Why a Geopolitical Europe Must Play to Its Strengths

Article by Michael Keating
July 20, 2022

From Yemen to Ethiopia to Ukraine, the world is struggling to find peaceful resolutions to conflicts. With the von der Leyen Commission, the EU found new momentum for its ambition to be a geopolitical actor. So far, its success has been in humanitarian aid. In Ukraine, it has flexed more of its economic and financial muscle. But to be a credible peace broker in a fragile security context, Michael Keating argues the EU will need more than political deals, weapons, and money.

Green European Journal: The war in Ukraine has sparked conversations about the return of war to Europe. Meanwhile, conflicts rage across the world. What are some of the most dangerous conflict situations globally?

Michael Keating: There are many ongoing conflicts around the world: wars in Myanmar and Yemen, insurgencies in places such as Somalia and sub-Saharan Africa, and conflict in Ethiopia. And there are several situations which are best described as "no peace, no war" like Venezuela, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

If peace is simply the absence of armed violence, then you can claim that many countries are at peace. But if peace means more than the absence of war and encompasses a sense of safety, job prospect, access to service, and recourse to justice, then unfortunately very large parts of the planet are not peaceful.

There are overarching issues that sustain this. First are geopolitical rivalries at the global level, most obviously between the US and China, with Europe struggling to figure out where it fits in this confrontation. In the last decade, a growing number of regional powers have also emerged with strong geopolitical agendas, whether to improve their access to resources, control of seaways, or land paths. Middle Eastern powers such as Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Turkey but also places such as India and Brazil are asserting themselves. The international architecture of peace and security is struggling to cope with these tensions. Gone are the days of the Cold War when superpowers signed agreements and everybody else more or less went along with them. Today's world is much more complicated and multipolar.

Then there are deeper trends that are not always direct contributors to violent conflict but create the conditions in which violence thrives. These factors include both climate change and environmental degradation (which are related but separate issues), growing inequality and a sense of injustice. Social media and information technology, Covid-19, and the increasing vulnerability of the global economic system have all played a role.

Food insecurity, for example, has been increasing for a while and has been massively exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Food insecurity contributes to negative

dynamics as well as a sense of injustice. It can strengthen the hand of extremists who claim that those in authority are self-serving, corrupt, and indifferent to the welfare of large numbers of people. That happens both within states, within regions, and globally. Many in the Global South have a sense that the rich parts of the world are more concerned with their problems and not the daily struggle for survival that hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people face around the world.

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Does the absence of peace in this broad sense explain why many countries of the Global South, while condemning the war in Ukraine, were not prepared to sanction Russia?

One doesn't want to be too broad-brushed but in most cases, it is not wise for countries in the Global South to take sides. They don't want to be caught up in a conflict which, if they take sides, could result in them being further damaged or penalised.

However, those who are sympathetic to the political and economic problems of the Global South do need to point out just how egregious the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been. This act of aggression is totally out of sync with everything from the Charter of the UN to all the rules that have been put in place since 1944 to govern international behaviour. It is in the interest of countries everywhere to insist upon a resolution to this conflict in line with international law. Otherwise, we enter the law of the jungle.

Soon after the invasion of Ukraine, the Kenyan Permanent Representative to the UN said, if we start redrawing boundaries, Africa is in serious trouble. Many countries in the Global South are not as alert to the dangers of insisting upon international law as they should be.

Of course, their main concern right now is access to energy, food security, and the political consequences of this conflict. The big picture is very negative. Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa, Bangladesh, Yemen, to a certain degree Afghanistan, and many other countries are heavily dependent on imported wheat and cooking oil from Russia and Ukraine. Prices for fossil fuels will shoot up (except for the Middle East). I can only see more difficulties ahead for many places.

What can the European Union do to maintain access to food globally?

The EU can play an enormously important role through development systems and humanitarian aid. Politically, it can lend its support to efforts to unblock the export of wheat and oil through Odesa and Ukraine. Many EU countries are influential in international financial institutions. They can lend their weight to providing fiscal and monetary support to countries that are experiencing these problems and they are doing that. The concern is that most European states are focused on the invasion's consequences for themselves.

The extraordinary unity that we have seen within the EU will be increasingly challenged in

the autumn as it gets colder and energy use increases. The political pressure to find a solution to this conflict will grow from electorates as the cost of living increases, and from the Global South as countries there face mounting economic and humanitarian crises as well as <u>civil disorder and violence</u>.

