European Union and Its Role in the Contemporary International System

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Abstract

The transformation of the liberal international order and the intensification of multipolar competition have challenged the European Union's traditional role as a liberal and normative actor in the international system. Although existing studies on Normative Power Europe have increasingly recognized the geopolitical pressures affecting the European Union's external action, the implications of these transformations for the conceptual understanding of European Union normative power remain open to further debate. This article examines how the European Union's international role is being reconfigured within a fragmented multipolar order characterized by geopolitical contexts, normative contestation, and declining liberal consensus. The study adopts a qualitative and theoretically grounded comparative case study approach, combining the literature on liberal internationalism, multipolarity, and Normative Power Europe with the analysis of selected European Union external missions and governance practices, including the Western Balkans, EULEX Kosovo, and EUBAM Rafah. The findings demonstrate that although liberal norms remain central to the European Union's institutional identity and official discourse, their practical application has become increasingly selective, strategic, and geopolitically conditioned. In response to these developments, the article proposes the concept of "geopoliticized normative power" to explain how the European Union increasingly combines normative discourse with strategic adaptation, geopolitical conditionality, and differentiated forms of external engagement under conditions of multipolar fragmentation. At the systemic level, the article argues that the European Union's transformation reflects the wider structural transition from a liberal international order toward a more contested and fragmented multipolar system.

Keywords: ***European Union, multipolarity, normative power, liberal international order***

1. Introduction

The European Union occupies an important position in the contemporary international system. Initially established as an economic integration project, it gradually developed into a sui-generis political entity within the liberal international order shaped under the United States' leadership, characterized by multilateral institutions, rule-based cooperation, and economic liberalization. (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 1-5; Acharya, 2017, p. 273) However, the international environment in which the European Union operates has undergone notable transformations over the past decade, challenging many of the assumptions that underpinned this order. In this context, this article argues that understanding the European Union's

contemporary international role requires situating it at the intersection between the legacy of the liberal international order and the structural transformations associated with the growing multipolar competition.

These structural transformations have progressively constrained the capacity of Western powers, particularly the United States, to unilaterally shape the institutions and norms of global governance, while simultaneously increasing the influence of alternative actors and governance models within an increasingly multipolar international order. Acharya (2017) notes that these changes do not necessarily imply that the United States is experiencing a definitive decline, as this remains a matter of debate among scholars. However, it indicates that the United States no longer possesses the same capacity to unilaterally shape the rules and dominate the institutions of global governance as it did throughout much of the post-Second World War period. He further argues that even though certain elements of the liberal international order are likely to persist, they increasingly need to adjust to the presence of new actors and alternative approaches that are not automatically aligned with American strategic preferences. (Acharya, 2017, p. 277) The redistribution of power has important implications for actors whose external influence has historically been embedded within the liberal international order, particularly the European Union.

At the same time, the rise of alternative political and governance models associated with actors such as China and Russia has gradually challenged the previously dominant universality of liberal norms and institutions. Together, these dynamics raise a critical question about the sustainability, limits and future alignment of the European Union's normative and liberal role in a contested international environment.

These developments have also led scholars to reconsider whether the existing theoretical frameworks remain adequate for explaining the European Union's external role under changing international conditions. The literature on Normative Power Europe has traditionally examined the European Union's ability to shape international norms through value diffusion, institutional legitimacy, and conditionality. In its original formulation, Manners (2002) conceptualized the European Union as a normative power capable of shaping international norms through institutionalization, conditionality, and value diffusion rather than coercion. Other authors have questioned the explanatory adequacy of this framework under changing international conditions. Diez (2005; 2021) argues that normative power has historically been rooted within the post-Cold War liberal order, while Sjursen (2006) highlights the lack of clear evaluative criteria and the normative assumptions in early formulations of the concept of Normative Power Europe.

In the context of this conceptual gap, the present article argues that the European Union's contemporary international role appears difficult to explain exclusively through the classical formulation of Normative Power Europe. Although normative discourse remains central to the Union's identity and external rhetoric, its practical application has become increasingly influenced by geopolitical contexts, security concerns, and selective forms of normative engagement.

