional requirements) and tension (competing claims to authority, redundant structures, coordination challenges). The key question is whether this division of labour represents stable differentiation or unstable competition, particularly as EU territorial logic expansion potentially encroaches on NATO's traditional domain.

Conclusion

The analysis here demonstrated that the EU's contemporary quest for geopolitical power reflects recurring patterns in European strategic thinking rather than fundamentally new responses to unique challenges. Similar external pressures – Russian military expansionism, American economic competition and the diminished standing of individual European states – consistently activate what this paper has termed territorial integration logic, generating calls for bounded European communities with defensive capabilities that transcend specific historical contexts. The comparison reveals persistent tensions between territorial and cooperative integration approaches that have characterised European integration thinking for over a century. Territorial approaches offer strategic effectiveness through institutional consolidation and clear lines of authority, enabling coordinated responses to external threats. However, they also create exclusionary dynamics and can reproduce competitive patterns at higher levels.

Conversely, cooperative approaches maintain inclusive engagement and adaptability whilst struggling to generate sustained strategic capacity due to their emphasis on consensus-building over hierarchical decision-making. Contemporary EU strategic initiatives face coordination problems not merely due to political constraints or institutional limitations, but also because they reflect deeper tensions between integration logics that have persisted across different historical contexts. The analysis suggests that effective EU strategic development may require explicit recognition of these fundamental trade-offs and more deliberate institutional innovations that balance strategic coherence with cooperative flexibility.

Three implications emerge for contemporary EU development. First, the EU should pay attention to the historical criticisms raised at bloc politics and recognise the trade-offs different forms of integration offer. Inter-war thinkers cautioned that tightly integrated European blocs could provoke counter-alliances and rivalries, suggesting that today's EU should complement any increase in military or economic power with proactive diplomacy. Second, Europe should learn from historical exclusion debates by maintaining inclusive orientations toward future enlargements and engagements, even whilst pursuing the strategic autonomy agenda. The 1929–1930 pan-Europe plans failed partly because they excluded major powers, creating strategic limitations despite the promise of enhanced internal coherence. Third, the EU's geopolitical turn should be guided by clear

mission-oriented goals, such as preventing conflict and maintaining global order, rather than power projection for its own sake.

Correspondence: Kamil Zwolski, Politics & International Relations, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom.
email: k.m.zwolski@soton.ac.uk

References

Abbott, A. (2004) *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences* (London: W.W. Norton).

Biscop, S. (2005) *The European Security Strategy: A Global Agenda for Positive Power* (London: Routledge).

Biscop, S. (2019) *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power* (London: Routledge).

Biscop, S. (2024) *This Is Not a New World Order: Europe Rediscovers Geopolitics, from Ukraine to Taiwan* (London: Owl Press).

Blockmans, S. and Crosson, D.M. (2021) 'PESCO: A Force for Positive Integration in EU Defence'. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 26, No. SI, pp. 87–110.

Bond, M. (2021) *Hitler's Cosmopolitan Bastard: Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and His Vision of Europe* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Boyce, R.W.D. (1980) 'Britain's First "No" to Europe: Britain and the Briand Plan, 1929–30'. *European Studies Review*, Vol. 10, pp. 17–45.

Coudenhove-Kalergi, R. (1923) *Pan-Europe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

Coudenhove-Kalergi, R. (1953) *An Idea Conquers the World* (London: Hutchinson).

Duchêne, F. (1972) 'Europe's Role in World Peace'. In Mayne, R. (ed.) *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead* (London: Fontana), pp. 32–47.

European Commission (2025) *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, 19.3.2025, JOIN(2025) 120 Final* (Brussels: European Commission).

Ferrara, F.M. and Kriesi, H. (2021) 'Crisis Pressures and European Integration'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 29, No. 9, pp. 1351–1373.

Haas, E.B. (1958) *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950–1957* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

Hadfield, A. and Demir, M. (2024) 'More or Less Borrell? A Critical Analysis of Josep Borrell as the European Union's High Representative'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 62, pp. 64–75.

Haroche, P. (2023) 'A "Geopolitical Commission": Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 61, pp. 970–987.

Helwig, N. and Sinkkonen, V. (2022) 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term'. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 27, No. Special, pp. 1–20.

Herriot, E. (1930) 'Pan-Europe'. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 237–247.

Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2002) *'Types of Multi-Level Governance',* Les Cahiers européens de Sciences Po*, No. 03* (Paris: Centre d'études européennes at Sciences Po).

Howorth, J. and Menon, A. (2015) 'Wake Up, Europe!'. *Global Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 11–20.

Hutchings, G. (2013) Speech During the Opening of the 'High-Level Conference on Managing Complex International Crises: Towards a Global Network of Crisis Rooms', Brussels, 3–4 December.