If you talk to Europeans about what a solution looks like, there are very different views. President Macron has been widely criticised, not only by the Ukrainians but also by the Baltics, for his remark that you shouldn't humiliate Russia. There are very different views within Europe, east and west but also politically, on whether, when and how to bring an end to this conflict. Ultimately, it's up to the Ukrainians and Russians but this conflict has much <u>bigger implications</u> so it is legitimate for international actors to have a say. You can't just say "we must do whatever the Ukrainians want" because the political consequences of this conflict will grow.

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Ukraine is not the only war in the world. The war in Yemen has been ongoing for almost a decade. What is the situation today and what role do European actors play?

Yemen has been described as <u>the worst humanitarian crisis</u> in the world and the population is suffering incredibly. It is a conflict that requires not only reconciliation among Yemenis but more coherence from the international community. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their western allies have taken a primarily military and security-driven approach. It is essentially not working and it is the Houthis who have asserted themselves on the ground.

The former EU envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, has now become the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General. It's excellent news because he can bring an EU as well as a UN perspective. He helped prepare a ceasefire three months ago between the Houthis and the government and other Yemenis. People are sceptical as to whether it will hold forever but so far it is.

What is required is not only a political process among Yemenis but agreements and investments that focus on meeting their need for human security such as jobs, access to services and justice, protection from abusive use of power by security forces, a sense that something is being done about corruption, and a sense that there is some form of justice. That is not going to happen unless there is a much stronger push by international actors.

The <u>European Institute of Peace</u> recently surveyed 16,000 Yemenis, including tribal elders, students, women, business people and young people on their vision of security and peace. To our surprise, environmental issues including water, land management, clearing up unexploded ordinances, and pollution, were considered fundamentally important. Yemenis see the abuse of resources as contributing to conflict but also as a pathway to its resolution.

Lasting peace is not just about political deals, weapons, and money. It is responding to what people consider to be fundamental to their basic security. It's the same for people everywhere. Bottom-up understandings of what peace is are not sufficiently informing political interventions to end conflicts.

What about Afghanistan? A 20-year NATO presence ended in US withdrawal in 2021 and the Taliban returning to power. What can we learn about peace-building from the Afghan intervention?

There are many lessons to be learned, the question is whether any will be. I was at a major conference in Washington in 2015 about lessons learned from NATO's invasion. Among the lessons was the absence of a clear political strategy, insufficient Afghan engagement in that strategy, failure to understand tribal dynamics or the political economy, and failure to promote economic development and reduce violence, including timely dialogue. There was an almost schizophrenic approach to engaging with the Taliban. At one stage, you couldn't speak to them at all but eventually, it ended up with a US-Taliban agreement that excluded national authorities.

The point is not so much the lessons – read the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report if you haven't – the issue is we don't apply them. What is the political strategy for Afghanistan by Europe and the US? It doesn't seem that there is one. The approach is that the Taliban cannot be recognised unless they do a list of things. They mustn't allow terrorists to use Afghan soil, they should respect the Afghan constitution, particularly the rights of women and minorities, and they should have a conclusive approach to government formation. That's not a strategy, that's a wish list.

Unfortunately, what we do not see is the political strategy to prevent the collapse of Afghanistan into violent conflict. Some in the US administration would like the word Afghanistan to disappear because it's politically toxic. But you forget Afghanistan at your peril. It will always come back and bite you.

Right now, the only acceptable form of international assistance to Afghanistan by Western countries is humanitarian. However, a humanitarian crisis cannot be solved with humanitarian aid; you need a functional economy, jobs, an agricultural sector that can trade, payroll systems, and a functional central bank. None of these things is in place. Relief is not a long-term solution.

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How effectively is the EU acting as a broker for peace in the world? And how would you assess the EU's work to reduce the longer-term drivers of conflict?

The EU is a very complicated beast so it's not easy to answer this. First of all, I think the EU has played a largely benign and positive role in many parts of the world in terms of trying to strengthen human security. The EU has been very important not only as a humanitarian actor and a development actor but also in areas such as trade and intellectual property, the Green Deal, and through encouraging accountable political processes and elections.

