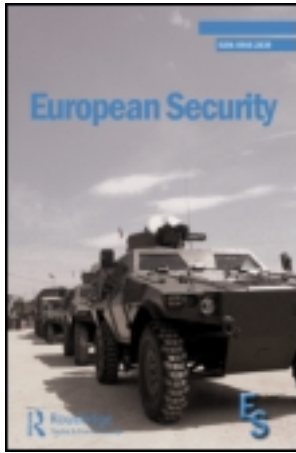


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The Russo-Georgian war and beyond: towards a European great power concert

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The Russo-Georgian war and beyond: towards a European great power concert

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The brief war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 provoked vigorous international reactions among the European states as consequence of the sudden shift in the strategic balance. This article argues for a focus on the great powers France, Germany and Britain as crucial actors for understanding the policy reactions towards Russia. It argues furthermore that reactions must be explained from the perspective of experience based on past geopolitics which translate the external pressures into concrete foreign policy: France oriented towards the creation of a strong EU as global actor, Germany influenced by her self-imposed restraint in foreign affairs and Britain influenced by Atlanticist commitments in her balancing behaviour. Beyond the Russo-Georgian war, the article points to an interest-based foreign policy approach towards Russia in the longer term driven by a great power concert with the Franco-German axis as stable element but increasingly with backing from Britain, thus contributing to transatlantic foreign policy convergence on the issue.

Keywords: Georgia; Russia; NATO ESDP; France; Germany; Great Britain

Power politics strike back

The brief war between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008 came as a shock for most international observers and was described as the ‘return of history’ (after the alleged ‘end of history’ following the collapse of communism) (Kagan 2008). Regardless of what one might think of this description, Europe had not experienced a conflict of the same dimensions since the struggles in the Balkans of the 1990s. Russia ended up recognising both of Georgia’s breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as independent states in a clear parallel to the recognition of Kosovo by most Western states. The war provoked an international crisis, triggering various diplomatic reactions from the European states, ranging between strong condemnations of Russia’s role in the conflict and expressions of general concern with the conflict escalation or even, in one case, support of Russia. The reaction pattern during the infamous crisis in many ways can be seen as symptomatic for the continued relationship between the West and Russia.

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This article does not seek to determine ‘who to blame’ for the conflict and the international repercussions it provoked; what can be concluded, however, is that the war for Russia became an efficient means of demonstrating to the Western states that Russia is back as great power on the international scene and that the West should refrain from intervening in Russia’s sphere of interest in large parts of the post-Soviet space. Not least, the Georgian war effectively put a stop to further NATO enlargements, since today only few member states would be willing to issue security guarantees to unstable and geopolitically exposed states which – as witnessed by realities – ultimately could lead to conflict – and war – with the Russian neighbour. Thus, the Russo-Georgian war constituted an obvious demonstration of the dangers and limitations of further NATO enlargement towards East in the proximity of Russia. If Georgia earlier could be characterised as being in the ‘grey zone’ between NATO and Russia influence, the brief war in August 2008 left no doubt that Georgia also in the future would find itself in a strategic limbo between Eastern and Western influences. The events have forced the European states to rethink their strategic options in a narrowed geopolitical environment with less real possibilities for exerting political leverage in the Eastern neighbourhood.

Great power stability in European diversity

A quick glance at the European reactions to the Russo-Georgian conflict reveals a large and interesting variety of foreign policy attitudes. The broad diversity of international reactions to the Russo-Georgian war among the European states can be summed up into three main reaction profiles (cf. Mouritzen and Wivel 2012): traditional hawks, fervent hawks and doves. The ‘traditional’ hawks include first and foremost the USA and Great Britain condemning the Russian ‘disproportionate response’, while the ‘fervent’ hawks consisting of the former Soviet satellite states (Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and, partly, Ukraine) employed a very sharp and confrontational rhetoric not only against Russia but also as a means of criticising the European doves for their perceived too soft reactions against the Russian response. By contrast, the countries adopting *dove* foreign policy attitudes generally sought a strategy of binding Russia through socialising the country into European values (‘Einbindung’) as too strong reactions would risk alienating Russia. To this category counts most importantly Germany but also a number of other states.¹ France remains a particular case to understand, since France as EU president at the time of conflict staked all on creating a common European position and acting as peace mediator. The French position ended up somewhere between the hawk and dove positions in what can be defined as the common lowest denominator, that is, in a compromise between hawks and doves among the EU members states (Mouritzen and Wivel 2012).

The case is made for focusing on the European great powers and their reactions to the Russo-Georgian war as key to understand the development of the relationship between Russia and ‘the West’ also beyond the crisis. France, Germany and Britain are states of comparable sizes and as during many other international crises – such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003 – great power alliances constitute the core around which international coalitions and smaller powers align. When common action is taken in the international forums, the great powers become crucial objects of examination, since only they have the ability of influencing the international structures through

offensive strategies (cf. Rickli 2008, p. 310). As to the relationship to Russia, common action within especially the EU is largely dependent on great power consensus which have shown remarkable ability of pushing forward common security policy initiatives within an otherwise great variety of foreign policy preferences between European states concerning the sensible Russia question.

The importance of geopolitical experience

The article furthermore makes the case for employing a neoclassical realist model to explain the great power divergences on the issue. A purely structural account seems incapable of providing a sufficient explanation of why the three great powers exhibited divergent reaction patterns in spite of being exposed to a 'similar' pressure following the Russo-Georgian crisis. This calls for an in-depth explanation of each case, that is, an intra-state analysis which takes into account the internal state dynamics predominant in the foreign policy-making process.

