

Rethinking European Leadership in an Era of Geopolitical Fragmentation and Strategic Uncertainty: Toward a Post-Hegemonic Model of Strategic Coordination

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary international order is increasingly characterized by geopolitical fragmentation, strategic instability, transactional diplomacy, economic securitization, and the gradual erosion of post-Cold War assumptions regarding liberal global governance. Within this unstable environment, the European Union faces mounting pressure to redefine its geopolitical role amid war in Ukraine, energy insecurity, technological competition, democratic polarization, and weakening predictability within transatlantic relations. Simultaneously, emerging geopolitical tensions surrounding Iran and the broader Middle East continue to generate fears of renewed energy crises, while discussions concerning territorial influence, Arctic security, Greenland, strategic resources, and expanding great-power competition further intensify Europe's strategic vulnerabilities. This paper argues that Europe's contemporary geopolitical condition reflects not only structural dependency, but also a deeper crisis of leadership capacity under conditions of permanent uncertainty and fragmented sovereignty. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from geopolitics, leadership studies, international relations, political economy, and strategic governance, the study develops the concept of "post-hegemonic leadership" as an emerging framework for understanding Europe's evolving geopolitical role. Unlike classical hegemonic models based upon military dominance, territorial expansion, or unilateral strategic control, post-hegemonic leadership refers to forms of coordination, influence, resilience, and institutional mediation exercised without full sovereignty or overwhelming geopolitical supremacy. The paper argues that Europe increasingly operates through negotiated influence, regulatory power, coalition-building, economic coordination, and crisis management rather than traditional hard-power hegemony. The analysis examines how the Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed European security consciousness, accelerated defense integration debates, exposed military dependence on the United States, and intensified tensions between strategic autonomy and transatlantic reliance. At the same time, instability surrounding Iran and global energy markets revealed the continuing fragility of European energy security and the geopolitical risks associated with external resource dependency. The study further explores how discussions regarding Greenland, Arctic geopolitics, rare earth resources, and territorial influence illustrate the return of strategic competition over geography, resources, and infrastructure in the twenty-first century. These developments challenge Europe's traditional preference for multilateralism, normative governance, and economic interdependence. The paper also addresses the internal dimension of geopolitical fragmentation by analyzing democratic fatigue, populist expansion, institutional distrust, and societal exhaustion generated by overlapping crises including inflation, ecological transition, migration pressures, technological disruption, and prolonged war anxiety. The findings suggest that Europe increasingly governs through continuous emergency adaptation rather than stable long-term strategic planning. Leadership therefore becomes less associated with domination and more connected to managing complexity, uncertainty, legitimacy, and strategic coordination within highly unstable environments. Ultimately, the study argues that Europe's future geopolitical relevance may depend not on becoming a traditional superpower, but on developing credible forms of post-hegemonic leadership capable of combining democratic resilience, technological sovereignty, strategic flexibility, institutional legitimacy, and cooperative governance under conditions of systemic fragmentation. The paper contributes to emerging debates concerning the transformation of global leadership, the future of European integration, and the reconfiguration of international order in an age increasingly shaped by geopolitical drift and transactional power politics.

KEYWORDS: European leadership; post-hegemonic leadership; geopolitical fragmentation; strategic uncertainty; transactional geopolitics; democratic resilience; global governance; crisis leadership

1. INTRODUCTION

Europe's geopolitical condition has become increasingly difficult to describe through the conceptual vocabulary that shaped post-Cold War political optimism. Terms such as integration, interdependence, and liberal stabilization still circulate within institutional discourse, although they now coexist uneasily with a very different geopolitical atmosphere marked by war, strategic anxiety, economic securitization, energy volatility, and visible fragmentation within the international order itself. The problem is not merely that Europe faces external threats. It is that the assumptions underpinning European leadership for several decades appear progressively less adequate for the conditions now emerging across the global system.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine accelerated this transformation dramatically. What initially appeared to many policymakers as a regional military escalation gradually exposed deeper structural vulnerabilities concerning Europe's defense architecture, strategic dependency, and political cohesion. The war destabilized not only Eastern European security arrangements but also the broader imagination of European stability that had persisted, perhaps somewhat complacently, since the 1990s. NATO regained strategic centrality almost overnight, defense expenditures increased across multiple European states, and discussions surrounding deterrence returned to the center of political debate. Yet the renewed emphasis on military preparedness simultaneously revealed Europe's continued dependence on American strategic infrastructure and leadership. This tension has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Europe seeks strategic autonomy while relying heavily upon transatlantic guarantees that remain politically contingent and periodically unpredictable (Heisbourg, 2020).

At the same time, geopolitical instability is no longer confined to conventional security questions alone. The intensification of tensions surrounding Iran and the wider Middle East demonstrated how rapidly energy systems, maritime routes, and economic stability can become entangled with geopolitical confrontation. Europe's vulnerability in this regard proved especially visible after the progressive reduction of Russian energy imports coincided with disruptions affecting global LNG flows and strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz. The resulting pressures exposed an uncomfortable reality: despite extensive discussions regarding resilience and sustainability, Europe's energy security remains structurally exposed to external instability. The issue is not simply dependence itself—interdependence is unavoidable within globalized systems—but rather the growing awareness that strategic exposure can now be weaponized economically, technologically, and politically with considerable speed.

A rather different, though equally revealing, geopolitical dynamic has emerged in relation to Greenland and the Arctic. Once treated largely as peripheral territory within European strategic thought, Greenland now occupies a far more consequential position within contemporary

geopolitical calculations. Melting Arctic routes, competition over rare earth resources, military surveillance infrastructure, and renewed great-power interest in northern territories have transformed the region into a space where geography, climate, energy, and security increasingly intersect. Donald Trump's earlier proposals concerning Greenland, widely dismissed at the time as rhetorically provocative, nevertheless signaled something important about the changing logic of territorial relevance in the twenty-first century. Strategic geography has returned, although in altered form. Europe can no longer assume that peripheral spaces remain geopolitically secondary merely because they were previously marginal to continental political imagination.

These developments collectively challenge one of the more persistent assumptions embedded within European political identity: that influence can be sustained primarily through normative power, market integration, and institutional multilateralism without substantial geopolitical recalibration. Such assumptions were never entirely apolitical, despite frequent claims to the contrary. European integration itself depended upon a relatively stable security environment guaranteed externally, above all by the United States. As that environment becomes more fragmented and transactional, Europe increasingly confronts the difficulty of exercising influence without possessing the forms of sovereign concentration historically associated with geopolitical leadership.

Yet the problem may not simply be that Europe lacks sufficient hard power. That interpretation, while partially accurate, risks oversimplifying a more complex transformation occurring within global governance itself. Traditional hegemonic models—centered upon unilateral dominance, territorial command, or overwhelming military superiority—appear increasingly unstable even for major powers. Contemporary geopolitical influence is exercised through more diffuse mechanisms: technological infrastructures, regulatory systems, energy networks, supply chains, financial leverage, cyber capabilities, and coalition management. Power has not disappeared, but its operational logic has become more fragmented, networked, and situational. Europe's predicament therefore raises a broader theoretical question concerning whether leadership in the emerging international order can still be understood primarily through hegemonic frameworks.

