

THIS IS NOT A NEW WORLD ORDER

Europe Rediscovered Geopolitics,
**from Ukraine
to Taiwan**

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Sven Biscop

To Aberu, my husband

CONTENTS

The Author _____	9
Introduction: Geopolitics? _____	11
Definitions Are Important	13
The Aim of the Book	17
Getting into the Game: Ukraine 2014 _____	21
A Bond with Ukraine	22
Invasion 2014	25
The Game Explodes: Ukraine 2022 _____	29
EU Interests at Stake	29
EU Strategy	32
An End to the War?	38
Long-term Military Support	42
The Game Expands: Europe _____	47
Europe Torn Apart	47
The Future Defence of Europe	50
Straddling Europe and Asia: the Black Sea Region	52
Which Role for the Caucasus?	56
Quid Russia?	60

Next Moves in the Game: The South _____	65
North Africa	67
The Middle East and the Gulf	74
Forget “Indo-Pac”	84
The Great Game: Eurasia _____	87
China’s Balancing Act	88
Central Asia and North Korea	93
Taiwan and the South China Sea	95
The EU and China	101
Rules of the Game: World Order _____	107
The Structure: Multipolarity	108
Tensions Within the Structure	111
Order Within the Structure: Rules	115
A Rules-Based Rather Than a Liberal Order	118
Conclusion: Europe’s Game – Keeping the World Together _____	121
The Inflation of Geopolitics	122
A Word on Institutions	125
EU Grand Strategy	127
Priorities	128
Acknowledgements _____	143
Endnotes	147

THE AUTHOR

Sven Biscop (born in Willebroek, Belgium, in 1976) read political sciences and obtained his PhD at Ghent University, where today he is a professor, lecturing on Grand Strategy and great powers, and on Belgian foreign and defence policy. In addition, he is the director of the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, the think tank associated with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sven is an Associate Member of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences of Belgium, and an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College (ESDC), an EU agency where he lectures for diplomats, military, and officials from all EU Member States and institutions. He is also a regular speaker at the Royal Military Academy in Brussels and at the People’s University of China in Beijing, where he is a Senior Research Fellow. Sven has been honoured with the cross of Officer of the Order of the Crown of the Kingdom of Belgium, and the Grand Decoration of Honour of the Republic of Austria. He lives in Brussels with his Taiwanese-Belgian husband Aberu, surrounded by a great many books, military paraphernalia, and *chinoiseries*. Unfortunately they travel too often to keep a cat.

INTRODUCTION: GEOPOLITICS?

These guys are not going to run away. That much I knew, but Vladimir Putin apparently did not. A couple of guest lectures at the National Defence University in Kyiv, in pre-covid times, each for an audience of some five hundred grim-looking officers, easily convinced me of the Ukrainian army's will to fight. Many of these officers had only recently been at the front, facing the Russian-armed separatists in the Donbas area in Eastern Ukraine. After the Russian invasion and illegal annexation of the Crimea in 2014, fighting in the Donbas never really stopped. The Russians just did not kill enough Ukrainians to make the headlines in the West. That is why, after a few years of this low-level conflict, the feeling in Brussels was that Ukraine was sufficiently stable to shift its attention to other challenges.

I did not see the second Russian invasion, on 24 February 2022, coming, therefore. Nor, alas, did the European Union (EU). There was a sound strategic argument to be made for that trust in the stability of the situation. In 2014, Putin had obviously failed to pull Ukraine back into the Russian orbit. On the contrary, he alienated Ukrainian public opinion entirely. Even those Ukrainians who before the invasion felt closer to Russia

than to the West did not like it enough to say: please, come and grab a province or two. But Russia did secure its hold over the Crimea, where Sebastopol harboured its Black Sea Fleet – naval dominance over the Black Sea, as a springboard for access to the Mediterranean, is a long-standing Russian interest. By instigating the armed rebellion in the Eastern Donbas, Russia also more or less ensured that Ukraine would not enter NATO, for the Alliance normally does not take in a member that does not control its entire territory. Moreover, Russia continued to reap the profits of exporting energy to the EU, which in the end adopted only limited sanctions against the country. Why risk all of that for another slice of Ukraine? What would one do with that anyway?

It seems that I had gravely underestimated, however, two drivers of Russian strategy: status and geopolitics.

