Geopolitics of a Post-Growth Europe

Being More With Less

STUDY & DEBATE

GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

WETENSCHAPPELIJK BUREAU GROENLINKS

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Foreword

Sien Hasker & Laurent Standaert

This report does not make for feel-good reading. It raises awkward questions about the relationship between economic growth and geopolitical strength.

It is unlikely that we will be able to defuse the climate time bomb, let alone other ecological threats, as long as the European economy continues to grow. To get back into balance with the living world, we need to scale back overproduction and overconsumption. Such is the call of the degrowth movement, which is currently gaining ground in Europe. Its claim that rich countries should stop chasing GDP growth is increasingly backed up by science.

However, degrowth fails to resonate with experts in foreign and security policy. It is easy to see why. In geopolitics, many determinants of power – trade, aid, technology, defence – are closely linked to GDP. If they do not ignore planetary boundaries altogether, geopolitical pundits trumpet the 'green growth' narrative so as to reconcile ecological and geopolitical security. It is this very narrative that degrowthers aim to refute.

While green growth may represent an easy way out for geopolitical thinkers, the pacifism and antimilitarism professed by many degrowthers verges on naivety at a time when aggressive autocracies are invading their democratic neighbours. Russia's attack on Ukraine has brought war to the doorstep of the European Union. It forces us to take a hard look at defence and deterrence.

Clearly, experts on degrowth and on geopolitics – both scholars and practitioners – need to have a conversation. Can we, the EU, recognise the limits to growth and still be a global actor? Would we be able to defend ourselves, our allies, and our values? Could post-growth offer new avenues to live up to those values and kick the double standards and neo-colonial dynamics that our insatiable hunger for resources continues to produce?

In 2023, the Green European Foundation launched this conversation within the transnational project *Geopolitics of a Post-Growth Europe*. With seven of our partners, we organised a series of seminars, webinars, and interviews around Europe. This report brings together some of the insights we harvested. For that, we thank all the participants and interviewees.

The report starts with an **essay** by project leader Richard Wouters, who outlines the contradictions and synergies between post-growth and geopolitics. He also offers suggestions on how to navigate this minefield. Allergy alert: may contain traces of realpolitik.

The essay was inspired by the **meetings and interviews** conducted in the context of the project; a selection of the latter are included in the present publication.

More interviews are available on https://geopoliticspostgrowth.eu

The report concludes with a list of **recommendations** drafted jointly by the project partners and designed to spur further debate.

At the Green European Foundation, we remain keen to facilitate this debate, because awkward questions should not be avoided; they are often the best questions.

Essay

Sparing the Planet, Shielding Democracy

Article by
Richard Wouters

Can a European Union that renounces economic growth still defend its values in the international arena? Only if it works better together and invests in its external policies and technology. Allies and partners are crucial for an EU that needs to do more with less.

Just over thirty years after the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, global greenhouse gas emissions are still on the rise. While one temperature record after another is shattered, we are witnessing the devasting effects of heatwaves, wildfires, and floods. 'The era of global boiling has arrived,' according to UN Secretary-General António Guterres.[1]

Humankind is disrupting the Earth system that has allowed it to flourish, not only by wrecking the climate but also by destroying biodiversity and forests, depleting fresh water, and polluting ecosystems with nutrients and other chemicals. We have now transgressed six out of nine 'planetary boundaries', which define the 'safe operating space for humanity'. These transgressions increase the risk of 'large-scale abrupt or irreversible environmental changes' according to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, driving the Earth system into a far less hospitable state for humans.[2]

Planetary disruption is largely driven by the growing use of energy and materials. The environmental gains from decarbonisation and from greater energy and material efficiency are being outweighed by an increase in production and consumption, which translates into economic growth. Some parts of the world, notably the European Union, have managed to reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions while growing their economies, partly because energy-intensive production has relocated to other places, but nowhere near fast enough.[3] And there are other red flags related to their environmental performance. In the EU, 'biodiversity continues to decline at an alarming rate,' the European Environment Agency (EEA) warns.[4] It also observes that the quantity of materials extracted both within and outside the EU to satisfy European demand exceeds the safe operating space for humanity, with no sign of a decrease.[5]

In the face of the deepening ecological crisis, science is increasingly expressing doubt as to whether continued economic growth is compatible with a liveable planet.[6] 'It is unlikely that a long-lasting, absolute decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures and impacts can be achieved at the global scale,' according to the EEA.[7]

It seems that 'green growth', the narrative underpinning many environmental strategies including the EU's Green Deal, may

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well be an illusion. It is in this context that the 'degrowth' movement is gaining traction. Degrowth advocates a shift from accumulating material wealth to promoting well-being in a more equal society with high-quality public service provision. This shift should first take place in rich, industrialised countries where economic growth no longer positively impacts well-being. Reducing overproduction and overconsumption by the Global North (and by rich elites elsewhere) should not only bring us back within planetary boundaries but also free up natural resources for the Global South. In many low-income countries, human needs cannot be met without increasing resource use.

The most widely used definition of degrowth comes from economic anthropologist Jason Hickel: 'Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being.'[8] It follows from this definition that degrowth is less about reducing gross domestic product (GDP) than about reducing the throughput of energy and materials. However, Hickel argues that 'it is important to accept that reducing throughput is likely to lead to a reduction in the rate of GDP growth, or even a decline in GDP itself, and we have to be prepared to manage that outcome in a safe and just way'.[9]

It makes sense for the EU to be a frontrunner in the transition to a society beyond growth. Firstly, as a matter of justice. A large chunk of the blame for the ecological crisis falls on the EU. Its 27 member states represent less than 6 per cent of the world's population today. Yet historically, they are responsible for approximately 22 per cent of global excess CO_2 emissions and material use.[10] To put it bluntly, ruthless extraction of natural resources from all over the world has made us one of its wealthiest regions. If we Europeans abandoned our pursuit of economic growth and focused on sparing

It is better to manage the end of growth through democratic deliberation than to have it imposed on us by ecological breakdown.

the planet, we would likely make a sizeable contribution to a more equitable sharing of wealth and resources – both between North and South and between generations.

Secondly, a post-growth EU might gain in resilience. GDP growth is already being slowed by Europe's ageing population; it need not be long before ecology retaliates so strongly against the economy that GDP growth comes to an end. It is better to manage the end of growth through democratic deliberation than to have it imposed on us by ecological breakdown, which would spell massive social upheaval.• The sooner we change course from growing the economy to growing well-being, the more likely we are to preserve internal peace. Without that, we cannot cope with external threats.

• See the interview with Gaya Herrington later in this report.

Facing conflict

For many in the world, a post-growth EU would be a more credible partner in the fight against the ecological crisis. However, international politics is not just about cooperation; it is also about rivalry. At a time when 'global boiling' cries out for united action, we are witnessing increasing hostility and violence. Failure to act on the ecological crisis would produce even more strife. How would an EU beyond growth fare in a conflict-ridden world?

Russia's assault on Ukraine brought war to the borders of the EU and taught Europeans hard lessons about resource dependency. Vladimir Putin thought he could get away with his war of conquest because the EU was addicted to Russian natural gas. That was a miscalculation: the EU maintained its support for Ukraine, even in the face of drastic cuts to gas supplies. But it paid the price in the form of an energy crisis. EU governments have spent hundreds of billions of euros helping residents and businesses with their energy bills. And almost two years into the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU still hasn't managed to fully wean itself off natural gas, oil, and uranium from Russia, adding to Putin's war chest.

Responses to the war have included a push to accelerate the transition to renewable energies. However, this makes the EU more dependent on China, which dominates the supply chains for many critical raw materials as well as the solar panels, batteries, and magnets made from them. The EU wants to reduce its import dependency through domestic mining, better recycling, and strengthening its own greentech industry. However, that can't be done overnight. In the meantime, we are stuck between two aggressive autocracies.