This paper approaches that question through the concept of post-hegemonic leadership. The term does not imply the disappearance of power asymmetries or geopolitical competition. Nor does it suggest a naïve return to cooperative idealism detached from strategic realities. Rather, post-hegemonic leadership refers to forms of influence exercised through coordination, mediation, resilience-building, and negotiated strategic alignment rather than direct domination. Such a framework may prove particularly relevant for Europe precisely because the continent lacks the conditions required for classical geopolitical hegemony while still retaining substantial institutional, economic, technological, and normative capacities capable of shaping international outcomes.

The relevance of this problem extends beyond foreign policy analysis narrowly understood. Europe's geopolitical difficulties intersect increasingly with internal democratic pressures,

economic insecurity, and societal exhaustion generated by overlapping crises. Inflation, migration anxieties, ecological transition, technological disruption, and prolonged war uncertainty have contributed to growing distrust toward institutions and expanding support for sovereignty-oriented political movements across several European states. Leadership under such conditions becomes less a matter of commanding direction and more a question of maintaining legitimacy amid uncertainty. European governance increasingly appears organized around continuous crisis adaptation rather than coherent long-term strategic orientation.

Existing scholarship has explored important dimensions of strategic autonomy, geopolitical fragmentation, and declining liberal order (Acharya, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2019; Biscop, 2020). Yet these debates often remain insufficiently connected to questions concerning the transformation of leadership itself under conditions where sovereignty is fragmented, alliances unstable, and crises increasingly multidimensional. Europe's current situation may therefore reveal something broader than regional strategic weakness. It may indicate the emergence of a geopolitical environment in which leadership no longer depends primarily upon hegemonic supremacy but upon the capacity to coordinate fragmented systems, sustain institutional legitimacy, and navigate prolonged instability without fully controlling it.

The paper consequently examines how Europe's contemporary geopolitical condition reflects the gradual transition from hegemonic assumptions toward more uncertain forms of post-hegemonic coordination. Particular attention is given to the war in Ukraine, the Iranian energy crisis, and Arctic strategic competition surrounding Greenland, not because these crises are identical, but because together they illuminate the changing relationship between geography, power, security, and leadership within an increasingly fragmented international order.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Debates surrounding Europe's geopolitical future have become increasingly shaped by a sense that the post-Cold War order is not merely evolving but losing many of the stabilizing assumptions upon which it depended. Yet the literature remains divided regarding the nature of this transformation. Some scholars interpret current instability primarily as the decline of liberal hegemony and the return of classical power politics, while others describe a more fragmented and decentralized international system in which no single actor retains sufficient authority to impose durable order. The distinction is not trivial because it shapes how European leadership itself is conceptualized. If the international system is returning to hegemonic rivalry, Europe risks strategic marginalization due to limited military concentration. If, however, global politics is moving toward fragmented interdependence and networked competition, then Europe's institutional and regulatory capacities may acquire renewed geopolitical significance.

Acharya's (2017) notion of a "multiplex world" remains influential in this regard because it challenges assumptions that global order necessarily revolves around singular hegemonic

dominance. Instead, geopolitical authority becomes distributed across multiple actors, institutions, and regional configurations. Yet while this framework captures aspects of contemporary pluralization, it perhaps underestimates the degree to which fragmentation itself generates instability rather than balanced coexistence. The present geopolitical climate appears less characterized by cooperative multipolarity than by overlapping strategic competitions unfolding simultaneously across military, economic, technological, and infrastructural domains. Leonard (2021) develops a related argument through his concept of “unpeace,” suggesting that hyperconnectivity no longer mitigates conflict but increasingly becomes one of its operational mechanisms. Interdependence persists, though its geopolitical meaning has changed. Connectivity now produces exposure as much as cooperation.

Within this environment, Europe occupies a distinctly uncomfortable position. The literature on strategic autonomy reflects this ambiguity rather clearly. Biscop (2020) argues that Europe can no longer rely indefinitely upon American strategic guarantees and must therefore develop greater geopolitical capacity. Yet strategic autonomy itself remains remarkably elastic conceptually. In some accounts, it refers primarily to military capability; in others, to technological sovereignty, industrial resilience, or diplomatic flexibility. Cottey (2023) usefully identifies these multiple dimensions, although his analysis also reveals a persistent tension within European strategy debates: autonomy is widely invoked politically while remaining uneven institutionally. Europe speaks increasingly in geopolitical terms without always possessing the centralized authority structures traditionally associated with geopolitical action.

This discrepancy becomes particularly visible in analyses of transatlantic relations. Heisbourg (2020) does not predict the collapse of NATO or the disappearance of American influence in Europe. Rather, his concern centers on unpredictability itself. American strategic commitment appears progressively conditioned by domestic political volatility and shifting geopolitical priorities. Europe consequently confronts a paradoxical condition in which dependence remains operationally necessary while simultaneously becoming politically uncomfortable. The return of Donald Trump to central geopolitical debate has intensified this anxiety considerably. Trump’s rhetoric concerning NATO burden-sharing, economic nationalism, and even Greenland illustrated how transactional geopolitical logic increasingly penetrates relationships previously assumed to rest upon stable strategic consensus.

Greenland occupies an especially revealing place within this broader transformation. Historically peripheral to most European political imaginaries, the territory has re-emerged as strategically consequential due to Arctic militarization, climate transformation, rare earth competition, and renewed interest in maritime corridors. Existing scholarship has not yet fully integrated Greenland into wider debates concerning European leadership, though the issue exposes important tensions regarding sovereignty, strategic geography, and transatlantic dependency. Trump’s earlier proposal regarding the acquisition of Greenland, widely treated at the time as diplomatically absurd, nonetheless revealed an underlying geopolitical reality: territorial significance is being recalculated under conditions of resource competition and Arctic

transformation. Europe's relatively cautious approach toward the region increasingly appears less like strategic restraint and more like strategic hesitation.

The war in Ukraine further intensified these contradictions. Much of the emerging literature interprets the conflict as a decisive rupture within European security architecture, although interpretations diverge regarding its broader implications. Realist perspectives, particularly those associated with Mearsheimer (2019), frame the war within longer-term structural tensions surrounding NATO expansion and balance-of-power dynamics. Such analyses remain controversial, partly because they risk underestimating the agency of smaller states and the normative dimensions of sovereignty. Yet they also force uncomfortable questions regarding whether liberal internationalism adequately anticipated the persistence of revisionist geopolitics. Europe's response to the invasion demonstrated significant coordination capacity through sanctions, military assistance, and institutional alignment. Still, the conflict simultaneously exposed substantial dependence upon American military infrastructure and intelligence capabilities.

Walt (2018) similarly critiques liberal interventionist assumptions, arguing that American foreign policy elites consistently underestimated the destabilizing consequences of expansive geopolitical commitments. Although his argument focuses primarily on the United States, its implications extend to Europe indirectly. European security structures developed under the protective umbrella of American primacy, allowing the European Union to prioritize economic integration and regulatory governance over military consolidation. Under conditions where American strategic reliability becomes less certain, Europe confronts the difficult task of recalibrating leadership without abandoning the institutional identity through which it historically exercised influence.