For Russia, to be recognised and respected as a great power is an important objective in its own right. Imposing its will on Ukraine would have been one way of demonstrating to the world that it still counts. Moreover, Moscow depicts Ukraine as the historic heartland of Russia rather than as a state or a nation in its own right. For someone living in the EU, this is difficult to comprehend: the EU is about peace between its Member States and, in a more practical way, good governance for its citizens, not about acquiring status. In some Member States there still is an idea of national grandeur – just ask the French or the Poles (though not the Belgians). But that no longer translates into the urge to conquer someone else's lands. The fratricidal world wars that Europeans launched in the previous century have cured us of that, hopefully forever. For Russia, however, subjective as it

may be, the quest for status remains very real, and military force is still an acceptable way of securing it.

Equally real is Russia's sense of geopolitical vulnerability on its Western borders, where there are no natural obstacles to invasion. In many ways, Putin is continuing a Grand Strategy that goes back to Peter the Great (Tsar from 1682 to 1725): creating strategic depth by controlling neighbours or by outright conquest, so as to put distance between the Russian capital and any potential invader. That kind of geopolitical thinking is also alien to most Europeans today, because obviously nobody in Europe has any intention of invading any country any longer, and certainly not Russia. Also because among the EU Member States

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geopolitics is no longer of much consequence. But most importantly because many no longer understand what geopolitics is. And that is dangerous, for as I had to appreciate myself, geopolitics is not a thing of the past. Geopolitics is like the weather: it is always there. One may not care for it or expect sunshine to last forever. But, as any Belgian can tell you, one who never carries an umbrella will eventually get wet.

Definitions Are Important

The irony is that more and more people talk about geopolitics. But often, they say “geopolitical” when they mean “strategic”, and they say “strategic” when they simply mean “important”.

First of all, therefore, let us get the definitions right.¹ *Strategy* is a calculated whole of ends, ways, and means (or objectives, instruments, and resources) with a certain time horizon. *Grand Strategy* serves the ultimate end: safeguarding the state, its territory, and the way of life that a society has built for itself. The conditions on which the survival of one's way of life depends are one's *vital interests*. The strategic calculus therefore has to assess the *threats and challenges* present in the strategic environment: the violent and non-violent events and developments that may imperil those interests. But in addition to reacting against the world's negative forces, strategy will also identify opportunities, and proactively pursue positive objectives that one wants to achieve in order to shape one's environment. Ultimately, the core of any Grand Strategy is the answer to the question: Which *role* am I playing on the world stage? Do I seek cooperation or domination? Do I prefer unilateral or multilateral action? Do I want autonomy or protection by another power? That identity determines which types of objective one pursues, and which kinds of instruments one deems legitimate to put to use to that end.

Some states, but not all, have a thorough strategic debate about these issues, and codify their thinking in a document such as a National Security Strategy. My country, Belgium, did so for the first time only in 2021. Even a powerful economic player such as Germany only adopted its first ever National Security Strategy in 2023. Some states never get beyond an implicit strategic understanding, a certain unspoken habit of doing things. But because all states have a way of interacting with the world, all have a Grand Strategy in one shape or another. The course of world politics is most impacted by the Grand Strategies of the

great powers: those states that have the ambition of exercising global influence, and that possess the resources and the organisational strength to mobilise those resources for their global purposes. Today, those great powers are the United States, China, Russia, and, if it acts in a united manner, the EU. Then there are states that are regional powers and/or have global influence in specific issue areas, such as Brazil, India, Japan, and South Africa. Some of these may develop into great powers in the future, but for the time being Americans, Chinese, Russians, and Europeans are in a league of their own.

Geopolitics is the influence of geography on the strategic calculus – nothing more, nothing less. One's own geographic situation, the location of partners and adversaries, of markets and supplies of natural resources, and the lines of communication that connect

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them: all of these condition the available strategic options. But geopolitics is never the only driver. The size of one's resources, the strength of one's allies and partners, one's historical experience, how much time one has to meet a certain target: these and

other factors shape strategy too. Furthermore, geopolitics influences strategy, but does not determine it: the same geopolitical situation can inspire opposite strategies.

The United Kingdom illustrates this well.² Britain's main geopolitical feature is that it is an island off the continent of Europe,