Neoclassical realism offers promising perspectives towards combining structural imperatives with state-specific factors in the explanation of a concrete case. Neoclassical realism attempts to systematise the theoretical insights of domestic politics into a scientifically inspired model and by doing so, bridging the differences between the abstract assumption of neorealism and empirically rich foreign policy studies (Wivel 2005). Neoclassical realists take structure as basic guiding principle for state action while nevertheless acknowledging that the link between power and policy 'requires close examination of the contexts within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented' (Rose 1998, pp. 146–147). Neoclassical realism shares classical realists' or even liberalists' concern for domestic politics but prefer to apply it as an intervening variable between structure and foreign policy to preserve theoretical parsimony. Neoclassical realism remains a relatively loose research paradigm with varying definitions of the importance of the domestic factors (cf. Lobell *et al.* 2009) and as such remains open to the choice of theory as long as this can be defended in relation to the research problem that is wished to be explored. While the choice of theory is a contextual issue, there is general agreement that theoretical information strengthens the analysis and helps to assess the conditions under which a certain foreign policy came about.

This analysis will bring in the notion of 'past geopolitics' as viable explanation for present foreign policy action. The concept draws on the ideational insights of classical realism and emphasises the role of historical lessons in foreign policy. The theoretical point of departure is that decision makers draw on lessons from past geopolitical events which influence foreign policy action in concrete cases (Khong 1992). 'Past geopolitics' denominates experience from past foreign policy events which are assumed to shape a state's preferences for how to respond to current external challenges. 'Past geopolitics' thus represents an intervening variable emphasising the *understanding* of power and thus the dominant beliefs and perceptions as domestic filter through which external pressures are translated into concrete foreign policy.

Faced with uncertainty or lack of information or when a leadership lacks clearly defined preferences for the outcome of a crisis, historical experience is likely to play a role in the formulation of foreign policy. Direct historic analogies, that is, clear similarities between a 'present' and a 'past' challenge, may serve as particularly

strong guiding principle for a foreign policy leadership for how to deal with a current external challenge. Both failures and successes as lessons learnt from past geopolitics experienced by a state serve as analogies for decision makers when faced with current challenges; successes encourage decision makers to continue with a ‘similar’ foreign policy strategy, while failure calls for the adoption of a ‘different’ strategy in the present (Mouritzen 2009, pp. 169–172).

Lessons of the past may settle either in the elite or in the broad political culture transmitted through socialisation. Decision makers may either *internalise* a lesson, that is, pursuing a strategy because they genuinely believe in it, or they may *instrument* it, that is, evoking past experience because other segments in society (elites or the electorate) believe in it – in both cases, geopolitical experience assumes importance by influencing the foreign policy-making process in one way or the other (Mouritzen 2009, pp. 173–174). Historical lessons do not necessarily improve foreign policy but frequently become a source of policy failure, especially if decision makers are over-focused on one analogy which is employed consistently as response to all external pressures (Mouritzen 2009, pp. 182–184).

The use of ‘past geopolitics’ entails a certain degree of inertia as foreign policy goals only slowly evolve, lagging behind changes in the material (‘objective’) environment. Formative experience in a state’s history, especially geopolitical experience closely related to state survival (e.g. participation in major wars), is assumed especially important for the shared assumptions about the character of the external environment. Geopolitical experience may be expressed as a role conception developing over time as a state acquires new experience from new important foreign policy events adding new layers to existing beliefs. Shared assumptions and political goals of a state are, therefore, unlikely to change overnight but and ‘past geopolitics’, therefore, prescribe a certain degree of continuity in time and across cases.

Past geopolitics should not be used as a catch-all category for any occurrence that cannot be explained by the objective pressures of present geopolitics. Past geopolitics is a luxury that can only be afforded under favourable external circumstances: decreasing action space means less room for past geopolitics, while increasing action space allows for past geopolitics to play a more important role. This is so because when the threat from external dangers rises, the role of historical lessons is reduced as fewer domestic voices are heard and as there are fewer viable foreign policy options to pursue – conversely, historical lessons are allowed an independent role when this external pressure disappears (Mouritzen 2009, pp. 170–176).

However, in the case of France, Germany and Britain, we must assume a high degree of action space, because the Georgian conflict admittedly represented a shift in the strategic balance but it did not represent any security threat to the states in question. Moreover, we are dealing with great powers which enjoy a significantly higher degree of external action space vis-à-vis Russia (in many respects an ‘equal’ great power) than what would be the case for smaller states with fewer aggregated capabilities. This justifies a great deal of importance to be attached to ‘past geopolitics’ as analytical tool in relation to the research problem. From a neoclassical realist perspective, ‘past geopolitics’ has the advantage that there is a clear outline of how domestic politics should be juxtaposed with the external pressures. Moreover, it is appealing as intra-state variable since it addresses the dominant beliefs and perceptions relevant in principle for all states, which allows for cross-case comparison.

To sum up on the methodology of the application of geopolitical experience, it calls for the use of theoretically informed narratives from the assumption that it is necessary to ‘understand in order to explain’. We are then compelled identify dominant beliefs in foreign policy discourse and ideally trace the effect of historical lessons on foreign policy decisions. All cases are assumed to be exposed to a ‘similar’ pressure (x) stemming from the strategic change after Russia’s reassertion in the Southern Caucasus. The explanation of differences in foreign policy reaction (y) must, therefore, be attributed to geopolitical experience at the intervening level for each state (z). The intervening level analysis must be carried out for each case to test the importance of historical lessons (or the lack of such) and to facilitate comparison between the cases.

The analysis of the great powers’ foreign policy action should not be strictly limited to the reactions to the Russo-Georgian war as such but meaningfully extended to include also strategic preferences for Georgian rapprochement to the West, including NATO membership and Membership Action Plan (MAP).² Moreover, the analysis should attach attention to the difference between official declarations (i.e. rhetoric) and actual foreign policy action (i.e. behaviour) and the long-term significance for the West-Russia relations.