A 'slower' economy as proposed by the degrowth movement would allow the EU to reduce its over-reliance on imported energy and materials more rapidly. This would make the Union less vulnerable to economic blackmail and thus deliver a gain in strategic autonomy. For example, current decarbonisation policies aim to replace all petrol and diesel cars with (mainly) battery-powered electric cars. Since batteries need lithium, EU demand for this metal is forecast to increase twelvefold by 2030.[11] Under a degrowth scenario in which private car ownership is scaled down in favour of cycling, public transport, and shared vehicles, the demand increase for lithium and other critical metals would be significantly tempered. Also, more energy would be saved.[12] We could well live to see the day when our economy can no longer be derailed by trade coercion from either Russia or China.

A post-growth EU could also help mitigate another type of resource-based conflict. The expansion of mining and export farming is often a violent and destructive process, especially in the Global South. Communities are driven off their land and see their water

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sources polluted and their forests destroyed. Militias finance their activities by seizing commodities. At the frontiers of extraction, where our supply chains start, conflict is rife, to the point of destabilising governments and spilling into neighbouring countries. The *Global Atlas of Environmental Justice* bears testimony to this.[13] By reducing our material footprint, we would slow down the advance of the frontline.

See the interview with Peter Newell later in this report.

In short, a post-growth EU would gain resilience in the face of inter-state resource conflicts and would be less complicit in intra-state conflicts. But geopolitical rivalry is by no means limited to resources. Russia's war in Ukraine, for instance, can hardly be explained by a scarcity of resources. The delusion – widely shared by the Russian populace – of restoring the former empire through recolonisation and the fear within the ruling elite of the contagious effects of democracy in post-Soviet countries make for better explanations. This shows that geopolitical strife extends to the very values on which national societies and global governance are based. The outcome of such conflicts will influence how much planetary operating space is left for humanity.

Defending democracy

One of the major fault lines in geopolitics runs between democracy and autocracy. Today, the rivalry between democratic and authoritarian governments is grimly playing out before our eyes in Ukraine. Tomorrow, or perhaps in a few years' time, a violent confrontation could unfold in the Taiwan Strait. Mainland China's sabre-rattling against Taiwan compels us to anticipate an armed attempt at unification, which would kill democracy in Taiwan.

Critics of economic growth cannot look away from the threat that aggressive autocracies pose to democracy, human rights, and the international rule of law. There is no doubt that the transition beyond growth must be democratic. Democracy offers a public space to challenge the growth dogma; autocracies would rather squash the debate on 'a new utopia' for fear of losing authority.[14] Many 'degrowthers' even advocate deepening democracy by extending it to the economic sphere as a way to overcome the compulsion to grow inherent in shareholder capitalism. Democracy in turn relies on constitutional safeguards that protect the rule of law, pluralism, and human rights. These include the right to protest against those in power for their failure to address the ecological emergency.

Preventing the worst will not only require green policies at the national level but also unprecedented global cooperation. This will not happen in the 'might is right' world that autocrats dream of; that would be a world with even more violent chaos. Admittedly, democracies can also resort to violence, but they rarely go to war against each other. They are more inclined to resolve conflicts peacefully, in accordance with the rules that just about every country has ever agreed to. A rules-based order is indispensable not just for preventing more wars, but also for tackling ecological threats. With Russia gone rogue, China behaving more and more aggressively towards its neighbours, and the US prone to exceptionalism, the EU has an important role to play in upholding the international rule of law.

Squaring a circle

The question therefore arises: could a post-growth EU play a part in shaping global politics instead of simply being subject to it? Would it be able to defend itself, its allies, democracy, human rights, and the international rule of law against attacks by the likes of Russia or China? The power of countries and alliances is usually measured by their wealth and military capabilities. Ukraine teaches us that moral strength must also be taken into the equation. Still, the Ukraine war largely confirms the standard metric. Without billions in Western support, both money and arms, Ukraine would not be able to withstand the Russian aggressor, who is intent on destroying not only the Ukrainian nation but also the European security order.

Seen this way, a post-growth EU risks increased vulnerability. It would see its share of global GDP shrink even faster than it already is. A diminishing share in global trade would give it less leverage over third countries and multinational corporations. The armed forces would compete more strongly with other public sectors over money and natural resources. There could well be less funding available for technological development, both civil and military, leaving the EU even further behind in the global technology race. Clearly, in rough times, degrowth and geopolitics is not an easy pairing. They rest on contradictory logics. Can the circle be squared?

Strengthening external action

One way to mitigate the tensions between post-growth and geopolitics would be to reduce division and dissipation in the realm of external action. Too often, European diplomacy is a cacophony of national self-inflation, obstructing a united approach. In the absence of a common strategy, the EU is a mere bystander in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite being Israel's biggest trading partner and Palestine's largest aid donor. Money can't talk without a script.

Divisions between EU countries partly explain why the democratic world has not yet set clear red lines for China. The US, the EU, Japan, and others jointly signalling that they would meet an attack on Taiwan with tough economic sanctions – to the point of inflicting pain on themselves – could make Beijing think twice. Maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait has planetary significance, because China going to war could very well lead to a breakdown in the global climate talks.[15] The difficult balancing act between rivalry (over democratic values) and cooperation (on ecology and health) with China would benefit from a common EU approach. Does war really have to reach the EU's doorstep before it closes ranks, as it did by and large when faced with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

European defence is plagued by fragmentation, duplication, and a lack of interoperability between national armed forces. Whereas the US military uses 30 major weapon systems, the EU's militaries have around 180.[16] This incoherence is a waste of public money as well as material and human resources. It reduces our collective strength, which is all the more worrisome now that Russian imperialism is forcing us to take deterrence seriously again.

The EU can no longer afford these 'costs of non-Europe'; this would be even more true for a post-growth EU. It would need to embark on deeper integration. This means speaking with one voice: no more vetoes in foreign and security policy; an EU foreign minister backed by a unified diplomatic service; upgrading the French seat on the UN Security Council to an EU seat. It also means getting serious about defence integration. Of the 200 billion euros that the 27 EU countries spend annually on defence, 20 to 120 billion could be saved, depending on the level of integration.[17] These savings could be used to increase combat power. The better the member states' military forces fit together, the more bang we get for our buck. The Netherlands and Belgium are showing us how it's done by merging their navies, for all practical purposes.

See the interview with Sven Biscop later in this report.

In the global rivalry between democracy and autocracy, the US may well defect from

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our camp at the next presidential election if Donald Trump or one of his supporters prevails. Either way, the US will increasingly focus its defence on threats from China rather than Russia.[18] Therefore, even a post-growth EU would need to reduce its security dependence on the US by increasing its strategic autonomy in defence. Plugging capability gaps in European defence would require the development and/or procurement of new weapon systems,[19] preferably involving European consortia. It is paramount that member states – especially France and Germany – do this together. Unified or shared armament saves costs and fosters interoperability. It could be a decisive step towards integration of the armed forces.[20]

A post-growth EU committed to reducing the throughput of energy and materials would also need to reduce the environmental footprint of its armed forces without undermining their combat power. This would be a costly and lengthy task. The defence sector will continue to impact the planet for decades to come, but we must keep in mind that the ecological costs of war may well outstrip those of deterrence.• [21]

• This applies not only to nuclear warfare, but also to conventional wars like the one in Ukraine. The greenhouse gas emissions attributable to the first year of the Ukraine war have been estimated at 120 million tonnes of CO_2e. This likely exceeds the annual emissions of all EU armed forces combined, including supply chains, which can be roughly estimated at 100 million tonnes of CO_2e. Other ecological costs of war need to be added, such as large-scale pollution, ecosystem degradation, and biodiversity loss – not to mention the loss and devastation of human lives.

Imposing sustainability requirements on the defence industry would be easier if member states moved to joint procurement.• [22] Under such a system, fewer types of arms would be produced in larger batches. It would be easier for the arms industry to recoup the costs of development and manufacturing, thus weakening their argument that exporting weapons is a commercial necessity.[23] This could facilitate the adoption of more restrictive EU arms export legislation, with stronger oversight by the European Commission, so that arms are no longer sold to countries that misuse them. The need for stricter rules is evidenced by the fact that no fewer than ten member states continued supplying military hardware to Russia after its first invasion of Ukraine in 2014.[24]

• The EU is already considering rules for the green public procurement of defence assets.

