

A Geopolitical "Furia Roja"? The European Union and Spain's EURO 2024 Victory

Written by Moritz Weiss and Benjamin Daßler

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/09/24/a-geopolitical-furia-roja-the-european-union-and-spains-euro-2024-victory/>

MORITZ WEISS AND BENJAMIN DABLER, SEP 24 2024

Two competitions have dominated Europe's summer agenda in 2024: the European Parliament elections and the UEFA EURO in Germany. While Spain's victory has crowned Europe's soccer champion, the election outcomes and the new European Commission will shape Europe's role in 21st-century geopolitics. If at all, however, what makes these two competitions hang together? At first glance, not a lot. While this is certainly true, we seek to highlight some opportunities from gaining insights by learning from analogies. Our point of departure is conventional wisdom in International Relations: With tensions rising due to China's economic and military ascent, Russia's aggressive maneuvers, and uncertainties in transatlantic relations, the traditional measure of power – military strength – seems more pertinent than ever. But is either 'dying' or 'strengthening European sovereignty' really at stake? Must the EU, lacking a unified military force and seemingly incapable of pooling necessary defense industrial resources, surrender to the brute reality of geopolitics? We argue "no, not at all". Instead, a smart geopolitical approach by the EU would combine a rigorous focus on creating global complementarities with like-minded international organizations (IOs) with regulatory policies and budgetary instruments that strengthen the military power of EU member states. And we arrive at this conclusion by thinking through a 'soccer analogy'. Just as Spain's EURO 2024 victory relied on both individual brilliance from players like Lamine Yamal and a cohesive team effort, geopolitical effectiveness requires both military strength and economic power working hand-in-hand.

Lining-up the EU with New Tactics

We admit that military strength remains a crucial force in International Relations. However, the EU's true comparative advantage on the new geopolitical playing field lies elsewhere, namely in its ability to weaponize the combined economic and military power of its member states. This strategy goes beyond simply encouraging increased defense spending. It requires a coordinated effort to use the EU's economic clout and regulatory power to enhance the military capabilities of its members in ways that complement, rather than duplicate, NATO's role. Achieving this ambitious goal will require abandoning the illusion of an independent EU military force capable of unilaterally coercing adversaries. The vision of a European Army distracts and thus weakens the EU's efforts. Instead, the new Commission must adopt a genuinely geopolitical approach, focusing on real-world – rather than only rhetorical – synergies with NATO.

A key figure in this effort should be a newly appointed defense commissioner – the EU's new team manager. Creating such a dedicated position is not simply a matter of replicating a traditional defense minister, but rather of creating a *dual security manager*. What do we mean by that? The ideal candidate will have a feasible and pragmatic strategy, capable of orchestrating the complex interplay between the EU's economic and regulatory instruments, its existing partnerships with organizations such as NATO, and the specific military capabilities of individual member states. Just as Spain's coach Luis de la Fuente masterfully coordinated the diverse talents of his squad – balancing the creativity of Dani Olmo with the solidity of Daniel Carvajal and the explosive potential of Lamine Yamal – a new defense commissioner should act as a dual security manager, bringing together the EU's global entanglements with its economic clout to enhance the military power of its member states.

Far from being a setback for the pan-European project, abandoning the idea of a supranational army is a prudent

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decision in favor of the EU's true strengths. Just as Spain's victory came from tactical brilliance and team cohesion rather than relying on a single superstar, the EU has the opportunity to prevail in the geopolitical competition without the creation of a supranational military force. In fact, the opposite is true. Given the peculiar nature of the new geopolitics, the EU can field a formidable team on the global political pitch – one that is particularly well equipped with an underestimated arsenal: Economic clout and regulatory prowess combined with strategic coordination with NATO. These internal and external assets, if used smartly, can be deployed in a new tactic to make the EU perform like a formidable geopolitical actor: first, by weaponizing vulnerabilities of adversaries; and, second, by weaponizing the military strength of EU member states.

Complementarities, Not Duplication Will Pave the Way for the EU's Success in Geopolitics

To avoid falling behind in the coming geopolitical contests with Russia and China, the EU should not only extend but also improve its well-established cooperation with NATO. While some perceive this partnership as unbalanced, focusing solely on NATO's military strength, it's essential to recognize the complementary capabilities both organizations bring to the table. Much like the players in Spain's victorious EURO 2024 squad, NATO and the EU complement each other perfectly. While NATO focuses on military readiness and defense, the EU skillfully wields its economic instruments and diplomatic channels to tackle current security challenges. This ability to compensate for military shortcomings through strategic partnerships is very much akin to Spain's balanced team that combined a powerful striker like Dani Olmo with creative midfielders like Pedri and the defensive prowess that kept clean sheets. *Functional differentiation* – rather than functional emulation – is the adequate strategy. With such a division of labor in place, NATO and the EU form a formidable squad capable of effectively addressing traditional and non-traditional security risks like hybrid threats including disinformation campaigns or sabotage, or cyber-attacks.