Energy insecurity introduces another layer of complexity insufficiently integrated into much strategic autonomy literature. The Iranian crisis and broader instability in the Middle East demonstrated how quickly geopolitical tensions can disrupt energy markets, supply chains, and domestic economic stability across Europe. Tooze's (2021) broader analysis of systemic crisis is particularly relevant here because it emphasizes the interconnected nature of contemporary disruption. Financial instability, public health crises, geopolitical conflict, and energy volatility increasingly interact rather than unfold separately. Europe's energy vulnerability following the reduction of Russian imports illustrates precisely this form of systemic entanglement. Strategic autonomy in such contexts cannot be reduced to military capability alone. Energy infrastructure, maritime security, and technological adaptation become equally central components of geopolitical resilience.

At the same time, the literature often struggles to conceptualize leadership adequately under these altered conditions. Classical hegemonic theories generally associate leadership with concentrated military or economic supremacy. Europe's geopolitical condition complicates such models because the Union lacks centralized sovereignty while still exercising considerable regulatory, economic, and institutional influence globally. Existing debates surrounding

“normative power Europe” partially addressed this issue previously, though often with excessive optimism regarding the transformative capacity of liberal governance. Current geopolitical conditions render purely normative interpretations increasingly insufficient. Yet the opposite conclusion—that Europe is therefore geopolitically irrelevant—appears equally reductive.

This tension creates space for reconsidering leadership beyond hegemonic frameworks alone. The concept of post-hegemonic leadership proposed in this study emerges partly from dissatisfaction with binary distinctions between dominance and weakness. Europe may not possess the concentrated sovereignty associated with traditional great powers, but it retains substantial capacities related to coordination, regulatory standardization, coalition-building, crisis mediation, and institutional governance. These capacities become particularly relevant within fragmented geopolitical environments where direct hegemonic control is increasingly difficult even for larger powers. Leadership, under such conditions, may depend less upon unilateral command and more upon the ability to sustain cooperation amid instability.

Krastev and Leonard (2021) indirectly reinforce this interpretation through their analysis of Europe’s “invisible divides” following the COVID-19 crisis. Their work suggests that European fragmentation operates not only externally but internally through divergent political experiences, asymmetrical vulnerabilities, and varying perceptions of crisis legitimacy. Europe’s leadership problem therefore cannot be separated from democratic fatigue and institutional distrust within member societies themselves. The geopolitical and the domestic increasingly overlap. Strategic coordination becomes difficult when publics experience prolonged economic pressure, inflation, migration anxieties, ecological transition, and war uncertainty simultaneously.

The literature consequently reveals a fragmented but increasingly convergent recognition that Europe’s geopolitical challenges exceed traditional security concerns narrowly defined. Strategic autonomy, energy vulnerability, Arctic competition, transatlantic uncertainty, and democratic fragmentation all intersect within a broader transformation affecting the nature of leadership itself. Yet relatively little scholarship has examined these dynamics together through a post-hegemonic lens capable of explaining how influence may continue operating under conditions where sovereignty is dispersed, crises overlapping, and hegemonic certainty diminishing. The present study responds to this absence by examining whether Europe’s geopolitical future depends less upon becoming a conventional superpower and more upon developing adaptive forms of strategic coordination suited to fragmented global conditions.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study emerged from a broader concern that prevailing frameworks used to interpret European geopolitical behavior increasingly struggle to capture the instability, fragmentation, and layered interdependencies characterizing the current international environment. Existing analyses of strategic autonomy tend either to privilege institutional-security dimensions or to frame Europe’s vulnerabilities primarily through military insufficiency. While these approaches

remain important, they often overlook how leadership itself is being transformed under conditions where sovereignty is dispersed, crises overlap, and geopolitical influence operates through fragmented networks rather than through singular centers of command. The methodological orientation of this research was therefore shaped less by the intention to measure geopolitical power quantitatively and more by the need to understand how political actors themselves interpret Europe's changing strategic condition.

Three interrelated research questions guided the investigation. First, how is European leadership currently understood by political, institutional, and strategic actors operating within contexts of geopolitical fragmentation and uncertainty? Second, to what extent do the war in Ukraine, the Iranian energy crisis, and Arctic tensions surrounding Greenland reshape perceptions of Europe's strategic autonomy and geopolitical vulnerability? Third, can the concept of post-hegemonic leadership provide a credible analytical framework for understanding Europe's evolving role in a transactional international order increasingly resistant to traditional hegemonic models?

Given the interpretative nature of these questions, the study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design combining discourse analysis, semi-structured expert interviews, and comparative geopolitical interpretation. The choice of a mixed approach was partly pragmatic. Purely quantitative geopolitical analysis often creates an illusion of strategic coherence by reducing complex political transformations to measurable indicators such as defense expenditure, GDP ratios, or energy dependency levels. These variables remain relevant, certainly, though they reveal comparatively little about how geopolitical uncertainty is experienced, narrated, or politically negotiated by actors themselves. The present study therefore prioritized interpretative depth while still incorporating selected quantitative contextual indicators related to defense budgets, LNG imports, Arctic investment patterns, and energy diversification strategies.

Data collection was conducted between October 2025 and June 2026 across three interconnected stages. The first stage involved discourse analysis of approximately 140 institutional and strategic documents published between 2019 and 2026. The corpus included European Commission communications, NATO strategic papers, European Council conclusions, policy reports from major European think tanks, transatlantic security analyses, speeches by European political leaders, and selected strategic commentaries concerning Ukraine, Iran, and Arctic governance. Particular attention was given to recurring concepts such as "strategic autonomy," "resilience," "sovereignty," "energy security," "transactional alliances," "Arctic stability," and "European leadership." The objective was not simply to identify conceptual frequency but to examine how strategic language itself shifts under geopolitical pressure.

The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with 38 participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants included academics specializing in international relations and European studies, energy security analysts, EU policy advisors, defense researchers, diplomatic officials, and geopolitical risk consultants from Romania, Germany,

France, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The inclusion of Danish participants proved particularly useful given Greenland's increasing strategic relevance within both Arctic and transatlantic debates. Interviews lasted between 55 and 110 minutes and were conducted either online or in person depending on institutional access and logistical constraints.

Interview discussions followed a flexible thematic structure rather than a rigid questionnaire format. Participants were invited to reflect upon changing perceptions of European leadership, strategic dependency, energy insecurity, Arctic geopolitics, transatlantic uncertainty, and democratic fragmentation. Some interviews diverged substantially from the initial research assumptions. For example, while the project initially anticipated stronger emphasis on military dependency after the Ukraine war, many respondents instead foregrounded institutional exhaustion, societal fatigue, and strategic overstretch as equally significant vulnerabilities. Several participants suggested that Europe's central difficulty is not simply insufficient hard power, but the challenge of sustaining political legitimacy while simultaneously managing overlapping transitions related to defense, climate policy, technological competition, and economic instability.