For a post-growth EU, it would be all the more important not to be threatened by weapons of its own making. To temper the rise of defence expenditure, it would also need to make a greater effort to achieve arms control agreements, even with Russia. Transparency on military capabilities and investment plans is conducive both to these agreements and more generally to walking the fine line between effective deterrence and an arms race.

Still, even a post-growth EU would have to invest more in external action. Mutual defence, strategic autonomy, and, by extension, the long-term support of Ukraine's defence are vital to our security – as are development assistance and climate finance for the Global South. Such a comprehensive security approach would be a large bill to foot for an EU without GDP growth, but the degrowth movement rightly stresses that we should sacrifice excess private consumption for the common good. A post-growth EU would do well to include diplomacy, defence, and foreign aid in the list of high-quality public services it pursues.

Enlarging and deepening the Union

For an EU pursuing a future beyond growth, allies – who bring additional resources and legitimacy – would be all the more important. With the risk of the US lapsing into authoritarianism, isolationism, and climate denial after the 2024 presidential election, the EU cannot afford to lose any more of them. It should keep the United Kingdom close and underline that the door is open for re-entry. EU membership offers the closest form of alliance.

Taking in the Western Balkans countries, Ukraine, and Moldova would become an even stronger geopolitical imperative for a post-growth EU. Such an EU would have to put in place an adapted 'green growth' policy to accommodate the needs of acceding countries seeking to narrow the economic gap with the older member states or rebuild after war. Ukraine, if it survives the Russian onslaught with our help, could be a formidable ally even before accession, both in terms of civil courage and military strength.[25]

The EU could invite Ukraine to participate in EU defence projects even before it becomes a member state.

There is an undeniable tension between deepening and widening the EU. The more members the Union acquires, the harder it is to reach agreement. This is especially the case if national governments jettison the values from the EU treaty that they signed up for. It only takes one outlier – like the authoritarian Hungarian government today – to undermine mutual trust and cripple decision-making. Therefore, EU enlargement must be accompanied by an extension of qualified majority voting and a more robust oversight of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law within the EU's borders. This is not excessive meddling in domestic affairs, because subversion of European values in a single country affects us all. The rules we live by partly come about through supranational decision-making in which each member state has a stake. The EU's standing as a global actor depends not only on its diplomatic, economic, and military strength, but also on its adherence to its own values. Finally, EU security is at stake when, as in Hungary under Viktor Orbán, the backsliding of democracy goes hand in hand with pandering to Moscow and Beijing.

A post-growth EU would do well to include diplomacy, defence, and foreign aid in the list of high-quality public services it pursues.

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The EU should be an ally to citizens fighting back against democratic decline. In the case of Hungary, the evidence of serious breaches of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights is so overwhelming that the Article 7 procedure against Hungary must be taken forward urgently, leading to the suspension of the Orbán government's voting rights in the EU Council. The EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, the European Council, and the Council of Ministers, need to make much better use of their existing tools to protect European values.

For all that, the EU can only do so much on its own. Constitutional democracy requires constant care at all levels, not least by political parties.[26] From the centre right to the left, they should not form alliances with far-right populists, mimic their scapegoating of migrants and other minorities, or let their attacks on the judiciary, the press, and science go unchallenged. Nobody benefits from courting, copying, and trivialising the far right except the far right, as the 2023 Dutch parliamentary elections demonstrated once again.

The battle against illiberal right-wing populism can be won. Creeping authoritarianism is not an irreversible trend. In 2023, opposition parties and voters in Poland proved that. After the opposition rallied around European values, Polish citizens voted out their bigoted and abusive government.

Partnering with the Global South

Would a post-growth EU that considerably reduces its environmental footprint with the express purpose of freeing up natural resources for the Global South find allies there? This is an appealing but unlikely scenario. In a multipolar world, the governments of developing countries are disinclined to ally themselves with a single great power. Instead, it pays to sit on the fence, to play the US, the EU, and China off against each other so as to secure as much trade, aid, and investment as possible. The best the EU can hope for is a series of strategic partnerships of a non-exclusive nature, which are nonetheless vital for greater security and legitimacy.

Establishing and deepening partnerships would be easier if the older EU members came to terms with their colonial pasts. It should come as no surprise that many governments and citizens in the Global South refuse to see the Russian invasion of Ukraine for what it is: an imperialist, colonialist attack by a regime that has no regard for international law or human suffering. They associate imperialism and colonialism with Western Europe and the US. There is a huge amount of historical pain and anger that has still not been sufficiently addressed. Doing so would require unequivocal apologies for slavery and colonialism by all EU countries involved, as well as a frank recognition that the crimes of the past carry forward into present-day injustices, whether economic or ecological. Such declarations should be backed up by significant EU contributions to poverty reduction, global public goods, tax justice, legal migration routes, international climate finance, and compensation for climate loss and damage. The EU should also team up with democratic governments in the Global South to develop proposals for the better representation of the South within the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Last but not least, double standards must be avoided. An EU that helps defend Ukrainian statehood should also stand up for a viable, democratic Palestinian state, alongside a secure state of Israel.

This part of the geopolitical agenda is a good fit with the degrowth movement's aims of decolonisation and redistribution. It would benefit peace and democracy too, all the more so if interwoven with a feminist foreign policy that promotes the rights, representation, and resources of women and other disadvantaged groups. According to the World Bank, 'Having more gender-equal societies results in more stable and peaceful states.[27] All of this highlights that it would be unwise for a post-growth EU to cut costs on external action.

The biggest obstacle to partnerships between a post-growth EU and countries in the Global South might well be trade. In principle, many governments of developing countries would applaud firm action by the EU to reduce its overconsumption of global resources. In practice, however, such action could easily clash with their development strategies. Increasing the export of natural resources is often still viewed as a way to grow the economy, even by democratically elected, progressive governments of not-so-poor countries such as Brazil and Chile. Telling them that we know better might bring back memories of colonial times.

Action speaks louder than words. An EU that pushes through debt cancellation, for instance, would ease the pressure on developing countries to sell off chunks of their lithosphere and biosphere in order to pay back foreign creditors. This could open up the debate to alternative (de)growth strategies for the Global South, not focused on exports.▪ But still, it is up to the polities of the South to choose their own development paths. For now, these are not aligned with post-growth in Europe.

▪ See the interview with Gabriela Cabaña Alvear later in this report.

The way out of this dilemma, albeit only partially, starts with recognising that even a post-growth EU would need huge amounts of imported metals to kick the fossil fuel habit. Take lithium. In an energy transition scenario involving fewer and smaller cars with smaller batteries, EU demand for this metal would still rise considerably: not twelvefold by 2030, as is currently projected, but around fivefold.[28] Only a minor portion would come from mining within the EU.▪ [29]

▪ The European Commission aims for metal mining in the EU to supply 10 per cent of EU demand of strategic raw materials such as lithium by 2030.

This awkwardly high metal demand presents both a concern and an opportunity. Of concern is the damage that mining inevitably inflicts on the environment, including biodiversity, water supplies, and the climate. This damage must be minimised, the voice and benefits of impacted communities maximised, in order to reduce conflict. The value chain due diligence law championed by the European Parliament[30] will go some way to promoting responsible mining, but this remains a daunting challenge. The opportunity lies in shifting a greater part of the value chain to mining countries. More and more governments in the Global South want to process their raw materials before exporting them. Refining plants and battery factories create jobs and can drive industrialisation on a broader scale. An EU that wants to secure the materials for its energy transition must meet these aspirations. The strategic partnerships it is offering to the countries in the Global South should include investments in local and regional value chains, as well as technology transfer.