To address this analytical gap, this article introduces the concept of geopoliticized normative power. Unlike the classical formulation of Normative Power Europe, the proposed concept explains how structural changes associated with multipolarity transform the operational logic through which the European Union exercises normative influence. Rather than viewing geopolitical competition simply as an external constraint, the concept argues that it has become a structural condition shaping when, where, and how normative commitments are implemented. The contribution of this article is therefore twofold. Conceptually, it introduces the notion of geopoliticized normative power as a distinct analytical framework for understanding the European Union's evolving international role. Empirically, it demonstrates how this framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of selected cases of European Union external action under conditions of increasing geopolitical competition.

The following analysis is organized into two main sections. The first section examines the European Union's evolution within the liberal international order and the structural transformations associated with the transition towards multipolarity. The second reassesses the debate on Normative Power Europe, develops the concept of geopoliticized normative power, and demonstrates its analytical value through selected empirical cases of European Union external action.

1.1 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how the European Union's international role is evolving under conditions of growing multipolar competition and the gradual erosion of the liberal international order. The study adopts an interpretative and theory-building approach aimed at refining existing conceptual understanding of the European Union's external role. In particular, it develops the concept of *geopoliticized normative power* as an

analytical framework for explaining how geopolitical competition increasingly conditions the exercise of normative power in European Union external action.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives: liberal internationalism, theories of multipolarity, and the literature on Normative Power Europe. Liberal internationalism provides the broader institutional context within which the European Union emerged as an international actor. Theories of multipolarity explain the structural redistribution of power and the increasing fragmentation of global governance. Finally, the literature on Normative Power Europe provides the conceptual basis for assessing how the European Union seeks to exercise influence through norms, values, and institutional legitimacy. The interaction between these three perspectives serves as the principal analytical lens throughout the study.

The empirical analysis relies on purposive case selection rather than statistical representativeness. Cases were selected according to three criteria. First, each represents an important dimension of European Union external action. Second, the cases reflect different geopolitical environments in which normative objectives encounter varying degrees of strategic competition. Third, together they capture different constraints, thereby allowing analytical comparison across diverse contexts. For example, the Western Balkans illustrate how European Union regulatory and normative influence operates under conditions of increasing geopolitical competition with external actors such as China and Russia. EULEX Kosovo demonstrates the European Union's reliance on civilian governance, institutional capacity-building, and the rule of law as instruments of normative influence. EUBAM Rafah illustrates the limitations of normative engagement where geopolitical and security dynamics substantially constrain European Union influence. Finally, selected European Union missions in Africa provide additional evidence of how regional instability and strategic competition affect the implementation of normative objectives. Collectively, these cases allow comparison across different policy areas while maintaining a common analytical focus on the relationship between normative power and geopolitical adaptation.

The empirical analysis is based on qualitative document analysis. Primary resources include official European Union documents, from its main institutions like the Parliament and the Council. These materials are complemented by secondary academic literature on liberal internationalism, multipolarity, European integration, and Normative Power Europe.

2. The European Union between Liberal Order and Multipolar Competition.

The European Union constitutes a sui generis entity in the international system, while its evolution as an international actor has been closely linked to the normative and strategic framework of the liberal international order. (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 7, 185) The emergence of this order after 1945 generated favorable structural conditions for Western European cooperation and institutional integration. A key element to this environment was the Marshall Plan, which not only facilitated Europe's economic recovery but also encouraged cooperation and long-term political stability among Western European states, by linking economic reconstruction with political alignment. This environment was also reinforced by the Bretton Woods system, which ensured monetary stability and trade liberalization, creating favorable conditions for European economic integration, for several years after the Second World War.