The third stage involved comparative interpretation of geopolitical narratives emerging across European and American strategic discourse ecosystems. Particular attention was given to how political actors framed leadership, sovereignty, and crisis management in relation to Ukraine, Iran, and Greenland. This stage became methodologically more fluid than originally planned because geopolitical developments evolved rapidly throughout the research period itself. Renewed tensions in the Middle East, fluctuations in LNG pricing, intensified Arctic military signaling, and changing American electoral dynamics continuously altered the strategic environment under examination. Rather than treating this instability as a methodological obstacle, the research incorporated it reflexively as evidence of the broader condition of geopolitical uncertainty explored throughout the study.

The analytical process combined thematic coding with interpretative geopolitical analysis. Interview transcripts and policy texts were coded using iterative thematic clustering procedures supported by NVivo software. Initial coding categories included strategic autonomy, leadership legitimacy, energy vulnerability, geopolitical fragmentation, Arctic security, and transatlantic dependency. Additional themes emerged progressively during analysis, including "permanent crisis governance," "distributed sovereignty," "symbolic autonomy," "leadership fatigue," and "adaptive coordination." The emergence of these themes suggested that participants increasingly understand European leadership less as centralized strategic command and more as the difficult management of fragmentation itself.

Methodological reflexivity proved particularly important because the study examined concepts that remain politically contested and analytically unstable. Terms such as leadership, sovereignty, and autonomy frequently carried divergent meanings depending on institutional position, national background, and ideological orientation. Some participants associated post-hegemonic leadership with European resilience and cooperative governance; others

viewed the concept more skeptically, interpreting it as rhetorical compensation for declining geopolitical influence. The study therefore avoided imposing excessive conceptual closure upon categories whose ambiguity may itself reflect contemporary geopolitical conditions.

Several limitations inevitably shaped the research process. The qualitative orientation limits statistical generalizability, while the evolving geopolitical context complicates stable long-term interpretation. Access to senior policymakers remained uneven, resulting in somewhat greater representation from academic and advisory communities than from executive governmental structures. Additionally, the Ukraine conflict, Iranian instability, and Arctic strategic developments remain ongoing processes rather than completed geopolitical events, meaning that interpretations may shift considerably over time. Yet these limitations also reinforce one of the study's central assumptions: Europe currently operates within an environment where strategic clarity itself has become difficult to sustain. The methodological objective was therefore not to produce predictive certainty but to examine how leadership, vulnerability, and geopolitical adaptation are being renegotiated under conditions of systemic instability and fragmented global power.

4 RESULTS

The empirical material revealed a rather uneven but persistent perception that Europe is entering a geopolitical phase fundamentally different from the one that shaped its institutional self-understanding after the Cold War. Participants did not necessarily agree on the causes of this transformation, nor on its likely outcomes, though there was striking convergence regarding the sense that older assumptions concerning strategic predictability, liberal stabilization, and transatlantic continuity no longer appear fully reliable. Europe, according to several interviewees, increasingly governs within an atmosphere of accumulated uncertainty rather than through clearly articulated long-term geopolitical direction. One policy advisor involved in EU strategic planning described the current environment as “a condition of simultaneous exposure,” where military insecurity, energy vulnerability, technological dependence, and democratic fragmentation reinforce one another rather than remaining compartmentalized policy problems.

The war in Ukraine emerged as the central reference point across nearly all interviews, though interpretations of its geopolitical meaning varied considerably. Some participants framed the conflict primarily as a security rupture that forced Europe to confront its dependence upon American military infrastructure and intelligence systems. Others viewed the war less as an isolated geopolitical event and more as a catalyst accelerating transformations already underway before 2022, particularly the erosion of confidence in globalization as a stabilizing framework. Interestingly, respondents from Eastern European contexts tended to interpret the war through a language of strategic urgency and deterrence, whereas several Western European participants emphasized institutional adaptation, economic resilience, and long-term political cohesion. The distinction was subtle but significant. It suggested that Europe's

geopolitical fragmentation is not merely external but also interpretative, shaped by uneven historical experiences and strategic imaginaries within the Union itself.

To clarify how distinct geopolitical crises collectively reshape Europe’s strategic environment, Table 1 synthesizes the principal vulnerabilities, pressures, and leadership implications emerging from the Ukraine war, the Iranian energy crisis, and Arctic competition surrounding Greenland.

Table 1: Major Geopolitical Crises and Their Implications for European Strategic Leadership

Geopolitical Crisis	Core Strategic Challenge	Structural Vulnerability Exposed	Leadership Implication for Europe
Russia–Ukraine War	Military insecurity and defense realignment	Dependence on U.S. military infrastructure and fragmented European defense coordination	Need for collective security coordination and adaptive strategic autonomy
Iranian Conflict and Energy Crisis	Disruption of LNG flows and energy markets	External energy dependency and infrastructural fragility	Necessity for resilient energy governance and diversified strategic partnerships
Greenland and Arctic Competition	Strategic rivalry over Arctic routes, resources, and surveillance	Limited European geopolitical engagement in emerging Arctic security architecture	Need for proactive Arctic governance and long-term geopolitical coordination
Transactional Geopolitics	Unstable alliances and selective cooperation	Reduced predictability within transatlantic and global governance systems	Shift toward flexible coalition-building and adaptive diplomacy
Democratic Fatigue and Populism	Declining institutional trust and societal exhaustion	Fragmented political legitimacy across European societies	Leadership increasingly tied to resilience, legitimacy, and crisis management

Source: Author’s conceptualization based on geopolitical literature, policy analysis, and empirical interpretation.

The discourse analysis revealed a marked shift in institutional language following the invasion of Ukraine. Earlier strategic documents frequently emphasized openness, cooperation, sustainable development, and multilateral governance. By contrast, post-2022 discourse increasingly foregrounded resilience, sovereignty, defense readiness, critical infrastructure protection, and strategic decoupling. Yet this transition remained conceptually unstable. European institutions continue to defend the principles of interdependence and rules-based governance while simultaneously advocating selective economic insulation and strategic protection mechanisms.

Several participants appeared aware of this contradiction, though few considered it entirely avoidable. One respondent noted that “Europe still speaks the language of globalization while preparing for fragmentation.” The statement perhaps overstated institutional inconsistency, although it captured a broader anxiety visible throughout the material.

Energy insecurity associated with tensions surrounding Iran and global LNG markets generated particularly strong reactions among participants involved in economic governance and strategic infrastructure analysis. The findings suggested that Europe’s energy crisis is perceived less as a temporary disruption than as evidence of deeper structural vulnerability. Participants repeatedly referred to the Strait of Hormuz, maritime chokepoints, and competition with Asian economies over LNG supplies as indicators that geopolitical instability increasingly operates through infrastructural pressure rather than conventional military confrontation alone. Several respondents argued that Europe underestimated the geopolitical implications of energy dependence for decades, assuming that economic interdependence would function primarily as a stabilizing mechanism. That assumption now appears considerably weakened.

At the same time, the data revealed notable disagreement concerning Europe’s capacity for strategic adaptation. Some participants interpreted recent developments—particularly accelerated renewable investment, diversification of gas supplies, and expanded defense coordination—as evidence that Europe retains substantial adaptive resilience under pressure. Others were more skeptical, describing current responses as fragmented and reactive rather than genuinely transformative. This divergence became especially visible in discussions surrounding strategic autonomy. For some interviewees, the concept represented an achievable if gradual process of reducing vulnerability. For others, it functioned more symbolically, offering political reassurance without fundamentally altering structural dependency patterns.