The French presidency

France’s active role as mediator in the conflict between Georgia and Russia in the function of EU president was fortunate for the EU’s credibility as international actor.³ Even though it can be claimed that Russia anyway would not have advanced further into Georgia proper as result of ‘mission accomplished’, the rapid deployment of an EU monitoring mission (EUMM Georgia) to oversee the ceasefire on the *de facto* borders to South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be taken as a manifest witness of the EU’s willingness and ability to act as reliable conflict solver and to prevent new escalations in the zone.

While Sarkozy did not miss the chance to emphasise the French role in the ceasefire brokering, it is worth noting that it is doubtful whether any other of the major European states in the function of EU President (e.g. the Czech Republic, which assumed the presidency after France) would have shown an engagement as eager as France that invested all diplomatic efforts for the sake of promoting a common EU position in the conflict, seemingly at the expense of formulating an independent position.⁴ The French foreign minister Kouchner refused to take side in the conflict and emphasised the need to end the hostilities.⁵

France’s amalgamation with the EU presidency was seemingly intended to maximise the presidency’s practical efficiency as peace broker. Obviously, France had to adopt a pragmatic approach if the realistic aim was to act as mediator vis-à-vis a militarily advancing Russia followed by the quick deployment of the EUMM. However, France was obliged to balance the multiple foreign policy preferences of the EU member states, since France in principle was acting on behalf of them.

We know from the French position within NATO’s own ranks that France is one of the strongest sceptics against further eastern enlargements and supports a Russian-friendly position that takes into concern Russian interest in her near abroad – just as France claims to have a special responsibility as security actor in her ‘near abroad’ in Francophone Africa. France (along with Germany) was the major

force behind NATO's untraditional decision of holding out prospects of NATO membership to both Ukraine and Georgia but without fixing any *date* for the accession plan – thus, delaying the Bush administration's intention to push for MAP (Bucharest NATO Summit of April 2008). French worries about the power balance between Europe and Russia were predominant, as exemplified by a statement of French Prime Minister Fillon: 'We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine because we think it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia'.⁶ The Russo-Georgian war could, therefore, only reinforce France in the perception that the original scepticism towards further NATO enlargements was well-founded; offering membership to a country so geopolitically exposed would risk dragging the Alliance into a series of defence commitment that no member state in reality would be willing to live up to. The French attitude towards NATO enlargement is not unlike French policies regarding EU enlargements: the need to consolidate in-depth integration of the Union with France as main geopolitical force before plunging headlong into new commitments.

Also subsequent to the actual ceasefire brokering process, France has at several occasions tried to bring the EU presidency into play to advance an interest-based agenda vis-à-vis Russia. France may have acknowledged the importance of signalling discontent with the Russian military action, which tipped the strategic balance towards Russia in the European neighbourhood. Overall, the most tangible (however, modest) response from the West has been the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council in which formal talks resumed as soon as in April 2009. This has been no impediment for France later stating that France and Europe would be willing to discuss a Russian proposal for a new European security architecture⁷ and a strengthened EU–Russia partnership based on economic interests (Sarkozy 2008a, pp. 726–727). France's decision to sell *Mistral* helicopter-carrying assault vessels to Russia arguably constitutes the clearest indicator of the French willingness to make great power agreements eastwards despite explicit worries from NATO allies on the borderline with Russia.⁸ France's Russia policies continue to cause anxiety among many of the other EU members, notably the before-mentioned fervent hawks wishing containment of Russia.

Europe is France by extension

France's wish of promoting the EU as global foreign policy instrument reflects the fundamental ambition since the cold war of promoting a multipolar world where the EU is transformed into a new power pole that could break with bipolarity and – today – unipolarity. France's lesson from the past is that her history-long global rank is threatened by the simple fact that the relative size of France as a country is decreasing. In addition to French isolation from the great power game during the cold war, also recent geopolitics may play a role in the perception of French decision makers, for instance the invasion of Iraq which for France was a witness of the dangers of unipolarity that had to be balanced by the means available.⁹

France is marked by this fundamental feeling of decline which France tries to compensate for through, first and foremost, an efficient foreign policy-oriented EU as multiplier of French influence. Only the EU has the necessary 'critical size' to play an equal game with the other world powers which France no longer can play

independently. Instead of pointing at a ‘critical juncture’ that has shaped the French strategic orientation towards Europe, it would be more correct to conceive it as an expression of changing geopolitical realities over time. De Gaulle’s original vision of the ‘Europe of states’ was a model based on mutual agreements between sovereign states with France acting as political and military centre of an independent Europe free from external (American) hegemony (Krotz and Sperling 2011, pp. 312–313). With Mitterrand, however, came the idea of a ‘state-like’ Europe transcending traditional alliance policy and involving deeper integration such as a common currency, a common foreign policy and, eventually, defence (Holm 2006, pp. 45–49, 101). The state-like Europe has obviously shown clear limitations in light of the many member states (especially after the Eastern enlargements) which do not share the idea of a state-like Europe, thus contradicting the ambition of the EU as strong and unified actor. To some extent, this has forced France to redefine her grand EU vision towards a ‘flexible Europe’ model where an avant-garde group of the most ambitious states can launch enhanced common foreign policy cooperation and thus uphold a strong and capable EU ‘of the willing’. Basically, it reflects a great power concert of states that are willing to take the lead which preferably, but not necessarily, will influence the originally hesitant EU members and make them join the policies of the core. The ‘flexible Europe’ model can thus be interpreted as an incremental adaptation to the reluctant EU members in the periphery but with an overall persistent element of promoting a multipolar world with the EU as a balancing pole.

The flexible Europe for France is naturally centred on the special relationship with Germany. The Franco-German axis is founded on the idea of common history overcoming the old arch-rivalry and the creation of big common projects. Major power restructurings in Europe have often led to fear among French political leadership that Germany would try to reaffirm herself as leading power. Whereas France has tried to establish alternative axes in more specific fields (e.g. with Britain in the domain of defence), Germany remains the long-term stable partner which France can fall back on. Compared to Germany, French foreign policy is, however, rooted in qualitatively different *realpolitik* features.