These systemic structures rested not only on economic integration and, later, legal and political cooperation, but also on a comprehensive transatlantic security architecture. The United States functioned as the principal external guarantor of the post-war liberal order by providing economic assistance, political leadership, and military protection. Through North Atlantic Treaty Organization, security responsibilities were largely externalized to the United States, allowing European integration to deepen without requiring the development of autonomous military capabilities. Consequently, the European project evolved primarily as an economic, legal, and regulatory actor operating under strategic protection of the broader Atlantic security framework. As Ikenberry writes, these initiatives were sought to establish an integrated market capable of sustaining Western European capitalism and ensure that Germany remained firmly anchored within the Western bloc during the Cold War. (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 206, 235, 242)

This institutional architecture shaped the European Union's international development. The Union gradually emerged as an international actor whose influence was derived primarily from market size, regulatory capacity, and institutional cooperation instead of traditional military power. This distinctive trajectory differentiated the European Union from conventional great powers and gave rise to debates regarding the nature of its international role and the sources of its global influence. Furthermore, there is an important theoretical question regarding the nature of the European Union's international influence. From the traditional international relations perspective, hegemony implies the possession of overwhelming material capabilities, the ability to shape global rules, and the provision of systemic stability through coercion or inducement. (Keohane, 1984, pp. 31-39, 46; Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 40-42) Measured with these criteria, the

European Union has never constituted a hegemonic power in the traditional geopolitical sense. Nevertheless, it has exercised considerable international influence through regulatory and institutional mechanisms that extend beyond its territorial boundaries. Bradford (2020) argues that the "Brussels Effect" enables the European Union to shape global market behavior and regulatory standards, as firms and governments frequently adapt to its rules in order to maintain access to its market.

While the Union has developed unique forms of governance, it has lacked unified military capabilities and the strategic capacity to enforce order through coercion beyond its immediate regional environment. Instead, the European Union has relied on civilian instruments, legal authority, and institutional capacity-building to exercise influence in post-conflict situations. This approach was evident in Kosovo, where the Union assumed a central post-conflict role through the EULEX mission. (EULEX Kosovo, n.d.) This mission focused on strengthening the rule of law by supporting police, judicial, and customs institutions through monitoring, and advisory functions. The Kosovo case thus illustrates the European Union's characteristic dependence on institutional and normative tools rather than military power. Liberal norms enjoyed broad international legitimacy, enabling the Union to project influence through integration, regulatory alignment, and cooperation. Similar patterns are also observable in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the European Union has relied on institutional supervision and conditionality to support state-building processes. (Ikenberry, 2011, p. 291)

These examples reflect the European context in which liberal institutionalism developed most successfully. Beyond Europe, however, the institutional foundations of the liberal order were far less uniform. Ruggie (1992) highlights that the institutional foundations of the liberal order were not equally consolidated across regions. Whereas Europe developed multilateral institutions capable of transforming traditional security rivalries, the Asia-Pacific lacked comparable mechanisms of collective governance, leaving balance-of-power politics as the dominant framework for regional stability. (Ruggie, 1992, p. 565) These regional and institutional asymmetries have become increasingly visible in the contemporary international system.

Nowadays, the rise of China as a major economic and political power, along with the emergence of Russia as a global power, have challenged the foundations of the liberal order. Alternative governance models and strategic priorities have reduced the universality of liberal norms, transforming them into contested points in global politics and creating greater space for the influence of these emerging powers. This dynamic is evident in the growing influence of China and Russia in regions of strategic importance to the European Union. In the Western Balkans, China's infrastructure investments in countries such as Serbia and Montenegro have strengthened economic ties while often bypassing European Union regulatory and transparency standards. (Stanicek & Tarapova, 2022) Also, Russia has exercised influence through energy dependency, particularly evident in the geopolitical tensions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war after 2022. (Boehm & Wilson, 2023)