Juncos, A.E. (2017) 'Principles, Pragmatism and Resilience'. In Lange, S., Nechev, Z. and Trauner, F. (eds) *Resilience in the Western Balkans* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies), pp. 75–80.

Juncos, A.E. and Pomorska, K. (2014) 'Manufacturing Esprit de Corps'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 52, pp. 302–319.

Juncos, A.E. and Pomorska, K. (2024) 'The Role of EEAS Chairs in Council Negotiations on Foreign and Security Policy Post-Lisbon'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 62, pp. 3–20.

Kaunert, C. and Zwolski, K. (2013) *The EU as a Global Security Actor: A Comprehensive Analysis Beyond CFSP and JHA* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Keohane, R.O. and Nye, J.S. (1977) *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Little, Brown).

Kutnarová, P. (2025) 'Estonia in Times of Russian Aggression: Rethinking Smallness'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 33, pp. 1–16.

Long, D. (1999) 'The Security Discourses of the European Union: A Functional Critique'. In Ashworth, L.M. and Long, D. (eds) *New Perspectives on International Functionalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), pp. 120–136.

Mader, M., Gavras, K., Hofmann, S.C., Reifler, J., Schoen, H. and Thomson, C. (2024) 'International Threats and Support for European Security and Defence Integration: Evidence From 25 Countries'. *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 63, pp. 433–454.

Mahoney, J. and Rueschemeyer, D. (2003) 'Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas'. In Mahoney, J. and Rueschemeyer, D. (eds) *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 3–38.

Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?' *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 235–258.

Manners, I. (2006) 'Normative Power Europe Reconsidered: Beyond the Crossroads'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 182–199.

Mitrany, D. (1930) 'Pan-Europa: A Hope or a Danger?' *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 457–478.

Mitrany, D. (1943) *A Working Peace System* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books).

Mitrany, D. (1965) 'The Prospect of Integration: Federal or Functional?' *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 119–149.

Nelsson, R. (2019) 'Aristide Briand's Plan for a United States of Europe - Archive 1929', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2019.

Norton, B. (2024) 'China-Russia Joint Statement Marking "New Era" on 75th Anniversary of Relations (Full Text)', GeopoliticalEconomy.com. Available from: https://geopoliticaleconomy.com/2024/05/24/china-russia-joint-statement-new-era-75th-anniversary/

Pänke, J. (2018) 'Liberal Empire, Geopolitics and EU Strategy: Norms and Interests in European Foreign Policy Making'. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 100–123.

Ruffa, C. (2011) 'Realist-Normative Power Europe? Explaining EU Policies Toward Lebanon from an IR Perspective'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 9, pp. 562–580.

Sabatino, E. (2022) 'The European Defence Fund: A Step Towards a Single Market for Defence?' *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 133–148.

Sandholtz, W. and Stone Sweet, A. (1998) 'Integration, Supranational Governance, and the Institutionalization of the European Polity'. In Sandholtz, W. and Stone Sweet, A. (eds) *European Integration and Supranational Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 1–26.

Scharpf, F.W. (1988) 'The Joint-Decision Trap: Lessons From German Federalism and European Integration'. *Public Administration*, Vol. 66, No. 3, pp. 239–278.

Seeberg, P. (2009) 'The EU as a Realist Actor in Normative Clothes: EU Democracy Promotion in Lebanon and the European Neighbourhood Policy'. *Democratization*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 81–99.

Sezal, M.A. (2024) 'Designing, Mapping, and Reshaping Borders'. In Bayramov, A. and Neuman, M. (eds) *European Union Governance in Central Asia* (London: Routledge), pp. 35–52.

Siegfried, A. (1929) 'European Reactions to American Tariff Proposals'. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 13–19.

Skocpol, T. and Somers, M. (1980) 'The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 174–197.

Smith, K.E. (2014) *European Union Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (London: Wiley).

Smith, M.E. (2011) 'A Liberal Grand Strategy in a Realist World? Power, Purpose and the EU's Changing Global Role'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 144–163.

Sus, M. (2023) 'Exploring the Dynamics of Policy Change in EU Security and Defence: Policy Entrepreneurs Behind the Strategic Compass'. *West European Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 942–966.

Tocci, N. (2017) *Framing the EU Global Strategy: A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

Varma, T. (2024) 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe'. *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 65–83.

Whitton, J.B. (1930) 'The Briand Plan for European Union'. *Current History (1916–1940)*, Vol. 32, No. 6, pp. 1176–1181.

Zwolski, K. (2014) 'Epistemic Policy Networks in the European Union's CBRN Risk Mitigation Policy'. *European Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 319–334.

Zwolski, K. (2020) 'Diversified in Unity: The Agenda for the Geopolitical European Commission'. *Global Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 4–5, pp. 519–535.