The French presidency seems to have been a litmus test for the above-mentioned flexible EU model. On the one hand, France plays the great power game with the other major European states, while upholding the vision that French power is multiplied at the European level.¹⁰ On the other hand, in order not to hazard the Union’s cohesion power, consent must be obtained also from the smaller powers in the longer term. A possible revival of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis in a more long-term strategic partnership between the EU and Russia, therefore, needs to take into account the concerns of the rest of the member states, too.

France’s number one priority in connection with the Georgian crisis was to make the EU act as a unified actor and obtain concrete results through the settlement of the Russo-Georgian conflict. To this end, a high degree of pragmatism was necessary in the actual negotiations (since Russia otherwise may not want not comply), whereas the official EU declaration (as expression of lowest common denominator between hawks and doves) could be allowed to take a more critical stance. For France, the number one priority has been exposing herself as political leader of a unified Union capable of delivering foreign policy results. From the French perspective, the multipolar world represents a more stable world order than unipolarity which is the reason why the EU necessarily has to play the role as

balancing actor in connection with international crises. The French position has clear elements of Gaullist realism (balancing) but essential information would be lost if the observer would neglect the fact that French interests increasingly become synonymous with European interests. Some additional factors can be highlighted in this connection.

Europe as strategic actor

French identification with Europe transcends the economic sphere, since from the French perspective economic power can never be transformed into political power without coupling to credible military capacities. The construction of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) has become a key area in which France plays the role as defence avant-garde (Krotz and Sperling 2011, pp. 323–326).

A number of reorientations in French security and defence policy have been observed during the approximate 10 years of the existence of the ESDP. Interestingly, France seems to have initiated a Europeanisation of the Africa policy in the traditional sphere of interest in Francophone Africa where France has intervened unilaterally on several occasions since decolonisation (Bergeon 2007, p. 59). To date, three ESDP missions have been carried out in Africa in which France, being by far the largest contributor, tries to include as many EU partners as possible, even though from a purely military perspective it would be more rational to 'go it alone'. Obviously, the Europeanisation of French Africa policy is driven by political motives.

French 'reintegration' into NATO is another important factor. Albeit more symbolic than of practical significance, French reintegration has often been interpreted as a major strategic reorientation towards a new Atlanticist-oriented France. However, the French strategy has the simultaneous – and explicit – aim of revitalising the transatlantic relationship: a new balanced relationship where the EU formulates the big foreign policies as equal partner to the USA, once the Union has been equipped with a new affirmed defence policy (Ministère de la défense 2008, pp. 98–102).

The construction of a credible European defence is a long-term goal for France, which from the beginning has encountered scepticism from certain member states, fearing the ESDP will start competing with NATO. For France, which already from the beginning had set the European defence as one of the top priorities for the EU presidency, the conflict in Georgia, however, came as a welcome opportunity that stressed the need for addressing real threats towards stability in the European backyard. The Russo-Georgian war and the European success in the deployment of the EUMM as independent ESDP mission fell well in line with Europeanisation of French foreign policy with the overall objective of Europe gradually assuming *strategic* actor responsibilities. Therefore, France's EU presidency was an expression of continuity rather than change in French foreign policy over the last decade.

Germany's binding strategy

As mentioned, Germany chose a balanced position where neither of the sides was blamed for the outbreak of the conflict. Prior to the war, foreign minister Steinmeier had been actively engaged in settling the disputes in Abkhazia, where the conflict in

the first place was believed most likely to escalate. Germany sought a constructive role in which Russia was not to be alienated but to keep Europe's door open to Russia and the long-term settlement of the Georgian issue.¹¹ This was in direct contrast to the 'fervent hawks', which sought a cold war-type containment of Russia. As expressed by foreign minister Steinmeier: 'Do we want strong-worded statements to air our frustration and our sadness of so much human suffering at Europe's doorstep? Or do we want Europe to remain capable of playing an active role in bringing lasting peace to the Caucasus?'.¹² Active engagement was deemed essential for a constructive de-escalation process between both parties.

More concretely, Steinmeier was in disfavour of any kind of tangible sanctions towards Russia, such as suspending the EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and he warned against interrupting talks in the NATO–Russia Council. Freezing the dialogue has never led to the solution of conflicts, it was claimed. Germany supported the French presidency for having put an end to the hostilities from which point international mechanisms should then take over the stabilisation process.¹³ A small nuance can, however, be identified between Steinmeier and chancellor Merkel, the latter employing a slightly sharper tone against Russia, finding some of Russia's actions disproportionate. Nevertheless, Merkel also engaged in the peace talks by visiting both Medvedev at his summer location in Sochi and later Saakashvili in Tbilisi. Generally speaking, it is worth noticing that Germany both during and after the Georgian crisis has defined interests primarily in *economic terms* stressing the need to uphold long-term partnership with Russia.¹⁴ This is in direct contrast to the French and British cases that defined interests first and foremost in *political-strategic* terms.

Germany has, moreover, been a major sceptic to new NATO enlargements, opposing both Georgian and Ukrainian membership with reference to the fact that NATO has undertaken over-hasty enlargements without the necessary prior internal debate and that further enlargements first and foremost must bring not less, but more security to Europe as a whole.¹⁵ From this logic, the Russo-Georgian war could only come as a witness of the worst-case scenario of an overstretched alliance which had issued risky security guarantees to unstable states with disputed borders. Like France, Germany has expressed herself in favour of discussing Medvedev's proposal for a new European security treaty; this was welcomed as a new start for the Russia-NATO relations and as an option for continued dialogue.¹⁶ There are clear parallels to Germany's EU preferences which are today characterised by an unprecedented enlargement fatigue and a wish to ensure the internal cohesion power and consolidate the projects already undertaken, not least in the wake of the Euro crisis where Germany has invested heavily for the preservation of the European single currency.