China's Belt and Road Initiative represents an alternative model of economic engagement that prioritizes infrastructure financing and strategic connectivity over regulatory conditionality, directly competing with the Union's governance-based approach. Concerns about transparency and fair competition have also influenced the European Union's response to the initiative. In 2019, European Union member states declined to endorse a declaration prepared by Beijing at the conclusion of the Belt and Road Forum due to insufficient guarantees regarding transparency, sustainability, and procurement procedures. Similar concerns were reiterated in a report signed by most European Union ambassadors in Beijing in 2018, which warned that some Belt and Road Initiative practices could distort free trade and provide advantages to Chinese companies. (Rolland, 2019, p. 8)

On the other side, energy dependency has provided Russia with significant power over several European and neighboring states, relatively restricting the Union's capacity to enforce regulatory and normative instruments. These developments constrain its ability to rely solely on regulatory attraction and force the Union to increasingly incorporate geopolitical considerations into its external policies. (Boehm & Wilson, 2023)

These systemic transformations do not necessarily eliminate the European Union's normative aspirations; rather, they fundamentally alter the conditions under which normative influence can be exercised. As geopolitical competition increasingly shapes international politics, the Union faces growing pressure to reconcile its traditional liberal identity with strategic and security imperatives. This tension provides the foundation for understanding the evolution of the European Union from a predominantly normative actor toward a more geopolitically oriented international role.

3. The European Union as a Normative and Liberal Actor- Challenges and Perspectives

The structural transformations discussed in the previous section are responsible for how the European Union's international role should be understood. Traditionally, this role has been examined through two complementary yet

analytically distinct perspectives: liberal internationalism and *Normative Power Europe.* (Manners, 2002; Diez, 2005) While both approaches emphasize the Union's preference for cooperation over coercion, they explain different dimensions of its external action. As a liberal actor, the European Union promotes multilateralism, rule-based governance, and economic openness, reflecting the core principles of the liberal international order. As a normative actor, it seeks to project values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law even beyond its borders, framing its external engagement in normative terms. Although these dimensions frequently overlap in practice, they rest on distinct theoretical foundations and therefore require separate analytical consideration. This distinction becomes particularly important in an international environment, characterized by geopolitical competition and multipolarity.

The European Union's influence extends well beyond its formal territorial boundaries through the diffusion of regulatory standards, institutional models, and governance practices. Rather than relying primarily on military or coercive instruments, the Union has historically exercised influence by encouraging regulatory convergence and institutional adaptation among external partners. (Rosecrance, 1997, p. 10) In the Western Balkans, this influence has been expressed through the gradual adoption of the acquis Communautaire, governance reforms, and regulatory alignment associated with the enlargement process. Beyond the enlargement context, the European Union has promoted similar forms of institutional convergence through the Cotonou Agreement with African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries, association agreements with the Eastern Partnership and Latin American states, and customs union with Turkey. At the global level, the diffusion of European Union regulatory standards in areas such as data protection and climate policy, captured by Bradford's (2020) concept of the "Brussels Effect", further illustrates how the Union shapes policy beyond its borders despite the absence of direct political authority.

The European Union's reliance on regulatory influence and institutional attraction reflects a broader historical transformation in the nature of international power. As Rosecrance (1997) argues, Europe gradually reconstituted its international influence not through territorial expansion or military dominance, but through economic independence, institutional cooperation, and the diffusion of regulatory standards. This transformation created the intellectual foundations for understanding the European Union as a distinctive international actor whose influence derives primarily from its capacity to shape rules, institutions, and normative expectations rather than coercion. Building upon this intellectual context, Manners (2002) introduced the concept of Normative Power Europe, arguing that the European Union's international role is best understood in normative rather than material terms. Instead of evaluating the Union through conventional measures of civilian or military power, Manners emphasized its capacity to shape conceptions of what is considered legitimate and appropriate behavior in international politics through the diffusion of norms and values.