The question of Greenland and Arctic geopolitics initially appeared somewhat peripheral during the early stages of data collection, though it gradually assumed greater significance as interviews progressed. Participants specializing in security and Arctic policy frequently described Greenland as illustrative of broader geopolitical changes affecting Europe’s strategic environment. The issue was not solely territorial. Rather, Greenland condensed multiple emerging tensions involving climate transformation, rare earth competition, transatlantic relations, military surveillance systems, and Arctic maritime routes. Trump’s earlier proposals concerning Greenland were repeatedly referenced—not necessarily because participants considered annexation realistic, but because the episode symbolized the return of overt strategic competition over geography and resources within alliances previously assumed stable.

Interestingly, several respondents interpreted Europe’s cautious Arctic posture as symptomatic of a wider leadership problem. Europe often appears strategically reactive in regions where other powers increasingly operate assertively. Yet participants disagreed regarding whether stronger geopolitical engagement necessarily requires more traditional forms of hard-power projection. Some argued that Europe’s comparative advantage lies precisely in regulatory coordination, infrastructural investment, and institutional mediation rather than territorial

competition. Others worried that normative and economic influence alone may prove insufficient within increasingly militarized strategic environments.

The notion of post-hegemonic leadership generated mixed but intellectually revealing responses. While participants generally recognized that Europe lacks the concentrated sovereignty associated with classical geopolitical powers, many resisted interpreting this exclusively as weakness. Instead, leadership was frequently described through terms such as coordination, coalition-building, resilience management, and institutional legitimacy. One academic participant referred to Europe as “a power of orchestration rather than domination.” The phrase recurred indirectly in several interviews, suggesting that some actors increasingly conceptualize influence less through unilateral control and more through the ability to sustain cooperation across fragmented systems.

Yet this interpretation remained contested. Critics of post-hegemonic leadership argued that coordination without credible coercive capacity risks strategic irrelevance under conditions of intensifying geopolitical rivalry. They questioned whether Europe can effectively shape outcomes while remaining militarily dependent and politically fragmented. These criticisms were not entirely dismissed by participants sympathetic to the post-hegemonic framework itself. Rather, they acknowledged an unresolved tension between Europe’s institutional strengths and its limited capacity for rapid geopolitical projection.

The findings also revealed growing concern regarding what several interviewees described as “leadership fatigue” inside European societies. Public support for Ukraine remained broadly visible, though respondents repeatedly noted signs of societal exhaustion linked to inflation, energy costs, migration anxieties, ecological transition pressures, and prolonged uncertainty. Democratic resilience therefore emerged not simply as an institutional issue but as a socio-psychological condition. Europe’s geopolitical challenges increasingly intersect with questions concerning legitimacy, emotional endurance, and political trust. Leadership, in this context, becomes less associated with commanding direction and more connected to maintaining coherence amid cumulative instability.

One unexpected finding involved the temporal dimension of strategic perception. American geopolitical narratives analyzed during the study tended to emphasize immediacy, competition, and decisive positioning. European strategic discourse, by contrast, often appeared slower, procedural, and layered with normative qualification. Some participants interpreted this difference as weakness; others considered it evidence of institutional maturity resistant to impulsive geopolitical escalation. The distinction remained unresolved throughout the material, though it reinforced the broader impression that Europe’s geopolitical identity continues to oscillate between normative governance traditions and increasing pressure toward strategic assertiveness.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Europe’s contemporary leadership crisis cannot be reduced to insufficient military capacity or geopolitical decline alone. More fundamentally,

Europe appears caught between incompatible strategic temporalities and institutional logics. It seeks to preserve multilateral coordination while adapting to transactional competition, defend openness while pursuing strategic insulation, and maintain democratic legitimacy while governing through continuous emergency management. The concept of post-hegemonic leadership emerged from the analysis not as a finalized strategic model, but as a tentative attempt to conceptualize how influence might continue operating under conditions where traditional hegemonic certainty has become progressively less sustainable.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings complicate several dominant assumptions currently shaping debates concerning European strategy, leadership, and geopolitical adaptation. Much of the existing literature still oscillates between two relatively rigid interpretative positions. In one version, Europe is portrayed as a declining geopolitical actor incapable of responding effectively to the return of hard-power competition. In the other, the European Union is imagined as an emerging strategic pole gradually consolidating autonomy through institutional coordination and regulatory influence. The empirical material supports neither interpretation fully. Europe appears neither strategically irrelevant nor genuinely hegemonic. What emerges instead is a more unstable condition in which leadership increasingly depends upon the management of fragmentation itself rather than upon the exercise of centralized geopolitical control.

This becomes particularly evident in relation to the concept of strategic autonomy. Existing scholarship frequently frames autonomy through defense integration and military capability (Biscop, 2020; Cottey, 2023), yet the present findings suggest that political actors often interpret the term more ambiguously. Strategic autonomy functions simultaneously as geopolitical aspiration, institutional narrative, and psychological reassurance. It reflects Europe's awareness that dependency has become politically dangerous under conditions of transactional geopolitics, though participants repeatedly acknowledged that complete sovereignty remains unrealistic across multiple domains. The tension here is revealing. Europe increasingly desires insulation from external vulnerability while remaining structurally dependent upon transnational infrastructures, American security guarantees, global trade networks, and energy markets. Autonomy therefore becomes less a fixed strategic condition than a continuous process of negotiating exposure.

The study also extends broader discussions surrounding the transformation of international order. Acharya's (2017) notion of multiplexity and Leonard's (2021) concept of "unpeace" both identify fragmentation and interdependence as defining characteristics of contemporary geopolitics, though the findings here suggest that fragmentation is experienced within Europe less as pluralistic coexistence and more as cumulative instability without stable organizing frameworks. Participants repeatedly emphasized uncertainty itself. This distinction matters because much geopolitical analysis still assumes emerging equilibrium between major powers,

whereas the empirical material points instead toward a prolonged condition of overlapping crises, temporary alignments, and strategic volatility.

The Ukraine war intensified this perception dramatically. Existing literature often interprets the conflict either through realist balance-of-power frameworks or through normative narratives defending sovereignty and democratic order. The findings suggest that European actors increasingly inhabit both interpretations simultaneously, even if somewhat uneasily. On one level, the war reinforced NATO cohesion and accelerated defense coordination. On another, it exposed Europe's limited capacity for independent military projection and revealed the fragility of assumptions concerning post-Cold War security stabilization. Participants frequently described the conflict not simply as a geopolitical rupture but as a crisis of temporal orientation. Europe no longer appears certain about the strategic future toward which it is moving.