Germany's new *ostpolitik*

Germany's confrontation-averse foreign policy orientation and abstinence from strong-worded statements is defined first and foremost against the country's own past. The catastrophic events and atrocities committed during the Second World War has left a fundamental feeling of guilt in all layers of German society which has resulted in a pronounced wish for a Germany acting as 'righteous' actor in international affairs (Stelzenmüller 2009, p. 92).

In German foreign policy-making, unilateralism is rejected per se and multilateralism regarded as a benefit in itself, almost regardless of the problems that need to be solved (Krause 2004, pp. 48–49). Multilateralism, international rules and consensus-building are regarded as the most suitable way of approaching international issues, transcending classic (obsolete) power competition.¹⁷ Germany's commitment to the international rules is manifested by the country's strong adherence to international law and organisations for solving international conflicts (Krause 2004). The consensus-seeking sentiment in German political culture has simultaneously resulted in a general rejection of the use of force and sanctions as foreign policy instruments (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2005, pp. 343–350). German efforts at redemption from the past have to a large extent been invested in the European project. What was observed during the Georgian crisis was admittedly a German foreign policy committed to a common European stance but this did not hinder Germany adopting the (apart from Italy) most Russia-friendly reaction among the European states. What is essential here is the fact that Germany acted as mediator with Russia by playing the role as bridge builder that even surpassed French pragmatism. The past seemingly played a very present role in Germany's foreign policy action.

The historic traumas become especially relevant in Germany's relationship to Russia, which as formerly defined German *Lebensraum* suffered particularly hard during the Second World War. The very conscience that Germany was largely responsible for the atrocities committed seems to cause certain reservations for Germany to criticise Russia today. Germany's abstinence from criticism of Russia can be traced back to one generational factor: among the generation presently in power in Germany, many look gratefully at Russia for having supported German reunification in the 1990s. For this reason, they are more inclined to attach importance to Russia as a stable partner (Stelzenmüller 2009, pp. 97–98). Self-identification with Russia may also play a latent role in German foreign policy. Germany's experience with the rise of Nazism is the story of having been a cornered great power herself after the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles. This is a historic analogy to Russia's current situation: the similarity between Germany's defeat in the First World War and Russia's 'defeat' in the cold war. Sanctions or sharp criticism against Russia for her role in the Georgian crisis would, therefore, risk contributing to additional Russian estrangement and eventually cornering of a strategically important great power. From this perspective, Germany sought to uphold the diplomatic course to avoid derailing the Russia–EU/NATO relations into 'obsolete' power rivalry for spheres of influence and to ensure Russia's continued binding to Europe.

Put in another way, German foreign policy towards Russia is best described as marked by continuity ever since the cold war and the *Ostpolitik* of the Willy Brandt era (Rahr 2007, pp. 140–141). In a key strategy paper from 2006, the German Foreign Ministry describes the strategy as 'rapprochement through economic interlocking' which is remarkably close to the strategy of 'change through rapprochement' of the *Ostpolitik* in the 70s with the aim of détente between East and West (Stelzenmüller 2009, pp. 93–94); Germany perceives herself as the most important bridge builder between Europe and Russia based on the assumption that the greatest triumph of Germany's soft power influence would be the successful integration of Russia into the rule-based European order.¹⁸ The German soft power

strategy has not been fundamentally shaken by the war in Georgia in spite of the international repercussions that followed it (Stelzenmüller 2009, p. 99).

Small German steps

Germany's self-imposed restraint in foreign affairs does not per se imply that Germany is unable to define any independent foreign policy. Since the end of the cold war, Germany has adopted a increasingly more independent voice, albeit still insisting on the self-perceived virtues of 'multilateralism' or 'civilian power' (Haftendord and Kolkmann 2004). The fact that Germany *de facto* blocks US insistence on further NATO enlargements and plays the role as EU–Russia bridge builder witnesses a new self-consciousness characterising a great power. Already Chancellor Schröder declared that German foreign policy should follow 'enlightened self-interests', including the protection of freedom and human rights (Haftendord and Kolkmann 2004, p. 168; Forsberg 2005, p. 217). This can be seen as a strategy for the political emancipation of a Germany that as minimum wanted to be consulted instead of (as in the past) automatically aligning with the policies of her traditional partners (Forsberg 2005).

Again, the notion of flexible Europe becomes relevant as analytical tool. Faced with the inefficiency of an EU-27, urgent crises (as witnessed by the French presidency) have shown the need of rapid and coordinated action which give a natural role to the great powers as foreign policy pioneers. Former foreign minister Joschka Fischer declared the necessity of a European gravity centre which he, moreover, saw as a natural complement to the historical process of European unification (Fischer 2004). Centred on Germany and France, the gravity centre should ensure enhanced integration as spearhead in the political development of the European community.

The practical unfolding of the 'flexible Europe' model has been observed most clearly in the more controversial aspects of the common foreign policy, such as the defence domain (ESDP). In accordance with Germany's gradual (however, cautious) acceptance of military out-of-area deployments, Germany has preference for small-scale military operations or the mere civilian missions within the domain of state-building and monitoring (Stark 2007, p. 798). Being assured that the ESDP will remain restricted to these relatively low key security responsibilities, Germany has shown real willingness to push forward reinforced cooperation in this domain based on a French-German-British coalition as main axis (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung 2006, pp. 38–49).¹⁹ From this perspective, the deployment of the EUMM Georgia was fully compatible with German strategic preferences: a civilian border monitoring mission to ensure stability in the European neighbourhood which could, moreover, ease Russian concerns about renewed military escalations in Georgia and the rest of the Southern Caucasus.

While the flexible coalition model may seem as a potentially conflicting with German multilateralism as number one priority, it remains objectively clear, simultaneously, that the original ambitions of substantial political cooperation with a common foreign policy based on 'European values' are endangered by European disunity following the continuous enlargements. However, as long as it does not mean deviating radically from the original European project, the Georgian crisis as well as the financial crisis has shown German willingness of acting in great

powers concert to address urgent needs or in the case of Russia even to assume an independent role as pragmatic bridge builder.