According to Manners, the European Union's normative character derives from its unique historical context, hybrid political structure, and legal-constitutional foundations, which predispose it to act through norms rather than coercion. Core principles such as peace, democracy, rule of law, and human rights are central to this identity. Normative power does not require the use of force; instead, it operated through institutionalization, conditionality and socialization, enabling the European Union to shape international norms despite military capacity. (Manners, 2002, p. 253)

In his more recent work, Manners (2025) reassesses the concept of normative power in light of growing geopolitical fragmentation and the declining consensus surrounding the liberal international order. Rather than abandoning the concept, he argues that normative power must be reconsidered within a broader global context characterized by climate change, inequality, demographic pressures, proxy conflicts, and the resurgence of ethno-nationalist politics. This reformulation suggests that normative power remains analytically relevant but can no longer be understood independently of the structural transformations affecting contemporary international politics. Consequently, the debate has gradually shifted from questioning whether the European Union remains a normative power to examining how normative influence is being reconfigured under changed geopolitical conditions.

Although Manners' formulation of Normative Power Europe has notably influenced European Union studies, it has also generated extensive debate regarding its theoretical assumptions and empirical applicability. Among the most influential critiques, Diez (2005) argues that normative power was historically embedded within the structural conditions of the post-Cold War liberal order and therefore cannot be uncritically extended to a more fragmented and competitive international system. He further challenges the assumption that European Union norms possess universal validity, arguing instead that normative identity is socially constructed through relations of power and difference. Revisiting these arguments in later work, Diez (2021) acknowledges that the re-emergence of power politics has exposed important limitations of the original formulation of Normative Power Europe. However, he proposes its reformulation through greater reflexivity, dialogue, and mutual recognition. His contribution therefore shifts the debate from defending normative power as a fixed characteristic of the European Union toward reconsidering the conditions under which normative influence can remain analytically meaningful in a changing international order.

Sjursen (2006) complements these critiques by focusing on the conceptual foundations of Normative Power Europe rather than its empirical performance. She argues that early formulations of the concept lacked sufficiently clear evaluative criteria and relied upon normative assumptions that were often taken for granted rather than critically examined. Furthermore, Sjursen supports its systematic reconceptualization so that it can better account for the changing political and institutional conditions of the contemporary international system. The contributions of Manners, Diez, and Sjursen suggest that the central question is no longer whether the European Union remains a normative power, but how normative influence is transformed under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation, multipolar competition, and contested liberal legitimacy.

Despite these important theoretical developments, the existing literature has not fully explained how the European Union's normative role is reconfigured when geopolitical competition becomes a structural condition rather than an external constraint. While previous studies have identified the limitations of the classical formulation of Normative Power Europe, they provide only limited conceptual guidance for explaining the growing interaction between commitments and geopolitical imperatives in contemporary European Union external action. Although recent scholarship has substantially advanced the debate on Normative Power Europe, existing reformulations primarily seek to preserve or refine the concept through greater reflexivity, conceptual clarification, or normative reinterpretation. They do not fully explain how structural changes in the international system alter the operational logic through which normative influence is exercised. This article therefore departs from previous reformulations by treating geopolitical competition not merely as an external challenge but as a structural condition that increasingly shapes the implementation of European Union normative commitments. This unresolved analytical gap provides the point of departure for the concept of geopoliticized normative power developed in this article.

This concept differs from previously similar approaches because its analytical focus is neither the European Union's pursuit of strategic interests nor the reformulation of normative identity itself. Instead, it explains how the structural transformation of the international system increasingly conditions the operational logic through which normative commitments are implemented. Geopolitical competition is therefore treated not merely as an external constraint or a policy challenge but as an independent structural variable shaping when, where, and how the European Union applies its normative commitments. Consequently, the concept seeks to explain the interaction between the normative objectives and geopolitical competition without assuming either the abandonment of liberal values or the complete predominance of strategic interests.

3.1 Internal challenges to the European Union's Normative Role

The transformation of the European Union's normative role is reflected not only in the changing international environment but also in the Union's internal political development. As geopolitical competition intensified externally, the European Union simultaneously faced growing internal political fragmentation, democratic backsliding, and increasing contestation over its policies and values. These developments have raised important questions regarding the coherence and credibility of the European Union's normative identity.