This would be easier if the EU were less bent on economic growth; the incongruities in its policies could then be eliminated more quickly. Lodging a complaint with the World Trade Organization because a country decides to process nickel ore before exporting it, as the EU did in the case of Indonesia, smacks of neo-colonial extractivism.[31] As does setting a goal of 90 per cent of annual battery demand to be met by EU manufacturers while the metals are dug up elsewhere.[32] Strategic autonomy does not mean that all 'critical goods' have to be made in Europe. Sourcing a proportion of the batteries that we really cannot do without from a range of countries – preferably democracies like Chile and Indonesia – would just as well fulfil the

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geopolitical goal of becoming less dependent on autocratic China. And it could provide the EU with some much-needed partners.

Maintaining a technological edge

As we have seen, forging partnerships with countries in the Global South depends partly on technology transfer. So does global climate action: a rapid roll-out of renewable energies worldwide is indispensable to avoid catastrophic heating. But the role of technology goes way beyond trade, development, and climate: it is intertwined with geopolitics across the board.

In the West's rivalry with China, technology is a major battleground. Here, tech transfer comes up against geopolitical and ethical limits. The EU and the US greatly need leverage over China in order to get it to play by international rules, not least those of human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. China's 35 'chokepoint' technologies, which the country will be obliged to import for the foreseeable future according to Chinese academics, provide such leverage. China's access to these key Western technologies must be made contingent on its willingness to act as a responsible great power.[33] Knowledge and technology that can be used to perfect state surveillance or weaponry should stay out of Chinese hands no matter what. The importance of cutting-edge tech in modern warfare is all too evident in the Russo-Ukrainian war. If Ukraine survives despite its troops being vastly outnumbered, it will be largely thanks to the technological superiority of the Western weapons it receives.

With technology cutting across all dimensions of geopolitics, the EU cannot allow itself to fall behind. This goes for both civil and military technology, since they cross-pollinate. The EU has only a few cards in its hand; chip-making machines are the best-known example. Would we drop out of the game entirely if we let go of economic growth?

In a post-growth EU, there might well be fewer company profits and less venture capital available to invest in research and development. But it would be premature to conclude that such an EU would be doomed to lag behind in technological innovation. We should not overlook the inefficiencies in our current growth-oriented economy. Shareholder capitalism pushes companies to focus on quarterly results rather than long-term value creation. This inhibits R&D spending. Many market-led innovations have negative social value. Instead of meeting essential needs, they spur conspicuous consumption and spurious convenience, setting people apart while wasting resources. SUVs are a prime example. The financialisation of capitalism is a major 'innovation' that creates artificial scarcity, for instance of housing, drives inequality, and tempts many of our brightest minds to devote themselves – at top salaries – to extracting value instead of generating it. To make matters worse, today's capitalism locks up useful data, knowledge, and inventions under intellectual property rights.[34] This hampers their dissemination – even when lives are at stake, such as in the case of vaccines.

If capitalism seems innovative, it is in no small part thanks to governments. Public funding stands at the cradle of many technological advances. Just look at the digital revolution, which is reshaping both trade and war. The internet, GPS, and artificial intelligence all originate from publicly funded universities and government institutions. The journey from lab to market is often made through public-private partnerships, where most of the risk-taking falls on governments. Capitalism falsely claims inventiveness.

If it heeded these lessons, a post-growth EU would not have to lose the tech race. It would be well-advised to shift control over companies from shareholders to stakeholders, including workers and nature. Democratising our economy, moving up the scale from capitalism to post-capitalism, promises a smarter use of both natural resources and human ingenuity. It would also resolve a painful contradiction in contemporary democracies, which is that most of us spend almost a third of our lives under the authoritarian rule of bosses.

This paragraph is inspired by Hans Rodenburg, Noortje Thijssen & Koen Bruning (ed.), *Er is wél een alternatief. Postkapitalisme – een einde aan de roofbouw op aarde en mens*, 2023, notably the chapters by Sjors Roeters and Merijn Oudenampsen et al.

A post-growth EU would have to put a considerable amount of public money into both fundamental and applied research. It could use both subsidies and democratic rule-setting to steer technological innovation towards applications that really benefit us – socially, ecologically, and geopolitically. By claiming public co-ownership of inventions in exchange for public money, it could more easily prevent technology leakage to China or Russia; technology could instead be shared with trusted partners or made available as global public goods. Medicines and vaccines should be open source to allow domestic production by the Global South. A post-growth EU venturing into post-capitalism would also need to ramp up its efforts to snatch our digital lives from the claws of US-dominated surveillance capitalism. It should invest in a resource-efficient public-civil digital infrastructure and in open-source software to the benefit of global society.

We should not forget that technological progress in the EU is also due to clever minds from abroad who work in European academia and corporate R&D centres. An EU beyond growth would not be able to tempt these international knowledge workers with the highest salaries, but there is more to life. Vibrant cities, green spaces, clean air, good public services, social connection, and a culture of welcome would be vital for a post-growth EU keen to avoid losing out in the global competition for brainpower. A well-being economy can be a geopolitical asset.

If Ukraine survives despite its troops being vastly outnumbered, it will be largely thanks to the technological superiority of the Western weapons it receives.

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Emerging stronger

In authoritarian societies, human hierarchies are maintained by coercion and violence, and nature often comes last. Oppression weakens the social fabric and corrupts the state. Depletion of natural resources erodes both living conditions and power. In comparison, democratic, egalitarian societies are more resilient and will ultimately turn out to be stronger, especially if they focus on well-being within planetary boundaries.• But it can take a long time before authoritarian regimes succumb to the rot. Today, faced with expansionist autocracies, democracies cannot afford to neglect their defences and leverages, lest they be swallowed up or vassalised. In a world plagued by both armed aggression and ecological crisis, they are bound to juggle rivalry with cooperation.

• See the interview with Gaya Herrington later in this report.

For an EU abandoning economic growth, defending itself and asserting its values in the global arena would be no easy feat. Geopolitics start at home, by preserving internal peace. The degrowth movement is right to emphasise that post-growth policies must prioritise redistribution, satisfy basic human needs, and promote well-being for all. These policies should kick in before the end of GDP growth is brought upon us by ecological collapse. Such a contingency needs to reckoned with, as it would cause widespread grievance and turmoil. Insofar as post-growth pre-empts conflict, both within and between European countries, it can be seen as a prolongation of the EU peace project.

Internal security is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for external security. Post-growth should provide a strong impetus for deepening and widening the EU, for partnerships with the Global South, and for common investments in diplomacy, defence, foreign aid, and technology. These would take sizeable slices of an economic pie that won't get any bigger. A post-growth EU might well be 'spartan' in more than one sense. But if we keep social justice in mind, that is not too high a price to pay for protecting our democracy and looking after our planetary and geopolitical security. The EU would still be one of the best places in the world to live – or least bad, if we factor in the hardships of climate disruption.

The concept of a well-being economy can also be identified in non-Western approaches such as the Latin American indigenous social philosophy of *buen vivir*. But few governments are ready to renounce economic growth. For the EU, post-growth would be a lonely venture. Other parts of the world are unlikely to join such a project anytime soon. Yet they too will eventually have to face the fact that a finite planet cannot sustain infinite economic growth. If by that time the EU has proved that it is feasible to increase well-being without growing GDP, it may be able to offer some useful templates to the rest of the world. Normative power – the power to export one's values – is an integral part of geopolitics.

The normative power of a geopolitical actor also depends on its external policies. Do they reflect its values? If so, are they effective?[35] In both respects, the EU needs to clean up its act. If post-growth pushes us to overcome the inefficiencies and incongruities in our external action, to become more self-reliant and more trustworthy, we might emerge stronger than we are today.

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Interviews

Geopolitics Beyond Growth

Interview with
Gaya Herrington
by
Richard Wouters

The degrowth movement is gaining popularity in Europe. But without growth, can we still stand up for our values and interests on the world stage? According to sustainability expert Gaya Herrington, a European Union that seeks well-being rather than growth will be in a better position to deal with the economic fall-out of ecosystem collapse, but only if it invests in defence and diplomacy.

Richard Wouters: You made headlines with a study that confirmed the Club of Rome's 1972 message: we are nearing the limits to growth. What did your research entail?