Hawkish Britain

Turning finally to the British case, foreign secretary Miliband described the situation as a blatant aggression by Russia and linked it to ‘threats to other neighbouring countries, such as yesterday’s to Poland’, thus referring to Russian threats to balance the then US-planned missile shield to be installed in Poland and the Czech Republic.²⁰ Miliband, moreover, tried to assure Georgia that the country would continue its path towards NATO membership in accordance with the promise given at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008²¹ that was promoted by the Bush administration wishing continued NATO enlargements eastwards. Moreover, the conflict was used also to argue for a strengthened European energy policy against Russia, thus enabling the EU to act as one actor when dealing with third parties instead of 27 member states easily being played off against one another.²²

A ‘second wave’ of sharp criticism followed after Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent republics. The arguably most remarkable act consisted in signalling willingness to contain Russia: Miliband visited Ukraine in the end of August, according to himself to ‘ensure the widest possible coalition against Russian aggression in Georgia’.²³ In this connection, obvious cold war parallels were employed: ‘the sight of Russian tanks in a neighbouring country on the fortieth anniversary of the crushing of the Prague Spring has shown that the temptations of power politics remain’.²⁴ The cold war phrases were combined with rhetoric similar to the American reactions, claiming that every country has a right to freely choose whether or not to be part of the ‘free and democratic world’.²⁵ Noting further that ‘there can be no going back on fundamental principles of territorial integrity, democratic governance and international law’, Miliband supported Ukraine, which as a sovereign and democratic state had a natural right of deciding whether to approach the West or not.²⁶ In short, traditional balancing indicating real willingness to take real action towards establishing counterweight to Russia was at the core of the British reactions. Britain did not express a wish to break relations with Russia but rather that time had become to weigh costs and benefits of the Russian partnerships.

Britain’s behaviour is consistent with the country’s overall preference for linking Georgia to the West by supporting the country’s quick accession to NATO and reiterating this wish, despite the fact that this position has gradually lost ground to the enlargement-sceptical states within NATO’s own ranks. This is a clear parallel to what concerns EU enlargements and the accession of Georgia where Britain, along with the USA, has been one of the most marked proponents of the accession of new countries into the European community as means of promoting geopolitical stability. An American–British alignment stands in clear contrast to the Franco-German bloc on this issue.

The special relationship

Britain’s foreign policy seems to be guided by an instinctive balancing sentiment towards a sudden shift in the strategic environment – related to Britain’s historic role as balancing power in the great power games of Continental Europe. However,

whereas France and Germany (albeit for different reasons) are influenced by a commitment to the European project, Britain can be said to be guided by the self-defined ‘special relationship’ with the USA as centre of gravitation for British foreign policy.

The existence of a ‘special relationship’ consistently affecting foreign policy action is by no means self-evident and the notion is commonly referred to as an *ideational* factor, even though from the beginning it has also been clearly rooted in *material* factors. The special relationship has been developed from the assumption that Britain still had global interests – and a global military reach – surpassing those of the other European powers and, consequently, that Britain could enter into a close partnership with the USA by investing enough in military capacities and operations which would justify ‘special’ access to influence on American foreign policy-making (Wallace and Phillips 2009, p. 282). The geopolitical glue which held the British–American relationship together during the Second World War and the cold war persisted in times when relations were less timid or even cold (Wallace and Phillips 2009, pp. 263–267). Under Blair and Bush, the relationship was centred on alignment to the American global strategy and the Middle East in spite of the two states’ divergent understandings of the underlying security logics (Wallace and Phillips 2009, pp. 280–284).

Whereas the ‘special relationship’ is often been defined as a political or ideological superstructure based on a common language and values, it has by and large been a material *security* relationship relying on tight integration between the British and the American defence industries and intelligence services (Wallace and Phillips 2009, pp. 267–270).²⁷ In Britain’s 2010-national security strategy, the USA is emphasised not only as strategic ally but also as a crucial intelligence and defence partner (Cabinet Office 2010a, pp. 15–22). The 2008-national security strategy describes the partnership with the USA as the ‘most important bilateral relationship and central to our national security’ (Cabinet Office 2008, p. 8). The traditional security and defence policy alignment with the USA persists as the perceived most crucial forum for international influence.

The perhaps most interesting aspect of Britain’s self-defined ‘special relationship’ is the alignment with the USA in the so-called liberal interventionist strategy that peaked in the Bush administration’s first period in power and which only now under Obama seems to wane (Dumbrell 2009, pp. 67–68, 76–77). While the relationship contains real strategic interests, it is simultaneously true that it is founded on an illusion that the USA has had a special and sentimental attachment to Britain beyond these common interests (Wallace and Phillips 2009, pp. 281–282). While American leaders have been oriented towards the pursuit of real national interests, their British counterparts have often given away to sentiments, sometimes at the expense of the pursuit of self-interests (Wallace and Phillips 2009).

While Britain’s reaction in principle can be attributed to ‘objective’ geopolitical expectations after a sudden change in the strategic balance in the European mainland, dependency on the USA can meaningfully be taken as factor for the way Britain in which chose to balance Russia. Britain’s verbal fire had clear resemblance with the ‘democratic rhetoric’ employed by the Bush administration: importance was attached to Georgia as an alleged ‘free and democratic’ country, thus emancipated from old-fashioned (Russian) ‘spheres of influence’, which would allow Georgia freely to choose whether to join the club of free and democratic

countries or not. By employing the Czechoslovakia analogy, Miliband did not only match the American ‘freedom’ language but he did also echo Saakashvili’s own rhetorical use of the Munich 1938-parallel to describe Georgia’s situation. Whether this parallel was genuinely believed in (internalised) or used for justification purposes (instrumentalised), it became an efficient means of signalling resolve to balance Russia as reaction to the outcome of the war.