In 2016, Juncker described the European Union's situation as a "polycrisis", referring to the economic instability, migration pressures, and the United Kingdom's referendum, which together created doubt and uncertainty across the Union. (Juncker, 2016) This accumulation of crises changed the political conditions under which European Union integration operated, transforming previously latent dissatisfaction into open political mobilization. As a result, politicization in the European Union has expanded irregularly across governance levels.

Before the polycrisis, European Union institutions produced policy within limited political contestation, while public dissatisfaction at the national level remained largely hidden. The eurozone and migration crises activated this hidden politicization, leading to opposition against specific European Union policies, or the European Union itself as a political project, leading to institutional irresponsiveness in an increasingly fragmented political landscape. (Zeitlin et al., 2019, p. 968)

The European Union faces a series of structural and political challenges that increasingly constrain its role as a liberal and normative actor. One major challenge emerges from the erosion of the normative coherence within the European Union itself. Democratic regression, rule of law disputes, and divergent political courses among member states have undermined the Union's ability to present itself as a consistent and credible promoter of liberal norms. (Kelemen, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2010)

The deterioration of democratic standards in Hungary has been extensively documented by European institutions. (Kelemen, 2020) The European Parliament has concluded several times that systemic breaches of the rule of law, judicial

independence, media pluralism, and civil society freedoms constitute a clear risk to the Union's fundamental values, leading to the activation of Article 7 procedure under the Treaty on European Union. (European Parliament, 2025) More recently, members of the European Parliament have emphasized the need for concrete measures to address these persistent violations and to ensure the credibility of the Union's commitment to democracy and the rule of law. (European Parliament, 2025)

These developments suggest that the challenges facing the European Union are structural rather than temporary. As internal democratic inconsistencies become increasingly visible the Union's external promotion of liberal norms has become more vulnerable to accusations of selectivity and double standards. This dynamic is consistent with Moravcsik's (1998) argument that national preferences in international cooperation are largely shaped by domestic societal pressures and political interests. Consequently, the credibility and coherence of the European Union's normative role depend not only on its external policies but also on its capacity to uphold internally the values it seeks to promote internationally.

3.2 European Union external action under geopolitical fragmentation

The transformation of the European Union's normative role becomes particularly visible in its external missions conducted under the Common Security and Defence Policy. Beyond Europe, the European Union has deployed a wide range of civilian and limited military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy, primarily focused on border management, security sector reform, rule-of-law assistance, and maritime security. Rather than relying on coercive enforcement, these missions seek to stabilize fragile environments through training, monitoring, institutional support, and capacity-building mechanisms. In this sense, European Union external missions reflect important elements of the classical understanding of *Normative Power Europe*, particularly the preference for institutional governance, civilian engagement, and the diffusion of liberal norms through non-coercive instruments.

In regions such as the Middle East and Africa, missions including EUBAM Rafah, EUPOL COPPS, EUTM Mali, EUTM Somalia, and EUCAP Sahel Niger have pursued objectives related to capacity-building of local security forces, strengthening policing and judicial institutions, and enhancing border control capacities. (European External Action Service, 2026b) These missions demonstrate the European Union's broader preference for partnership-based governance and institutional engagement rather than direct military domination. While several of these operations have achieved technical and operational results, including improved training standards, institutional coordination, and administrative capacities, their broader political impact has often remained limited. Structural instability, weak governance, regional insecurity, and recurring political crises have frequently constrained the sustainability of EU-supported reforms.

The European Union Border Assistance Mission at Rafah, launched in 2005, particularly illustrates the limitations of contemporary European normative influence in high-intensity geopolitical conflicts. As a civilian mission focused on monitoring and technical assistance, EUBAM Rafah reflected the European Union's broader commitment to international law, civilian protection, and institutional cooperation. (European External Action Service, 2026a) However, despite consistently promoting humanitarian principles, the European Union has struggled to translate its normative commitments into effective geopolitical influence, largely due to internal political and military conflicts between Israel and Palestine. The resulting gap between normative commitments and effective geopolitical influence raises persistent questions regarding the selectivity, coherence, and credibility of the European Union's external normative role. This tension became increasingly visible in the European Council conclusions of 18 December 2025, in which the European Union reaffirmed its strong commitment to international law, humanitarian access to Gaza, and compliance with international legal obligations. At the same time, although the Council condemned the conflict, it refrained from adopting sanctions against Israel. (European Council, 2025) This contrast between normative rhetoric and limited geopolitical enforcement further illustrates the constraints affecting contemporary European external action.