Having said that, the EU is going through an extraordinary transformation as we speak. The number of times I've been in meetings in which people have said the EU is the world's most successful peace project. Look at the violence that took place in Europe between 1914 and 1945. It was unsurpassed by anything that's ever happened anywhere on this planet at any time in history in terms of the destruction and people killed. You've had the Balkan conflicts, Northern Ireland and the Basque conflict, but on the whole, it's been an incredibly successful peace project with these very serious exceptions.

Now that's all changing and I'm not sure where the transformation that's taken place as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is going. Ursula von der Leyen said upon her appointment that she wanted the EU to be more geopolitical. With Ukraine, the EU certainly has become much more geopolitical. It is now effectively party to the conflict. It is no longer an independent actor trying impartially to resolve it. This transformation is going to reposition the EU for many actors around the world.

What the EU needs to do as a peace actor is to figure out how to be strategic in promoting peace. That means sometimes supporting others who have better credentials in terms of acting as peace agents such as the UN, regional bodies, independent organisations, or local actors. The EU can continue to play an enormously important role in strengthening the peace ecosystem but it can't be directly involved in every situation. Where the EU is seen as compromised, it's better to use its considerable muscle – economic, financial, political and diplomatic – to support others.

The EU aspires to be a more geopolitical actor. Is there a way to do that without the traditional "might is right" logic of geopolitics? Or is the EU heading towards becoming a classic big power by going down the geopolitical route?

I don't envision a situation in which the EU would be a strong military actor in the way that the US, China, Russia, or any number of regional powers are. The EU wants to beef up its military capabilities so it can support national actors fighting extremists or protecting the rule of law but I don't see it becoming a major military player in its own right. It needs to play to its strengths: economic weight, regulatory power, financial clout, and a strong diplomatic network. Sanctions are one way of doing that but the problem is that they're much easier to start than to end and they're quite difficult to use strategically.

The rearmament of the world and the expiry of several arms control treaties, most obviously between the US and Russia, are very worrying. There is a drift towards militarised responses to disputes and I hope civil society in Europe and globally insist upon more comprehensive approaches.

The political economy that sustains militarised approaches is not in sync with one that promotes public goods and we need to be clear-eyed about that. Sometimes we are not. Of course, this is the stuff of politics but the momentum behind rearmament needs, at a minimum, to be complemented by investment in public goods and strengthening open societies, democracy, and accountability.

The changes taking place do not bode well for this. America may be the most vulnerable to changes in the coming years as the several hundred-year-old tradition of holding people in power accountable and separating powers is being eroded. You don't have to look very far

to see the evidence of that.

We seem to be moving towards a world of blocs and regional powers as the multilateral order crumbles. The post-war order was never perfect but it had principles such as self-determination and international law that were immensely valuable. What are the priorities to repair multilateralism and restore its clout?

The UN is as strong as its member states want it to be. Since its founding in 1945, it has evolved quite dramatically as an institution to do several things that are often taken for granted but should not be overlooked. For example, the UN manages things in the humanitarian field that many other actors simply cannot do. It also does incredibly important accountability work, as we see in its documentation of the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Ultimately, however, the UN was set up to prevent and resolve conflict. The Security Council is at the apex of that. The Security Council's dysfunctionality is on full display because this invasion is by one of the five Permanent Members with another neither supporting nor condemning it. The question is whether a way can be found around that.

There have been two very interesting votes in the General Assembly related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The member states of the UN effectively said, look, we cannot be held hostage by a Security Council that is unable to achieve some kind of political and legal clarity, and we must find other ways to express our views. Liechtenstein managed to pass a resolution authorising the General Assembly to meet within 10 days to discuss a crisis if a discussion is blocked in the Security Council by veto exercised by a Permanent Member. Before writing off the UN, its members must work to make it politically and legally decisive.

The Secretary-General has some discretion in using his office for conflict resolution and mediation. You have seen that many times since its existence, both successfully and unsuccessfully, whether in El Salvador, Afghanistan, Cyprus, or the Middle East. The issue is whether he can use this in creative ways today when many powerful actors may not be responsive.

In the public domain, the UN has prioritised very practical things like trying to get grain and cooking oil out of Odesa, brokering ceasefires and providing humanitarian relief, and documenting the behaviour of the parties. But there is no powerful actor or group vocally insisting upon ending the violence, not least in the interest of those most affected. Although extremely challenging, we must find a just end to this conflict. Otherwise, the consequences for the world could be even worse than they already are.

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