The European pressure

How then, in turn, understand Britain’s relationship to the EU, which in spite of everything became the most important actor as mediator in the Russo-Georgian conflict? It can convincingly be argued that the gradual restructurings in the post-cold war order, now more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, has caused a new pressure on Europe to become a producer of security. Not only did ‘Europe’ prove helpless in preventing the bloody ethnic conflicts that emerged in European neighbourhood in the 1990s but there are now also indications of declining American power, strongly fuelled by the economic crisis and the military deadlock in Afghanistan (Xinbo 2010). A potential American retreat from Europe as consequence would be expected to influence not least Britain’s strategic legacies.

Despite the sharp rhetoric reactions, one should not forget that Britain in fact joined the common EU position, including the decision of deploying the EUMM. Another noteworthy element was the expressed will to strengthen the European energy policy against Russia. This should not be seen as any sudden British sentimental commitment to the EU but rather as a perceived need to bind the USA geopolitically to Europe through a higher degree of burden-sharing of the security responsibilities. In the 2010-defence review (Cabinet Office 2010b, p. 62), British participation in EU missions is specifically listed as complement to NATO. The seemingly decisive boost occurred in early 2008, when NATO officials talked about a ‘Copernican revolution’ in Washington’s attitude towards the European defence which was brought about by Sarkozy’s decision of French ‘reintegration’ with NATO (Dumbrell 2009, p. 70). Arguing that an ESDP with only soft power is insufficient, the USA pushed for British support for an EU defence expansion – if Britain earlier only suspiciously had backed such plans, she from 2008 was urged by Washington to change direction (Dumbrell 2009). From this perspective, a new British strategy with the EU assuming a more asserted role as reinforcer of and complement to NATO within a Euro-Atlantic framework was, therefore, fully compatible with an ESDP mission to Georgia as stabilisation unit for the prevention of future conflict escalations in the European neighbourhood.

Towards an EU great power concert

The EU consists of self-conscious nation states. When severe foreign policy crises occur, the real differences in foreign policy preferences crystallise (not unlike the divisions over the invasion of Iraq in 2002–03). However, at this point, there seems to be significant discrepancy between the mere rhetoric level, where significant differences between hawks and doves remain, and the behavioural level, where little concrete sanctions to Russia have been applied: in fact, the relatively short-lived suspension of the NATO-Russia Council remains the most tangible example of a

sanction. The discrepancy is remarkable: at the end of the day, Russia has faced only symbolic sanctions after the recognition of Georgia's break-away republics. Hence, at the behavioural level, it would seem that reactions are strongly dependent on the great powers or coalitions of great powers, which in the medium and long run have adopted a predominantly pragmatic and interest-based approach towards Russia. The argument is not that the foreign policy preferences of the smaller states have changed over time; in the case of the before-mentioned 'fervent hawks' consisting of former Soviet satellite states especially, worries over the Russian neighbour persist. The reasoning is rather structural, namely that the preferences of the smaller European states were sidelined in the final policy outcome because there was no viable great power initiative to back them up as powerful and independent axis. The 'fervently' hawkish states were unable to mobilise any sanction that would be able to punish Russia as none of the European great powers, even Britain, were willing to run the risk of sacrificing the long-term relations with Russia over Georgia. Thus, the crisis did not bring about any major dividing line similar to the divisions over the invasion in Iraq in 2002–03. The great power perspective thus offers the best understanding of the European reaction pattern towards Russia.

As demonstrated, there are indications that the EU-3 countries have shown willingness of undertaking enhanced cooperation within certain policy fields, either by coalitions of two (France and Germany) or by coalitions of three (France, Germany and Britain). The 'flexible Europe' is a natural response to a less effective Union with 27 member states which requires an avant-garde group, if more controversial policies – such as peace brokering – are to be advanced in an otherwise all-encompassing consensus-seeking forum. Great power concerts simultaneously allow for more hesitant states at a later stage to join common projects to which they were sceptical in the first place.²⁸ This was seen in connection with the Georgian crisis when real foreign policy differences crystallised during the immediate crisis but where pragmatism took over in the longer term. In this sense, great power consensuses serve as main axes with which the smaller states are compelled to look to adjust their long-term action patterns. In the European context, the Franco-German axis remains the stable element but backing from Britain seems increasingly to be the reality. For structural rather than for ideational reasons, however, Britain is compelled to seek cooperation with France and Germany. This points to strategic convergence among the European great powers in the relationship to Russia based, at the end of the day, on converging interests in a stable European order.²⁹

Rapprochement between EU-3 as equal powers in a pan-European framework, indeed, seems realistic in the light of the fact that the states increasingly (however, slowly) adjust to the political realities and the world order that seems to be restructuring towards the beginning of the 2010s. With beginning American decline and the persisting 'mismatch' between the economic/demographic weight of the EU and its political-military capacities (cf. Hill 1993), a great power consensus would have the potential for reducing this deficit over time. It would then be a piecemeal development driven mostly by external shocks rather than by internal visions. The great powers will have an interest in keeping the USA geopolitically tied to Europe, while the USA in future will have an interest in a more capable European partner, as long as the relative decline of the USA continues. In other words, the development in the international power structure suggests that the division between the 'old' and 'new' Europe will fade out and that the Western states will re-emerge as coherent

international entity. When the American secretary of state Clinton during a meeting in Geneva gave her Russian counterpart a ‘reset’ button for his desk,³⁰ it should be taken seen as a clear signal that the USA in future acknowledge (Russian) spheres of influence in which other powers have preponderance. On this background, it can be expected that the Western bloc as a whole will tone down its foreign profile eastwards, notably the value-based democracy promotion policies, and return to pursuing more classical interest-based objectives based on geopolitical principles.³¹

Moreover, if Britain and France to date have been ‘punching above their weight’ as international actors, Germany has clearly been ‘punching below her weight’. Consequently, if Germany’s slow but gradual steps towards an asserted/independent foreign policy will continue in the future (as the past gradually loses significance), in the very long term there are prospects of a change in the balance towards Germany within the European framework.