These cases demonstrate that the European Union continues to exercise international influence primarily through regulatory engagement, institutional governance, and civilian instruments rather than through coercive power. At the same time, however, they also reveal the growing limitations of the traditional understanding of Normative Power Europe under conditions of intensifying multipolarity and geopolitical fragmentation. These empirical cases reveal a common pattern that cannot be fully explained by the classical understanding of Normative Power Europe. In this context, geopoliticized normative power refers to a form of European Union external action in which normative discourse remains central to institutional identity, while its practical implementation becomes increasingly conditioned by geopolitical considerations.

A comparison of the selected cases reveals that the relationship between normative commitments and geopolitical

constraints varies according to the strategic environment in which the European Union operates. In the Western Balkans, normative influence continues to be exercised primarily through enlargement conditionality and regulatory alignment, although its effectiveness is increasingly challenged by Chinese economic engagement and Russian political influence. In EULEX Kosovo, where the European Union enjoys a relatively high degree of institutional authority, normative objectives remain largely achievable through civilian governance and rule of law assistance. By contrast, EUBAM Rafah illustrates a context in which severe geopolitical conflict substantially limits the Union's capacity to translate normative commitments into effective political influence despite the continued prominence of humanitarian discourse. Similarly, the selected African missions demonstrate that while institutional capacity building remains an important component of European Union external action, regional instability, security threats, and competing external actors significantly constrain the long-term sustainability of normative objectives.

In summary, these cases demonstrate that geopolitical competition does not eliminate the European Union's normative aspirations, rather, it systematically conditions the contexts in which the normative instruments remain effective.

4. Conclusions

This article has argued that the European Union's contemporary international role can no longer be fully understood through the classical assumptions of liberal internationalism and *Normative Power Europe* alone. The structural transformation of the international system, marked by the diffusion of power, different geopolitical contexts, and the subsequent fragmentation of liberal legitimacy, has progressively altered the conditions under which the European Union operates internationally. Although liberal norms continue to shape the European Union's institutional identity and external discourse, their practical application has become increasingly selective, strategic, and conditioned by geopolitical constraints.

The analysis demonstrated that the European Union continues to rely primarily on regulatory influence, institutional governance, and civilian instruments rather than traditional military coercion. However, the growing gap between normative discourse and effective geopolitical capacity has exposed important limitations in the European Union's external action. At the same time, the effectiveness of these instruments increasingly depends on the geopolitical context in which they are applied. Rather than abandoning its normative identity, the European Union is adapting its external action to a more fragmented and competitive international environment, where strategic considerations increasingly shape the implementation of normative commitments. At the same time, internal political fragmentation, democratic backsliding, and divergent member-state interests have weakened the coherence and credibility of the European Union's normative agenda, further constraining its capacity to project liberal norms consistently at the international level.

In this context, the article proposed the concept of geopoliticized normative power as a conceptual framework for explaining how the European Union reconciles the continued importance of normative commitments with the growing influence of geopolitical constraints. This framework extends it by demonstrating how normative objectives are increasingly implemented through strategic adaptation, geopolitical conditionality, and differentiated forms of engagement.

The transformation of the European Union's international role reflects the wider transition from a predominantly liberal international order toward a more contested and fragmented multipolar system in which normative influence increasingly operates under geopolitical constraints rather than universal liberal consensus. Future research may further assess the applicability of this conceptual framework across different policy areas and regional contexts, thereby contributing to the broader debate on the evolution of the role of the European Union in the international system.

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