Gaya Herrington: I checked the scenarios the authors of the report *The Limits to Growth* created in the early 1970s against recent data. I have seen many models in my lifetime, but I don't know of one that has proven so accurate decades later. Current data were closest to the 'business-as-usual' scenario, in which we persist in pursuing economic growth as the ultimate goal. If this continues, the model predicts that we will experience ecosystem collapse in about 20 years' time, due to pollution. That includes greenhouse gas emissions. In this scenario of continued climate change, global welfare levels will fall sharply.

We are furthest away from the 'stabilised world' scenario in which humanity stops pursuing economic growth, reduces its material footprint, and commits to improving healthcare, education, and other public services, as well as clean technology. Under that scenario, ecological breakdown is staved off. Right now, we are not moving in that direction, but the distance between this scenario and our current situation can still be bridged. We can still avert collapse, but it will be a bumpy ride because we have lingered too long for a gradual transition. What we do in the next 10 to 20 years will determine our level of prosperity for the rest of the century.

Proponents of 'green growth' argue that technological innovations make it possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution while growing gross domestic product (GDP).

You don't see that at all in the empirical evidence; it's just wishful thinking. You hardly see relative decoupling, where our ecological footprint grows less quickly than GDP. And you certainly don't see absolute decoupling, where that footprint shrinks while GDP grows. It is true that some countries are succeeding – slowly – in reducing greenhouse gas emissions while GDP grows, but other forms of pollution continue to increase while biodiversity declines. This is all the worse because we have been exceeding our planet's carrying capacity since the 1970s.

You do not believe in green growth, but at the same time keep your distance from the degrowth movement. Why?

I am much closer to the degrowth camp than to that of green growth. But I want to emphasise that green growth is definitely useful for poor countries. There, growth still contributes directly to people's well-being. In Europe, this has long ceased to be the case – in fact, the drive for growth makes us unhappier because it fuels pollution and inequality. The policy agenda of the degrowth movement is very suitable for Europe.

My objection mainly concerns the term 'degrowth'. It reminds people of recession, with unemployment and social unrest. We must take this fear seriously. I agree with degrowthers that deliberate shrinkage of the economy would set in motion a more positive dynamic than not growing in a growth-oriented economy. But I fear that the term scares people so much that they will not listen to that explanation. Therefore, I would rather let go of growth than actively degrow. An economy that focuses on human well-being and the protection of nature simply creates a more beautiful world. The best term for this is 'well-being economy'. It provides an enticing perspective.

The countries of the EU bear the greatest historical responsibility for the climate crisis and the depletion of natural resources. They are also among the most affluent parts of the world. Is it likely that the EU will be the first to let go of economic growth?

I think so. European politicians could very well be the first to realise that this is better for their citizens, that it prepares them for a new future. My research suggests that at some point in the next 20 years, growth will stop anyway. We have a choice between consciously renouncing growth now or leaving it to a collision with our planetary boundaries. I hope politicians will understand that the second scenario would cause much more instability.

I would like to draw politicians' attention to the phenomenon of downshifting. This is a term from neurology. It indicates that when people are under stress from issues such as imminent violence and resource scarcity, instincts take over. There is still a chance to implement the systems thinking needed to bring about deep reforms in the EU; it's less likely we'll be cool-headed enough for it a decade from now.

I live in the United States, and here it seems more difficult to make the transition to a well-being economy because politics is much more polarised. There is a strong movement for more gender inclusion, but in some states, progress is being reversed. There, abortion and LGBTIQ+ rights are being scrapped and sustainability standards for companies are vigorously opposed.

Do you consider gender inclusion the first step towards a well-being economy?

Yes. This has to do with the difference between two models of society: the domination society and the partnership society. The first model maintains order through strict hierarchies: male over female, straight over gay, human over nature. That order must be maintained by coercion and violence. Such a society is characterised by great inequalities and by a constant drive for economic and territorial expansion. The second model of society, that of partnership, is egalitarian and democratic. Such a society pays more attention to the well-being of the community, caring for one another, and the conservation of nature. Throughout history, you see that partnership societies cause less pollution, do not deplete their resources. They don't need economic growth or conquests to sustain themselves. Equality and gender inclusion are therefore core elements of a sustainable well-being economy.

So here comes the geopolitical question: Can a society based on partnership defend itself against a society that strives for domination?

In its purest form, a partnership society is unable to do that. It is not inclined to invest in defence. One of the most famous lines of poetry in Dutch, by artist and poet Lucebert, applies here: 'Alles van waarde is weerloos.' (All things of value are defenceless.) In the real world, countries with a partnership model will have to move a little towards the domination model. That is a shame because investments in the armed forces are made at the expense of natural resources, but unfortunately it is necessary. Still, it is important not to lose yourself in a warrior mentality. You must have a strong army – not to dominate, but to engage.

Domination versus partnership – which countries should we think of?

Domination and partnership are the two ends of a sliding scale. No country has only one or the other. Russia is an example of a country closer to the domination model. In Bhutan, with its gross national happiness policy, in Costa Rica, an eco-economy without an army, and in New Zealand, which assigns rights to nature, you clearly recognise the partnership model. The same applies to the EU, although it varies by country.

Like degrowthers, you advocate high-quality public services as part of a well-being economy. These include social security, education and healthcare. In the EU, should we add defence to this list now that the Russian attack on Ukraine has ended a long period of peace on our continent?

Yes, I think so. You and I will not live to see the day when military power is no longer necessary, I'm afraid. We should also put diplomacy on the list of essential public services, although it is of course more credible if a government carries a big stick. It's important to know when to fight and when not to. That is how I see the role of the EU: a proud frontrunner in sustainability efforts that is always looking to work cooperatively, but able and willing to defend itself if necessary.

In a society without economic growth that has to maintain strong armed forces, there is even less room for private consumption.

Indeed. In addition, we need a buffer in case our ecological footprint increases due to calamities such as a health crisis or military conflict. That is why our economy should become completely climate neutral. Nature's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere then forms the buffer for emergencies.

In geopolitics, GDP is an important indicator of power. Would an EU without economic growth lose power?

That might have been the case in the past. But now we have to face the fact that growth will come to an end anyway. This will likely be at some point over the next 20 years, as I mentioned earlier. If the EU has transformed itself into a well-being economy by then, it will be stronger in the world. Countries that continue to chase growth while the ecosystem breaks down are heading for disruption.

Can declining economic power be compensated by other forms of power?

Social capital is a huge source of power. We see that today in Ukraine: the wartime resilience of Ukrainians has amazed everyone. Russian men often have to be coerced into fighting because there is no galvanising story they believe in. Ukrainians are in solidarity with each other, connected by a strong narrative about what they stand for and what they are fighting for. Many are willing to sacrifice their lives for it. A strong social fabric makes all the difference in times of crisis. And I think that a well-being economy that meets everyone's basic needs, a society where people feel that there is fair sharing and equal treatment, will reap social cohesion.

In contrast, societies in which coercion and violence predominate are often weaker than they appear. I sometimes compare the domination model with toxic masculinity: it looks very strong, but it is as fragile as anything. The urge to expand causes shocks of an ecological or other nature, and the resilience to absorb these shocks is lacking. A society based on domination will eventually collapse.

In relations between the EU and the Global South, the domination model can still be recognised. We source much of our energy and raw materials from poor countries, often at the expense of the people who live there. Can a well-being economy without growth put an end to this neo-colonial extractivism?

A Europe that focused on well-being rather than growth would be able to reduce its dependence on imported energy and raw materials more easily. If less energy is needed, the transition to solar and wind power can be accelerated. Circular solutions can meet the demand for materials faster if that demand stops growing. In this respect, abandoning economic growth would have clear geopolitical advantages.

A post-growth EU would see its share of global GDP decline even faster than it is currently. Does such an EU need more allies in geopolitics?

An EU beyond growth could become more selective in its choice of allies. You don't want to be condemned to friendship with autocracies such as Russia and Saudi Arabia because you depend on them for raw materials or energy. Good allies make it easier to focus on well-being. One of the reasons why Costa Rica has been able to develop into an eco-economy is the protection it enjoys from the US.