Return to theory

The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 for Russia became an effective means of limiting further NATO expansions eastwards and thus reaffirming herself as main power in large parts of the post-Soviet space. The brief war came to be the perhaps most marked international crisis in Europe since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, forcing the European states to react to the shift in the strategic balance.

Failing to find convincing explanation from a systemic realist perspective, this article has made the argument for employing a neoclassical realist model focusing on the interplay between present and past geopolitics for explaining the reactions from the European great powers towards the Russo-Georgian conflict. Past geopolitics is an expression of historic inertia which related to specific foreign policy crises may restrain or reinforce action compared to what would ‘rationally’ be expected and it adds additional explanatory power to compensate for insufficient explanation at the mere systemic and inter-state levels. In this way, it also became possible to make more substantial conclusions about the character of the emerging great power concert beyond the Georgian conflict. For France and Germany, experience based on lessons of the past could explain behavioural deviations from realist predictions: in the French case an ‘overwhelming’ identification with the EU which was almost allowed to *play an independent role*, and in the German case an ‘overcautious’ reaction to Russia where the past clearly *restrained* the present. In the British case, conversely, the past arguably *reinforced* the present.

The analysis showed no need of disaggregation to, for example, the decision-making level; generally, there has been a picture of lessons of the past that are changing over time but this should be conceived as slow adaptation to external pressures (based on accumulated lessons), rather than being attributed to the individual characters of decision makers. In the French case, there is a general role conception clearly oriented towards Europe as number one priority, which is seen as multiplier of French influence on the global scene but also this role conception evolves over time towards the flexible Europe model. The German case, in turn, is strongly influenced by the past and the historic traumas only slowly wane over time. Germany contains the perhaps most tacit role conception, which nevertheless has shown to persist across major restructurings in international system, including German reunification. The British case, finally, represents a very rigid role

conception, too, with the special relationship persisting as overarching political goal in British decision-making with no major reorientation since the cold war. Taken together, all three European states represent old and stable cases which reinforce the explanatory power of history and the lessons of the past.

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Notes

1. An additional number of Western, Central European and West Balkan states plus Turkey. Italy – represented by Prime Minister Berlusconi – represents the only case of a veritable Russia supporter.
2. Possibly related to preferences for further EU enlargements. For both Georgia and Russia, EU membership has been a less salient issue than NATO membership but can meaningfully be taken as expression of general preferences for approaching the eastern neighbourhood countries to the West.
3. According to diplomatic sources, during one of the meetings with Sarkozy, Putin had threatened to overthrow the regime in Tbilisi and string up Saakashvili, cf. Fox News (2008).
4. When foreign minister Kouchner uttered some rather harsh statement condemning the ethnic cleansings in South Ossetia and the need for sanctions against, he was quickly corrected by Sarkozy (2008b).
5. See The Guardian (2008).
6. See Reuters (2008).
7. Medvedev launched the idea for a new security treaty from ‘Vancouver to Vladivostok’ which has given rise to considerable scepticism among most Western states, fearing the undermining of the current constellation under the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).
8. See Reuters (2010).
9. As middle-sized power, France pursued a ‘soft power balancing’ strategy with the aim of entangling the USA in diplomatic commitments and signals of resolve to balance in future (cf. Pape 2005).
10. The 2008-financial crisis once again allowed France to play the global role as European avant-garde that she so urgently wants to. Sarkozy in 2008 took the lead in convening the G20 meeting as representative of the EU (vis-à-vis a weakened USA) for initiating a new economic order with the inclusion of the upcoming economic powers (Brazil, India and China).
11. See Deutsche Welle (2008).
12. See Auswärtiges Amt (2008a).
13. See Auswärtiges Amt (2008b).
14. See Welt am Sonntag (2008).
15. See Auswärtiges Amt (2009).
16. See Auswärtiges Amt (2010).
17. Put in another way, the German security dilemma is a question of how to play a larger international role without becoming a threat to others which (as proven by history) would again generate action disadvantageous to Germany (Bach and Peters 2002, p. 11).
18. During the EU presidency in 2007, Germany launched three initiatives for a new EU *Ostpolitik*: a new Neighbourhood Policy, rapprochement to the Central Asian republics

- and negotiations for a new EU–Russia partnership agreement, while advancing a common European position at the expense of putting Berlin’s own interests (Stark 2007, p. 793).
19. Germany joined the Anglo-French first initiative for launching the ESDP in St. Malo in 1999 and with France and Britain was initiator behind the ESDP *battle group* concept.
 20. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 16 August 2008.
 21. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 19 August 2008.
 22. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 20 August 2008.
 23. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Russia ‘unjustifiable and unacceptable’*, 26 August 2008.
 24. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Protecting democratic principles, 27 August 2008.
 25. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
 26. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign Secretary speech in Ukraine, 28 August 2008.
 27. Such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme and the military nuclear cooperation where there are enormous advantages connected to access to American technology.
 28. The principle of a ‘pioneer group’ is taken into account in the Lisbon Treaty’s provision for ‘permanent structured cooperation’ in defence (cf. Whitney 2008, pp. 14–28).
 29. Moreover, British support is often a prerequisite to ensure band-wagoning of the Atlanticist-oriented member states, notably the before-mentioned ‘fervent hawks’ in Eastern Europe, for whom British support is perceived to be the guarantee of American support and thus the preservation of the imperative transatlantic relationship (Asmus and Vondra 2005, pp. 211–212).
 30. See Reuters (2009).
 31. See Spiegel (2009); President Obama in an address to the UN General Assembly (23 September 2009) announced a retreat in USA’s democracy promotion profile worldwide, suggesting that the tendency is persisting.

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