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Europe Should Pay More Attention to Ukraine

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The world's center of gravity is heading eastward so fast that we Europeans can almost feel the ground moving beneath our feet. Because almost all major actors on the international stage are redefining their roles in response to this tectonic shift, Europe must do the same. So it is right that the European Union Council of Ministers is meeting to grapple with this challenge.

For decades, however, Europeans have been more concerned with unification and constitutional arrangements than with traditional diplomacy. Europe's historical rivalries have, of course, been civilized into a political model that European diplomats often see as applicable across the international arena.

To be sure, consensus, compromise and a pooling of sovereignty are the only ways to resolve many of the great issues — climate change and nuclear proliferation, for example — that bedevil our world. But on the great issues of war, peace and the balance of power, Europe

seems trapped between an insufficiently cohesive foreign policy and uncertainty among individual countries about how to define and secure their national interests.

By contrast, the world's rising powers — Brazil, China, India and Russia — insist not only on the primacy of their national interests, but, as the failed climate negotiations in Copenhagen last December demonstrated, on sovereign freedom of action as well. To them, geopolitics is not anathema; it is the basis of all their external actions. Defending the national interest still rallies their people. The exercise of power remains at the heart of their diplomatic calculations.

In the face of this new and old reality, Europe must not merely make itself heard on the great global issues of trade and fiscal imbalances, important as they are. Instead, Europe must recognize which of its strategic assets matter to the world's rising powers and leverage those assets to gain influence.

One of Europe's key strategic assets are the countries that straddle the great energy corridors that will deliver more and more of the fossil-fuel resources of the Middle East and Central Asia to the world. Indeed, ever since the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, Europe has mostly averted its eyes from developments in the region.

Ukraine, in particular, is being neglected by the EU. This neglect is both unwarranted and dangerous. Ukraine and other countries that lie between the EU and Russia are not only a source of geopolitical competition between Europe and Russia, but now intersect with the national interests of the world's rising powers, particularly China.

The Russia-Georgia war showed just how much this region matters to the entire world. In its wake, China began a systematic effort to buttress the former Soviet countries' independence by offering them huge aid packages. Countries from Belarus to Kazakhstan have benefited from Chinese financial support.

China cares about this region not only because it is concerned with maintaining the post-Cold War settlement across Eurasia, but also because it recognizes that the region will provide the transit routes for much of the energy wealth of Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia. Indeed, China has been pouring billions of dollars into developing the oil and gas fields of Iraq and Iran. Given that security issues will likely prevent most of this energy from being transported eastward to meet China's domestic needs, Chinese energy concerns will need to become players in international energy markets, which means shipping Chinese-developed oil and gas in Iraq and Iran westward for sale.

But two countries essential to this trade —Turkey and Ukraine — are increasingly estranged from the EU. For Turkey, tensions reflect the lack of progress on the country's application for EU membership.

Ukraine is another matter. Until President Viktor Yanukovych bludgeoned his way into Ukraine's presidency earlier this year, Ukraine was becoming emphatically European in its orientation. Now, Yanukovych seems determined — for the most shortsighted of motives — to weaken Ukraine fatally as an energy-transit country. Indeed, his latest gambit is an effort to sell Ukraine's transit pipelines to Gazprom in exchange for cut-rate gas.

That idea is foolish economically and strategically. Ukraine's industries need to modernize, not become more addicted to cheap gas, and transit will become almost as monopolistic as gas supply — a dismal prospect, given past cutoffs of gas supplies between Russia and Europe.

Moreover, Ukraine's politics is fracturing. A witch hunt is under way against opposition politicians. Crusading journalists disappear without a trace. The country's biggest media baron, Valery Khoroshkovsky, who happens to be head of state security, expands his media empire by abusing the courts. Yanukovych's systematic dismantling of Ukraine's democratic institutions is damaging the country's potential as a European strategic asset.

Of course, it is up to Ukrainians to defend their democracy. But Europe is at fault as well because the EU lacks a grand strategy toward the East. The moral and strategic vision of the 1990s, which culminated in the EU's "big bang" of eastward expansion, has exhausted itself. Nowadays, Europe is full of whispers that "neo-Finlandization" might be a reasonable compromise for countries like Ukraine and Georgia.

Rebuilding the EU's relations with Ukraine and the other countries to the union's east would, however, also help shape relations with Russia, which today is facing a series of strategic challenges: relations with the Soviet Union's former republics, the proximity of a dynamic China, the exposed emptiness of Siberia and the future of Central Asia's energy resources, around which the 19th-century "Great Game" between Russia, China, India and the United States is restarting. The EU can play a constructive role through permanent dialogue that is sensitive to the Kremlin's concerns without acquiescing in all of Russia's answers to them.

Today, the art of diplomacy is to translate power into consensus. This requires better relations with all of the world's rising powers. But it also implies, above all, a unifying vision, not only concerning the challenges that affect all countries — weapons proliferation, terrorism, epidemics and climate change, for example — but also concerning one's strategic assets. If the EU is to craft a successful policy toward the world's rising powers, it must speak in a strategic language that they understand.

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