The EU also depends on the US, the strongest partner in NATO, for its security. We shelter under the American nuclear umbrella. Do you, as a US resident, think we can continue to count on this ally?

That is difficult to predict because American politics is highly polarised nowadays. I am cautiously optimistic. Surveys show that the younger generation is losing faith in the current form of capitalism. They attach much more importance to fair sharing. If the US goes in that direction, it could be a relatively good ally for a post-growth Europe.

Gaya Herrington is a Dutch econometrician, sustainability researcher, and women's rights activist. In 2021, her study *Update to Limits to Growth: Comparing the World3 model with empirical data*, which confirmed the conclusions of the Club of Rome's 1972 report *Limits to Growth*, made waves worldwide. In 2022, she published the book *Five Insights for Avoiding Global Collapse* (MDPI). Herrington lives and works in the United States. She is vice president for sustainability research at Schneider Electric and a member of the Club of Rome's Transformational Economics Commission.

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Can Europe Defend Itself Without Growth?

Interview with
Sven Biscop
by
Richard Wouters

There are increasing doubts as to whether pursuing GDP growth indefinitely is compatible with a liveable planet. Could the EU be the first to renounce economic growth without putting itself at the mercy of other great powers? Belgian geopolitical thinker Sven Biscop says defence cooperation and diplomacy are the recipe for peaceful coexistence under a degrowth scenario.

Richard Wouters: Has the degrowth discussion already reached expert circles in the field of international relations?

Sven Biscop: Not really, I think. People who, like me, have a background in strategic studies are engaging with the economy more than before. Firstly, because today's geopolitical players are deliberately using economic instruments to pursue strategic goals. Secondly, because of the climate. A failure to mitigate climate change is going to exacerbate existing security problems and will probably create new ones. But the concept of 'degrowth' is something I've only come across a few times.

The EU bears the greatest historical responsibility for climate change and the depletion of natural resources. It is also one of the most prosperous parts of the world. If we have to abandon economic growth, is it natural for the EU to be at the forefront?

In the abstract, yes. In geopolitics, economic growth is seen as something positive, but I recognise that you can look at it differently. When concretely implementing degrowth, though, you have to be careful not to erode your power base in relation to other players too much. The EU is not alone in the world. It has competitors and rivals. All states pursue their self-interest, so they are competitors. Rivals, on top of that, actively undermine the interests of others. The EU has rivals, so it cannot afford too great an imbalance of power. You can say that we are building the perfect society in Europe, but if we don't have the power to defend it against rivals, what good is it? Then your model will be eroded.

There is also an internal dimension to it. With the green transition, and certainly with degrowth, we have to be careful not to create new imbalances within our own borders. There is always the risk that the measures you take can easily be borne by those who are already well-off, while the less well-off are hit hard. Security policy is external as well as internal. You cannot be an effective external player if you don't have internal stability. We guarantee that internal stability through the welfare state, with a certain degree of equality and democratic control. Without that stability, in times of crisis, extreme solutions suddenly become attractive.

Ultimately, the biggest threat to our security is internal. It would be very difficult for an external actor to bring down the EU. But if we start voting en masse for non-democratic parties – which are already in power in Hungary and [at the time of this interview] Poland – we can bring ourselves down. To avoid that, we need to preserve internal balances. A functioning welfare state must redistribute what is available.

People often say that the EU is a peace project. Thanks to European integration, starting in the 1950s, the participating countries no longer wage war against each other. But that is only half the story. The other half is that in those same 1950s, great strides were made in building the welfare state in order to keep peace within each of those countries. For me, these are the two halves of the peace project: integration between member states and social security within member states.

The challenge now is that we also have to make social security a European project, at least partly, because we have a single market and a single currency, with labour mobility and so on. Certain minimum conditions have to be agreed within the EU to keep all that manageable.

The degrowth movement advocates high-quality public services such as social security and healthcare. Should these include defence and diplomacy?

Yes. It is often suggested in the public debate that we have a choice: guns or butter. That is a false dichotomy. Why do we need defence? Because we have something worth defending: a model of society that combines the welfare state and democracy. If that model cannot withstand external pressures, it will not survive for long. We need defence that is both real and realistic, that is strong enough to defend us without costing astronomical sums of money. In addition, of course, we need diplomacy because defence alone will never suffice in international politics. Ideally, defence should serve only as a deterrent.

If the EU stopped pursuing economic growth, would member states cooperate better on defence?

It's hard to say. Even now, there is a strong argument for more European cooperation. The size of national armed forces has been greatly reduced, and their equipment has become much more expensive. We are seeing total fragmentation, which is not at all cost-effective. Yet the economic argument, endorsed by all, is insufficient to achieve true defence integration. Governments still want to protect their own defence industries, and the armed forces are seen as a symbol of sovereignty. Although we have had a European defence policy since 1999, we still haven't made the big leap. I doubt the end of growth would trigger it.

Is the Russian invasion of Ukraine the great gamechanger?

The war has actually deepened the divide between EU member states. One camp says: in a crisis like this, we can't do without NATO and the US, so what is the point of EU defence? The other camp says: if we want to exert influence in times of crisis, we can only do so through the EU. The result is a stalemate.

Admittedly, the EU is now doing things that are unprecedented, such as jointly buying weapons for Ukraine. But supporting Ukraine's armed forces is not the same as accelerating the integration of our own forces. Of course, if joint arms procurement works for Ukraine, that is an argument for doing it for our own militaries as well. So I keep hoping for a breakthrough, but I've been disappointed many times over the past 25 years.

And what if Trump or a Trumpist returns to the White House?

We had four years of Trump making crazy statements about NATO without it leading to a breakthrough in European defence integration. Even if Trump were to become president again, or if one of his followers were to make it to the White House, I don't imagine this would have much of an impact – unless he announced the disbandment of NATO.

The problem is that European countries don't trust each other. If you ask a Pole or even a Finn, 'If Russia were to invade now, whom would you trust to come to the rescue?', they will answer, 'The United States.' Not France, Germany, or the UK. From a historical viewpoint, this is strange: when Belgium was invaded in 1914, and Poland in 1939, who declared war on the aggressor? France and the UK. The US only came into the war much later.

When countries pool parts of their armed forces or divide military tasks among themselves, they can increase their combat power.

I see only two scenarios that could produce a breakthrough in European defence integration. The first would be a major crisis just outside Europe in which the US refuses to intervene, telling the EU to deal with it alone. The second would be if France and Germany, which are at the heart of European integration, really start doing what they announced in 2017: that they will jointly implement all their major defence projects, including a new type of battle tank and a new fighter jet. Such a merger of the military-industrial complexes would set a lot in motion, as other EU member states would be forced to join in or risk being pushed out of the defence market. The French and Germans also need those other member states, because it is not cost-effective to jointly develop a weapons system that nobody else buys.

How much can we gain from defence integration?

That is difficult to quantify. Estimates of the potential cost savings range from 20 billion to 120 billion euros a year,[1] depending on the degree of integration. The current state of fragmentation is not cost-effective, that much is clear. An example I often use is the air force. Whether a country has 100 aircraft or ten, it needs an airfield, training facilities for pilots and technicians, military air traffic control, etc. The smaller the armed forces, the larger the share of these support services – the shaft of the spear – and the smaller the share of combat units – the tip of the spear. When countries pool parts of their armed forces or divide military tasks among themselves, they can shift resources to the tip of the spear. In this way, they increase their combat power.

Belgium and the Netherlands already do that with their navies. Ships are still national, flying the Belgian flag with a Belgian crew or the Dutch flag with a Dutch crew. But all support tasks, from command and supply to training and maintenance, have either been divided – one country does it for both – or merged. There is only one headquarters. That makes it possible for countries to generate more deployable capabilities with the same budget.

Suppose all EU countries followed the example of the Belgian-Dutch navy, would a defence budget of 2 per cent of GDP be sufficient?