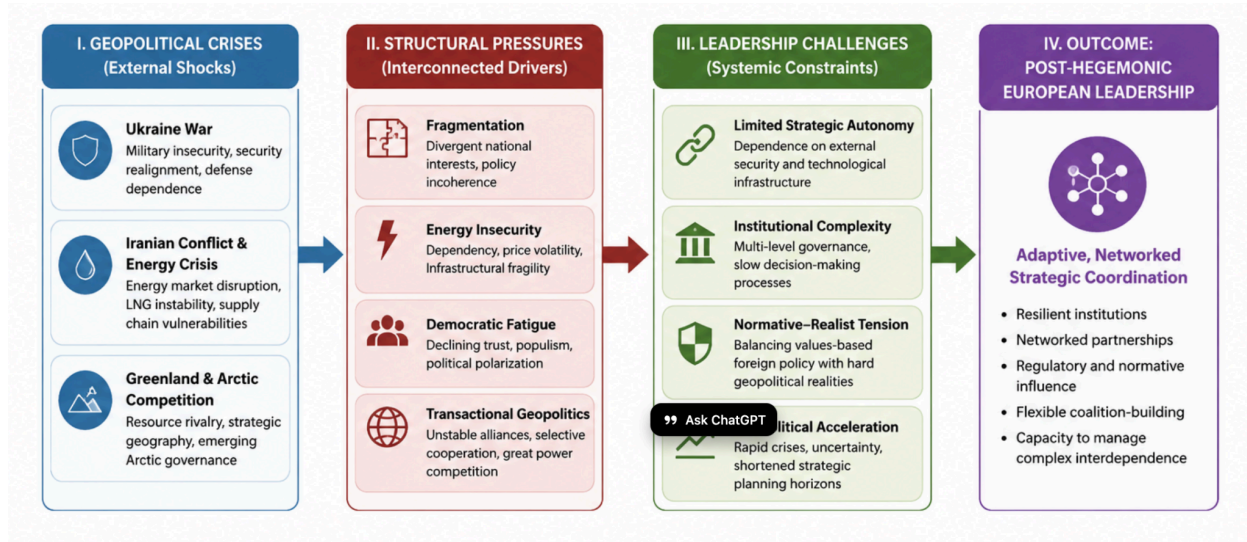
This uncertainty became even more visible in discussions surrounding Iran and energy insecurity. Tooze's (2021) argument concerning systemic crisis proved particularly resonant because participants consistently described geopolitical disruption as multidimensional rather than sectoral. Energy markets, maritime routes, technological competition, inflation, and democratic legitimacy increasingly intersect. Europe's vulnerability following disruptions affecting LNG flows and strategic chokepoints reinforced perceptions that infrastructure itself has become geopolitical terrain. Yet the findings also complicate simplistic narratives of European weakness. Several respondents emphasized that crises have accelerated adaptive capacities previously considered politically difficult or institutionally slow, particularly regarding renewable investment and energy diversification. Adaptation exists, though not always coherently.

The Greenland case introduced a somewhat different but theoretically significant dimension. Existing literature has not fully integrated Arctic geopolitics into broader debates concerning European leadership, perhaps because the region was long treated as strategically peripheral. The findings indicate otherwise. Greenland increasingly symbolizes the return of geography within geopolitical calculations once dominated by assumptions of borderless globalization. Rare earth resources, military surveillance systems, maritime routes, and climate transformation converge there in ways that challenge Europe's historically cautious Arctic posture. Trump's earlier proposals regarding Greenland, while frequently dismissed as diplomatic spectacle, nevertheless exposed anxieties surrounding strategic dependency and territorial relevance within transatlantic relations themselves.

The concept of post-hegemonic leadership emerged from these tensions not as a normative idealization but as an attempt to conceptualize leadership under conditions where classical hegemonic models appear increasingly difficult to sustain. Traditional understandings of leadership often presuppose concentrated sovereignty, military superiority, or unilateral strategic capacity. Europe lacks these characteristics in conventional terms, yet it retains considerable influence through regulatory coordination, institutional legitimacy, market integration, and coalition-building. The findings suggest that participants increasingly recognize these capacities

as geopolitically consequential, although doubts remain regarding whether such forms of influence are sufficient within environments marked by militarization and transactional competition.

To better conceptualize how overlapping geopolitical crises and systemic vulnerabilities collectively reshape Europe's strategic role, Figure 1 illustrates the transition from fragmented geopolitical pressures toward an adaptive model of post-hegemonic European leadership.



Source: Author's conceptualization based on the analysis of geopolitical developments and the relevant literature.

Figure 1: *From Overlapping Geopolitical Crises to Post-Hegemonic European Leadership: A Conceptual Framework*

Importantly, the study does not suggest that coercive power has become irrelevant. Several participants explicitly criticized what they perceived as excessive European reliance on normative discourse detached from strategic realities. The war in Ukraine, Arctic militarization, and energy insecurity all reinforced the continuing importance of military deterrence and infrastructural control. Post-hegemonic leadership therefore should not be interpreted as post-power politics. Rather, it reflects a reconfiguration of how power is exercised and coordinated within fragmented systems where domination alone no longer guarantees stability. Europe's comparative advantage may lie less in commanding geopolitical order than in sustaining cooperation under conditions where order itself becomes increasingly unstable.

Another important implication concerns democratic legitimacy. Krastev and Leonard's (2021) observations regarding Europe's "invisible divides" resonate strongly with the findings, particularly the growing sense of societal exhaustion described by participants. Leadership fatigue emerged repeatedly throughout interviews, often linked to inflation, ecological transition

pressures, prolonged war anxiety, and distrust toward institutions. Europe's geopolitical difficulties therefore intersect with internal legitimacy crises in ways that traditional strategic literature often underestimates. The capacity to maintain democratic cohesion under conditions of continuous emergency governance may become as strategically significant as military or economic capability itself.

Several limitations should temper interpretation of the study's conclusions. The qualitative orientation necessarily privileges interpretative depth over broad statistical generalizability. Moreover, the geopolitical environment evolved rapidly throughout the research process itself, particularly regarding Middle Eastern instability, Arctic strategic developments, and transatlantic political uncertainty. Participants' perceptions may therefore shift considerably as conditions continue changing. The concept of post-hegemonic leadership also remains analytically provisional. While useful for describing forms of distributed coordination and fragmented influence, it requires further theoretical refinement, especially regarding the relationship between normative governance and coercive capacity.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that Europe's geopolitical future may depend less upon becoming a traditional superpower and more upon developing credible forms of adaptive coordination capable of functioning within unstable global environments. This does not eliminate the importance of military capability, technological sovereignty, or strategic investment. Rather, it implies that leadership under contemporary conditions increasingly involves managing fragmentation, sustaining legitimacy, and navigating interdependence without fully controlling it. Europe's challenge, then, may not simply be geopolitical competition with other powers, but the difficulty of exercising influence within a world where hegemonic certainty itself appears progressively eroded.

The preceding analysis suggests that Europe's current geopolitical condition cannot be adequately understood through traditional hegemonic frameworks alone. The convergence of military insecurity, energy vulnerability, Arctic competition, democratic fatigue, and transactional geopolitical pressures points instead toward the emergence of a more fragmented and adaptive model of strategic coordination that may be described as post-hegemonic leadership.