Consider the current scenario in Ukraine where the declared objective of both the EU and NATO is to increase the cost of Russia's ongoing military actions. Just as winning the EURO 2024 required both Spain's skilled passers and reliable strikers, the EU's economic influence and NATO's military prowess are equally vital in coercing Putin. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO-EU cooperation has intensified, evident in regular high-level consultations and joint 'progress reports' outlining concrete deliverables. This collaborative approach underscores the EU's capacity to offset its military limitations through strategic partnership. Weaponizing Russia's vulnerabilities requires both economic and military power; rather than a duplication of both. There is no need for two identical teams, but instead for players who complement each other's undisputed strengths. This is what we can learn from analogical reasoning.

Improving Team Performance by Strengthening Individual Players

Team managers cannot simply draw on individual players; they need to help them improving. Beyond complementarities with like-minded IOs, internal security management focuses on making individual players, i.e., member states, better in order to improve the overall team performance, i.e., the EU's aggregate military power in relation to adversaries such as China or Russia. Most significantly, the EU's existing power lies in its ability to use regulatory and budgetary tools to enhance the military capabilities of member states. For meanwhile fifteen years, the EU has employed significant regulatory power over the European defense industry to improve its competitiveness. By setting standards for the procurement and transfer of military equipment, the EU indirectly influences the military capabilities of its member states. More and even smarter initiatives are under way. 'The European Defense Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act' (EDIRPA) exemplifies this strategy, pre-defining specific military capabilities to better arm Europe's armed forces.

Internally, the EU's main strength lies in its role as both team manager and team sponsor for the security of its member states. The EU not only sets many of the rules that guide member states' "security training," it also "seed funds" some of their equipment. Through budgetary innovations such as the European Defense Fund (EDF), the EU provides money to encourage member states to acquire specific weapon systems and develop capabilities in line with its security objectives for the Union as a whole. This is not just about cash; it is about designing the team's tactics: The EU uses its sponsoring to shape and integrate its member states' military structures and helps to "Europeanize" defense spending.

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Here, too, smarter initiatives are underway. In March 2024, the EU agreed on a 'European Defense Industrial Strategy' (EDIS) which leverages parts of the EU's budget to incentivize members 'to make steady progress towards procuring at least 50% of their defense investments within the EU by 2030 and 60% by 2035.' This approach mirrors how Spain's football federation has invested in youth academies and domestic leagues, ensuring a steady supply of world-class talent like Lamine Yamal for the national team.

Weaponizing member states requires regulatory expertise combined with the use of budgetary instruments in a way that exploits the security-economy nexus of the new geopolitics. Just as Luis de la Fuente trained individual players like Pedri, Lamine Yamal, and Dani Olmo to create a cohesive Spanish team that could adapt to various tactical challenges, the European Commission is cleverly helping EU member states to improve their individual military strength while fostering a unified strategic vision.

The Way Forward: Unleashing the EU's Potential as a Geopolitical Team Manager

Relying on economic and regulatory power rather than direct military intervention is not without its challenges. Balancing economic interests with security concerns requires careful calibration, much like balancing attack and defense in a championship-winning soccer team. To realize its full potential, coordination among member states and existing regulatory frameworks need to be improved. The EU can become a "geopolitical furia roja" by increasing its investment in the economic and technological strength of member states, rather than duplicating existing military structures.

This "smart investment" in critical sectors such as advanced manufacturing and renewable energy empowers states and strengthens the EU's collective influence, enhancing its team performance in the geopolitical contests ahead. A dedicated defense commissioner should play a crucial role in this process. This position will not resemble a traditional defense minister, but rather a security manager who will orchestrate the EU's indirect means of geopolitical influence. The vision would be to enhance Europe's security without an army. The fact that this does not sound familiar is a great opportunity rather than a constraint.

Think of Spain's Euro 2024 victory: while experts initially focused on France, England or Germany, it was the team's overall strategy, depth, and adaptability that secured the victory – beyond the undisputed skills that Pedri, Lamine Yamal, and Dani Olmo may have shone in matches. Spain's success came not from having the most star-studded line-up, but from having a cohesive unit where each player understood their role, where labor was divided and where every part contributed to the greater whole. Not as a surprise, it was eventually two bench players, Mikel Merino and Mikel Oyarzabal, who scored the winning goals in the quarter-final and final respectively, and thus made *the* difference when the EURO 2024 was standing from knife edge. Similarly, the EU's geopolitical success will depend not on a single military force or economic policy, but on its ability to coordinate and leverage its diverse strengths.

As we reflect on Spain's triumph in the EURO 2024, let's remember that in both soccer and geopolitics, the key to success lies not in individual brilliance alone, but in the ability to bring together diverse strengths into a cohesive, adaptable, and formidable whole. The EU, with its unique blend of economic power, regulatory expertise, and diplomatic finesse, has all the ingredients to become a geopolitical champion. By learning from Spain's soccer success and applying these lessons to its geopolitical strategy, the EU can position itself as a key player on the global stage, ready to face the challenges of the 21st century. And the final good news is that we might learn something about geopolitics, when we watch and better understand soccer and begin thinking in analogies.

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