NATO's 2 per cent rule has become a kind of fetish. Countries should first determine what their ambition is, what military tasks they want to be able to perform. Even if governments chose to do as much as possible together, that would not immediately produce savings. There are upfront costs. Investment is needed to build a new organisation, to harmonise equipment. I think 2 per cent of GDP is about the minimum amount required.

In the EU, we have 'communitised' a number of policy areas, such as trade. Decision-making takes place at the European level; member states have no right of veto. Should the EU do the same with defence?

In my view, that would be the ideal approach. It would require an amendment of the EU treaty, and that is a difficult process, but I see no objective reason why it couldn't be done. In my opinion, the EU should decide on everything by majority vote, even on the deployment of troops. I would make only one exception: a member state that votes against a military operation should have the right not to participate in it. A country should never be forced to deploy its military as long as the military personnel are on its payroll. Should it ever come to the point where the military is on the EU's payroll, this exception will no longer be needed. Then we will have a real European army. But that will take a long time.

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Another form of communitisation is through the European Defence Fund, which supports research and the joint development of military capabilities. It allows the European Commission to steer the defence market. But this fund is currently very small – a billion and a half euros a year – compared to the more than 200 billion euros a year spent on defence by EU member states in total. I would shift a larger part of the defence budget from the national to the European level. The Commission could then spend the money with the common interest in mind.

I am also in favour of the EU buying its own military hardware. Talking about EU-owned assets is taboo at the moment, but I can imagine an intermediate step where a number of countries make a joint decision to buy the same equipment – drones, for example. Instead of dividing the drones between these countries, you could then operate them as one big fleet with a single command centre.

In your latest book, you wrote that allies bring more resources and more legitimacy. Does this make them all the more important for a post-growth EU?

Yes, but I would make a distinction between potential member states, allies, and partners here. EU enlargement involves the Western Balkans – which are already surrounded by EU countries – and Ukraine, which was granted candidate status in 2022. If Norway or Switzerland ever asked to join, they would soon be members. These will pretty much be the EU's borders for a long time, because I don't see Turkey becoming an EU member state.

In addition, we have allies with whom we have established a collective defence guarantee: NATO countries such as the UK and the US.

Finally, the EU should aim for strong partnerships with countries in South America, Africa, and Asia. We should not demand exclusivity but recognise that it is in their interest to cooperate with all major players and not rely too much on any one of them. In fact, this is the aim of the EU's Global Gateway strategy. We put an investment package on the table, link it to a political partnership and – if there is a need – offer security cooperation as well. All this without forcing countries to choose between, say, China and us.

The EU is highly dependent on imported raw materials, especially for the energy transition. If we implemented a degrowth programme and, for example, reduced the role of the private car in favour of cycling, public transport, and shared transport, we would need fewer scarce metals for the electrification of our mobility. Would that offer a geopolitical advantage?

It might make Europe's dependencies more manageable. But we will still need raw materials; we are not autarkic. Sourcing raw materials from abroad is not necessarily a bad thing. Much depends on how resource-rich countries organise extraction: is it done in the most environmentally friendly way possible, and do the proceeds benefit the population? Unfortunately, in many countries this is not the case because of poor governance.

In the end, the most important thing is that we all continue to recognise that everyone is dependent on everyone else. That contributes to stability. Interdependence is not a sufficient condition to prevent war, but it does help; it creates an additional threshold for warfare. Therefore, we need to foster connectivity so that the world economy remains globalised.

Dependencies can be weaponised, but that is always a double-edged sword. Even before the Ukraine war, I said: we must make it clear to Putin that if he turns off the gas tap, it will never open again. Now that the Nord Stream pipeline has been blown up, it won't. So stopping the supply of energy or raw materials is a weapon you can only use once. It is not as strong a weapon as people often think.

Some Green realos advocate that the EU should seek a global alliance of democratic states to counterbalance authoritarian powers such as Russia and China. Is that a good idea?

A club with only democracies, what global problem is that going to solve? Climate change? Migration? Nuclear proliferation? To tackle the big problems, we also need the non-democratic countries. We need to keep them involved in the institutions that shape multilateral cooperation, without that implying approval of their domestic practices. To me, that is realpolitik.

World politics is about interests. Every state pursues its interests and ultimately cooperates with every other state if that serves its interests, regardless of the domestic political system. By presenting world politics as a confrontation between democracies and autocracies, you push China into the arms of Russia. At present, the Chinese are trying to hold the middle ground on the war in Ukraine. We need to play a nuanced diplomatic game to make sure China stays in that middle position. A new Cold War, with the US and Europe on one side and China and Russia on the other, is really not in our interest.

The EU is working on legislation to ban products made with forced labour from its internal market. This is particularly targeted at products from Chinese factories where members of the Uyghur minority work under duress. Do you support that law?

I do. The question is where we draw the red lines. If we say that we cannot trade with countries that violate human rights, we won't be left with many trading partners. But we can say that we don't want to become complicit in human rights violations, so we won't be buying products made by Uyghur forced labourers.

Is it compatible to draw red lines for China while working together to tackle the climate crisis?

It will have to be. If we link everything to everything, we won't agree on anything anymore. We have to separate issues, 'compartmentalise' relations. My general principle is: work together where you can, push back where you have to. It is precisely by having the courage to push back or strike back when our red lines are crossed that we lay the groundwork for equal cooperation in those areas where interests coincide.

What if China attacks Taiwan?

If China starts a war to change the status quo, it has a lot to lose. The country has an export economy heavily dependent on the global economy, much more so than Russia. We have to make it clear to Beijing that if they take that step, our economic relationship will change irrevocably. That is the only deterrent we have as Europeans, because we are not in a position to intervene militarily.

My husband is Taiwanese, so we often visit the island. It is a democratic society that is vastly different from the one in mainland China. The current status quo between China and Taiwan is best for everyone. The EU should underline that, and it should not tamper with that status quo.

Do China's threats against Taiwan keep you awake at night?

I don't think China will invade Taiwan tomorrow. The Chinese regime is currently focusing on consolidation and stability at home, so it doesn't want to cause a big stir abroad. But Taiwan is a highly ideologically charged, highly symbolic file, which makes it unpredictable.

If there's one thing that makes me lose sleep, it's that I try to develop a nuanced view, and as a result I come to conclusions that I don't always feel comfortable with. For example, when I say that we can do little for human rights in China. At the same time, I have studied the situation and this is my objective analysis. I'm not going to say something else because that makes me feel better. It's painful, but that's realpolitik. You shouldn't promise anything you don't think you can deliver.

Endnote

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Steering Away From Extractivism

Interview with
Peter Newell
by
Jonathan Essex

If the acquisition of ever more resources to feed expanding production and consumption is no longer a core aim of state policy, the violence required to access and maintain access to those resources within and between countries also becomes redundant. International relations expert Peter Newell highlights how a degrowth strategy would impact on geopolitics by addressing the sources of geopolitical competition and violence.

Jonathan Essex: How do you see the tensions or synergies between managed degrowth in Europe and the ability of Europe to achieve its geopolitical goals, such as promoting security in the widest sense?

Peter Newell: The dominant liberal peace doctrine[1] suggests that high levels of economic interdependence are crucial to maintaining peace in the world. If Europe delinked from the global economy as part of a degrowth agenda – for example by shortening supply chains, reducing flows of international trade, or regulating international production – this would reduce its economic interdependence. The liberal peace idea suggests this could have knock-on implications such as international relations becoming more conflictual (e.g., trade barriers rise, and economies start to shut themselves off), thereby reducing disincentives to go to war. There is also a fear that this might limit Europe's leverage to further its geopolitical aims through reciprocal relations with other countries or regions around trade and investment, which are often key bargaining chips for advancing other social and environmental goals.

However, in my view, Europe should focus on cooperation with other countries to tackle global challenges – related to the environment, health, poverty, and so on – while having a more de-globalised economy. The EU could seek ongoing political, cultural, and social exchange and cooperation on such issues whilst delinking some economic aspects, or at least not seeking to globalise further.