5.1 Toward a Post-Hegemonic European Leadership Paradigm

The findings presented throughout this study suggest that Europe's leadership dilemma is not reducible to a temporary strategic crisis or to the simple decline of geopolitical influence. Rather, the continent appears increasingly situated within a structural transformation affecting the nature of leadership itself under conditions of fragmentation, interdependence, and prolonged systemic instability. Traditional assumptions concerning geopolitical authority - particularly those rooted in military concentration, centralized sovereignty, and hierarchical control - have become progressively more difficult to sustain, even among major global powers. Europe's predicament therefore reflects not merely insufficient hard power, but the growing inadequacy of hegemonic

frameworks within an international environment where crises overlap and strategic control is increasingly dispersed across interconnected domains.

The war in Ukraine exposed the fragility of post-Cold War security assumptions and forced Europe to confront unresolved tensions between strategic autonomy and transatlantic dependency. Yet the conflict also demonstrated that geopolitical influence in the contemporary era extends beyond conventional military deterrence alone. Sanctions coordination, infrastructural resilience, financial governance, refugee management, cyber defense, and diplomatic coalition-building emerged as equally significant dimensions of strategic response. Europe's capacity to act collectively under pressure was neither entirely coherent nor entirely ineffective. What became visible instead was a form of fragmented coordination operating without full geopolitical sovereignty but nevertheless capable of shaping international outcomes in important ways.

The Iranian energy crisis reinforced this dynamic further. Europe's vulnerability did not derive solely from military exposure but from infrastructural dependency embedded within global energy networks and maritime supply systems. The strategic significance of LNG flows, shipping corridors, and energy storage capacities revealed how deeply geopolitics now intersects with economic systems previously imagined primarily through market logics. Europe's response increasingly depended upon regulatory flexibility, market coordination, diplomatic negotiation, and accelerated energy diversification rather than upon traditional coercive mechanisms. Power, in this context, appeared less territorial and more infrastructural.

Greenland and the Arctic added yet another dimension to this transformation. What was once considered peripheral geopolitical space has become central to emerging struggles over climate routes, surveillance systems, rare earth resources, and strategic positioning between major powers. Europe's relative hesitation in the Arctic reflects broader uncertainty regarding how influence should be exercised within contested regions where military, environmental, technological, and economic considerations overlap. The Greenland issue demonstrated not only the return of geography, but the return of strategic competition over infrastructure, access, and logistical control in spaces increasingly affected by climate transformation.

Taken together, these crises suggest that Europe is entering a geopolitical condition in which leadership can no longer rely primarily upon assumptions of stable liberal order or uncontested institutional legitimacy. Leadership increasingly involves managing systemic exposure, coordinating fragmented alliances, sustaining democratic resilience, and responding adaptively to rapidly shifting geopolitical pressures. The empirical material repeatedly indicated that Europe governs less through long-term strategic certainty and more through continuous negotiation between competing vulnerabilities and partially incompatible priorities.

Within this context, the concept of post-hegemonic leadership offers a potentially useful analytical framework. Post-hegemonic leadership does not imply the disappearance of power politics, nor does it assume that military capability has become irrelevant. Rather, it refers to

forms of influence exercised through coordination, institutional mediation, regulatory power, infrastructural resilience, and coalition management under conditions where centralized geopolitical supremacy is increasingly difficult to maintain. Europe's comparative advantage may therefore lie not in replicating classical superpower models, but in developing adaptive capacities capable of sustaining cooperation across fragmented systems.

The transition from traditional hegemonic models toward adaptive strategic coordination can be further conceptualized through the comparative dimensions presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *From Hegemonic Leadership to Post-Hegemonic Strategic Coordination in Europe*

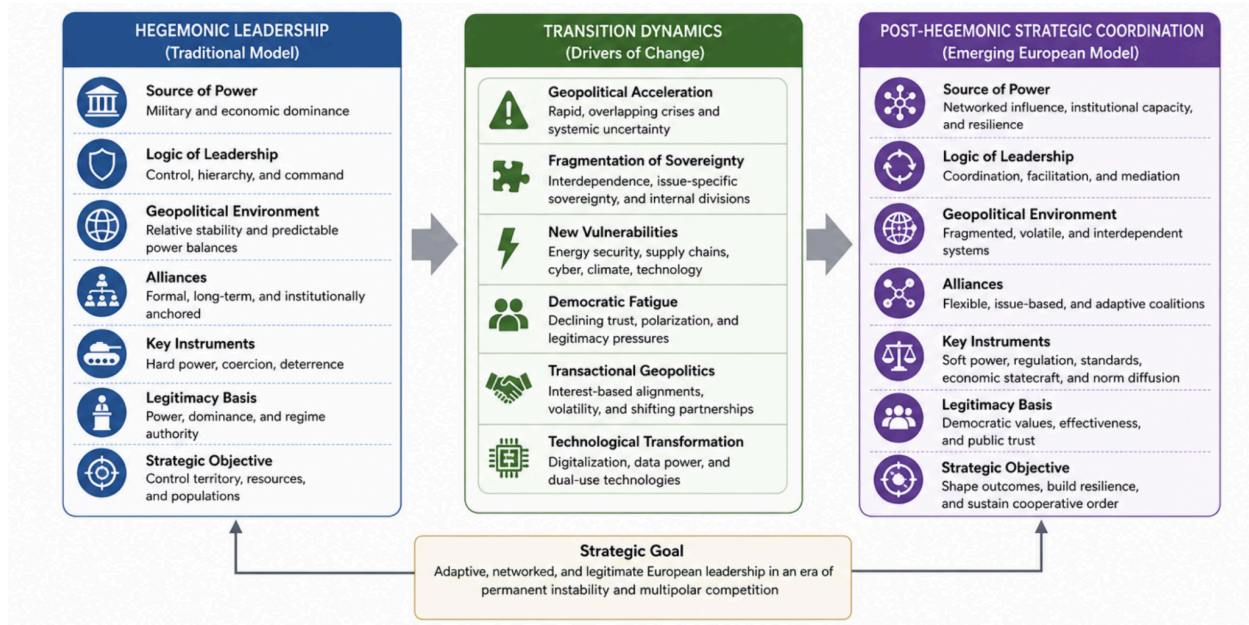
Traditional Hegemonic Leadership	Post-Hegemonic European Leadership
Centralized sovereignty	Fragmented and shared sovereignty
Military dominance	Strategic coordination and resilience
Territorial control	Networked governance and infrastructural influence
Unilateral decision-making	Coalition-building and multilateral negotiation
Stable alliance systems	Flexible and adaptive partnerships
Geopolitical hierarchy	Distributed influence across interconnected systems
Coercive power projection	Regulatory, economic, and institutional influence
Strategic predictability	Governance under uncertainty and permanent crisis
Hard-power legitimacy	Democratic legitimacy and societal resilience
Command-based leadership	Adaptive and mediating leadership structures

Source: Developed by the author based on the theoretical framework of post-hegemonic leadership.

This interpretation nevertheless remains politically and strategically unstable. Several tensions identified throughout the study remain unresolved. Europe seeks greater strategic autonomy while preserving deep interdependence with transatlantic structures. It defends multilateral governance while adapting to transactional geopolitical competition. It promotes openness while simultaneously pursuing economic securitization and technological insulation. These contradictions do not necessarily invalidate the post-hegemonic model, although they do reveal its fragility. Europe's future leadership capacity will likely depend upon whether such tensions can be managed without eroding democratic legitimacy or institutional cohesion internally.

To conceptualize the transformation affecting European strategic governance, Figure 2 illustrates the transition from traditional hegemonic leadership toward a post-hegemonic model based on adaptive coordination, resilience, and networked influence.

Figure 2: From Hegemonic Leadership to Post-Hegemonic Strategic Coordination in Europe: A Conceptual Transformation



Source: Author's conceptualization based on the analysis of the relevant literature and empirical findings.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings suggest that the future relevance of Europe may depend less on strategic domination than on its capacity to orchestrate cooperation within fragmented geopolitical environments where no single actor possesses stable hegemonic authority. This does not eliminate conflict, nor does it guarantee geopolitical stability. Yet it indicates that leadership in the twenty-first century may increasingly involve the difficult coordination of uncertainty itself rather than the imposition of order through overwhelming power concentration. Europe may therefore be entering not a post-political era, but a post-hegemonic one in which influence derives from resilience, adaptability, and negotiated strategic coordination under conditions of permanent instability.

6 CONCLUSION

This study examined how Europe's geopolitical condition is being reshaped by fragmentation, strategic uncertainty, energy vulnerability, and the gradual erosion of assumptions associated with post-Cold War liberal order. Rather than approaching European leadership through conventional hegemonic frameworks centered upon domination or concentrated sovereignty, the paper explored whether the concept of post-hegemonic leadership offers a more adequate lens for understanding Europe's evolving role within an increasingly transactional and unstable international environment.

The findings indicate that Europe's current challenges cannot be reduced simply to military insufficiency or geopolitical decline. The war in Ukraine exposed structural dependencies within European security architecture while simultaneously accelerating debates concerning defense integration, strategic autonomy, and transatlantic reliance. At the same time, instability surrounding Iran and disruptions affecting global energy systems revealed the extent to which infrastructural interdependence has become a central terrain of geopolitical vulnerability. Greenland and the Arctic introduced yet another dimension, demonstrating how climate transformation, strategic geography, and resource competition are reshaping the geopolitical significance of regions once considered peripheral to European strategic thinking.

Across these cases, a broader pattern became visible. Europe increasingly operates within conditions of overlapping crisis management where strategic coherence remains difficult to sustain. Participants repeatedly described governance through adaptation rather than long-term direction. Leadership therefore appears progressively less associated with unilateral control and more connected to coordination, resilience-building, institutional mediation, and the management of fragmentation itself. This does not imply the disappearance of power politics. Military capability, infrastructural security, and technological competition remain highly consequential. Yet the findings suggest that geopolitical influence today is exercised through more diffuse and interconnected mechanisms than traditional hegemonic models typically assume.

The concept of post-hegemonic leadership emerged from the analysis as a tentative but analytically useful framework for interpreting this transformation. Europe lacks the concentrated sovereignty and military supremacy historically associated with hegemonic leadership, though it retains significant capacities related to regulation, coalition-building, economic integration, and institutional governance. Under fragmented geopolitical conditions, such capacities may become increasingly important, particularly where stable hierarchical order is difficult to maintain even for larger powers. Still, the study also revealed persistent tensions within this model. Several participants questioned whether coordination without substantial coercive capability risks strategic marginalization. The relationship between normative influence and hard power therefore remains unresolved rather than superseded.

The research additionally highlighted the growing overlap between geopolitical instability and democratic fatigue inside European societies. Public anxiety concerning inflation, migration, ecological transition, and prolonged war uncertainty increasingly shapes perceptions of legitimacy and institutional trust. Europe's leadership problem is consequently not only strategic but societal. The ability to sustain democratic cohesion under conditions of continuous pressure may prove as important as military preparedness or economic competitiveness in determining Europe's future geopolitical relevance.

Certain limitations inevitably affect the study's broader generalizability. The qualitative orientation prioritized interpretative depth over statistical representation, while the geopolitical developments examined remain ongoing rather than historically settled. The Ukraine war,

tensions involving Iran, and Arctic strategic competition continue evolving, meaning that political interpretations may shift substantially over time. The concept of post-hegemonic leadership itself remains analytically open and requires further theoretical elaboration, particularly regarding its applicability beyond the European context.

Future research could therefore expand comparatively by examining whether similar post-hegemonic dynamics emerge within other regional governance systems confronting fragmentation and strategic uncertainty. Additional work is also needed concerning the relationship between technological sovereignty, energy transition, Arctic governance, and democratic legitimacy within emerging geopolitical configurations. The Arctic dimension in particular remains comparatively underexplored despite its increasing strategic significance.

Ultimately, the paper argues that Europe's future influence will likely depend less upon replicating traditional models of hegemonic power and more upon its capacity to coordinate fragmented systems, maintain legitimacy under pressure, and adapt institutionally to prolonged instability. Whether such a model can remain geopolitically effective within increasingly competitive environments remains uncertain. Yet the assumption that earlier forms of stable liberal order can simply be restored appears progressively less convincing. Europe may therefore be entering not the end of leadership, but a different and more fragile historical condition of leadership altogether.

Ultimately, the study suggests that Europe's geopolitical future will depend less on its ability to replicate traditional hegemonic models of power and more on its capacity to construct adaptive forms of strategic coordination capable of functioning within conditions of systemic instability. The convergence of war, energy insecurity, Arctic competition, infrastructural dependency, and democratic fragmentation reveals that contemporary geopolitical influence is increasingly exercised through resilience, institutional mediation, regulatory capacity, and coalition-building rather than through unilateral domination alone. In this context, the concept of post-hegemonic leadership offers a useful interpretative framework for understanding how Europe may continue to exert influence despite fragmented sovereignty and persistent strategic vulnerability. Yet such a transition remains uncertain and politically fragile. Europe continues to navigate unresolved tensions between autonomy and dependence, openness and securitization, normative governance and geopolitical competition. The challenge ahead is therefore not simply strategic adaptation, but the preservation of democratic legitimacy and institutional coherence within an international order where stability itself can no longer be assumed.

Europe may therefore be entering a geopolitical condition in which influence can no longer be measured exclusively through military concentration or territorial control. The emerging challenge is whether fragmented democracies can still generate strategic coherence without reproducing the coercive logics historically associated with hegemonic power. In this sense, post-hegemonic leadership should not be interpreted as the absence of power, but as an alternative mode of exercising influence within an international system increasingly defined by instability, interdependence, and negotiated coordination.

The findings therefore suggest that Europe may be moving toward a different geopolitical model altogether - one better understood through the concept of post-hegemonic strategic coordination. This transition does not imply the disappearance of power politics, nor the emergence of a post-conflict international order. Rather, it reflects the growing importance of adaptive governance capacities, networked alliances, infrastructural resilience, coalition-building, regulatory influence, and institutional mediation in contexts where hegemonic certainty can no longer be assumed. Europe's future relevance may consequently depend less on reproducing traditional superpower logics and more on its ability to sustain cooperation, legitimacy, and strategic adaptability under conditions of prolonged instability and geopolitical fragmentation.

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