Geopolitics would be very different if a degrowth agenda was pursued, but it might strengthen the EU's ability to act in some areas. For example, one of the factors weakening the EU's ability to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the continued dependence of some European countries on Russian gas, leading to a reluctance to impose sanctions or take other measures.

This dependence, together with illicit and more explicit trade flows and financing, investment in property, and links through the arms trade has meant that Europe has essentially been financing Russia's war on Ukraine. The reduced energy demand delivered by a degrowth strategy could help reduce dependence on energy imports and increase leadership in this area.

There is a close relationship between concentrations of fossil fuels and autocratic regimes. Russia and Saudi Arabia are the obvious examples, but the list goes on. Europe engages in geopolitics with various undesirable regimes. Instead of shaping these countries' behaviour through traditional geopolitical means such as trade sanctions or the threat of conflict, we might be able to reduce their power by no longer buying their fossil fuels, which are a key source of their wealth. The shift to a lower carbon economy would see this wealth start to shrink, necessitating the diversification of their economies. Multilateral arrangements such as the proposed Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty[2] would be needed to ensure a fair phase-out.

In this way, actively pursuing a degrowth agenda might impact some of the drivers of conflict. This is not just about inter-state conflicts, which are just one part of the geopolitical puzzle. In many parts of the world, regional conflicts are also inextricably linked to natural resources.

The expansion of commodity extraction into new areas is part of a normal economic growth strategy. But this causes conflicts between governments, indigenous groups, and others, as even a cursory glance at the *Global Atlas of Environmental Justice* makes clear.[3] It also feeds broader forms of terrorism: look at how the FARC in Colombia and Boko Haram in Nigeria have relied on the ability to extract revenues and protect resource rents. By reducing encroachment on other peoples' territories and lands, steering away from an extractivist model of development could well reduce conflict.

In short, the only escape route from our current toxic geopolitics is to break the connection between growth and violence, which stems from the acquisition of ever more resources and labour from remote parts of the world. That isn't possible unless you deal with the nature of growth and extractivism.

If we had fewer state resources, how could we stand up to aggressive autocrats such as Putin? What would a Green foreign policy look like in the face of conflict?

One of the challenges I address in my book *Global Green Politics* is that of defence. Greens often want to be internationalists and express solidarity, but if you deliberately weaken the state – for instance by reducing its resources via degrowth – you are less able to perform this kind of international role.

That said, if you steal fewer resources, you will generate fewer problems and resentments among former colonies and populations displaced by extraction. As a result, there may well be less need for intervention around the world. We need to build alliances with other governments and social movements to magnify collective pressure on reckless states and corporations, including by withdrawing economic support for them in the form of boycotts and the like.

This is about addressing the root causes of social inequality, unsustainability, and war.

For Greens, these reside in a growth-oriented economy, which extracts wealth from humans and nature in an unsustainable way. If we were to live more sustainably, there would be less need for the unrelenting extraction of resources around the world and for the use of force to secure and protect those unjust flows of resources from poorer to richer groups and regions. This requires a rebalancing of power relations between states and citizens, capital and labour, and the Global North and South. Without this, a peaceful world will remain out of reach.

Europe sits between internationalism and localism. How might it be designed to better support both?

Europe can combine supranational oversight and coordination across communities and regions with the principle of subsidiarity, which enables decisions to be made as locally as possible. The impulse should be to control as much as possible locally and only go up to national or EU level when necessary. This would operate across different levels of co-existing nested authority rather than via a top-down governance model.

There is the potential to do this better in Europe through bodies such as the Committee of the Regions, which can help to coordinate action to be more than just the sum of a series of smaller regions or subnational units. There is also scope to use European funds, such as the Cohesion Fund, to lift up more deprived regions, encourage more social inclusion, and invest in green infrastructure. The EU also has a role in 'supporting the local' by amplifying the voices of smaller countries against more global actors such as the UN institutions, the US, China, and Russia.

While the EU plays an important intermediary role, it is not an entirely benign actor. The EU's guiding rationale was primarily about the common market and reducing trade barriers. It still exists largely for the benefit of economic interests, and so there is a need to reset its notions of development and progress.

There will always be scepticism about how far the EU as a body will go to deliver a degrowth agenda. There is support for a more conventional green economy agenda such as the European Green Deal, with a more interventionist tone than the US. But the EU is essentially still promoting the interests of European companies, for instance by pushing trade and investment deals overseas. To challenge that would mean shifting the power relations between the different Directorates-General of the EU (as well as between ministries in the governments of individual countries) away from those dealing with finance and trade and towards those dealing with environmental and social concerns. Such a rebalancing of power would require controls on corporate lobbying as a precursor to embedding an alternative vision.

The pursuit of a genuine degrowth pathway would require a rethinking of the overall purpose and mandate of the EU. There's almost a prior question to answer: can the EU realistically do that? This agenda could be pushed if one or two countries moved more in that direction, for instance if the Greens gained more power in Germany or elsewhere. Clearly, the EU already has a more progressive vision of a green economy than the US, Canada, China or Russia, but it is still quite far from the radical vision represented by degrowth. The EU had its origins in the drive for peace, followed by the creation of a common market. It now needs a longer-term vision defined around the fundamental challenges of peace and sustainability.

Could the EU's relationship with the Global South change with degrowth? How can we move beyond the post-colonial legacies of extractivism?

Unfair land acquisition and colonial legislation continue to be used in many African and Asian countries to extract ever more resources. This remains a driver of conflict. A conscious shift to reign in companies that benefit from these practices could form part of a 'solidarity economy'. This would recognise how resources continue to be exploited to fuel our consumption in the Global North instead of supporting development in the Global South.

There is also a difficult conversation to be had around our colonial past and reparations. There are huge debts to be paid by those who benefitted most from colonialism, just as there are by oil companies who benefitted most from carbon emissions; these could be redirected towards countries in the Global South. But it would be a challenge to find the resources for reparations in the context of attempts to reduce the size of the state and state expenditure.

Also, the nature of international development assistance would change. The global economy has expanded hugely since the Second World War. But we still have poverty, huge levels of malnutrition, and social exclusion. There are so many non-functioning institutions and poor health outcomes. Clearly that money, that huge increase in wealth, is not being evenly spread. Trickle-down economics does not work. Yet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals assume that tackling poverty and other goals is still contingent on economic expansion, which is ridiculous and contrary to most evidence.

There are huge debts to be paid by those who benefitted most from colonialism.

Will the transition to a lower carbon economy still lead to an increase in demand for resources, replicating the neo-colonial extractivism of the past?

The pursuit of a conventional green economy will lead to increased demand for certain minerals and resources for renewable energy. An economy aiming to achieve sufficiency and meet basic needs would require far fewer of those resources. Demand has to be reduced so that extractivism is minimised. Where materials are extracted, which will be inevitable in certain cases, this has to be done in the most socially and environmentally responsible way possible with the appropriate standards and regulation.

The way resources flow around the world currently serves geopolitical rather than developmental needs. Catalan economist Joan Martinez Alier and others have explored the uneven exchange of resources between countries and how this results in injustices, both ecological and social, within and between societies.[4]

This links into the discussion around polluter elites and how to 'shrink and share' the economy globally. The bulk of resource production and consumption does not address the needs of the majority but rather fuels unsustainable consumption by richer groups. There is plenty of scope to both reduce production and consumption by limiting overconsumption and directing production towards meeting genuine social and environmental needs.

A degrowth approach goes beyond *substitutability* – the 'plug and play' approach of green growth in which we simply replace petrol and diesel cars with huge numbers of electric cars. It is like saying, 'Everything else in the system is fine, we just need to make it all electric.' This is already driving an unsustainable resource boom. Degrowth would mean saying, 'We need fewer cars in the world.' There has to be a shift in tackling the demand side. This is a big challenge in a growth-oriented capitalist economy. But it would potentially free up land and resources overseas that those countries might then use for their own populations, rather than for export to Europe.

In the meantime, we must clean up the mining industry. It is awash with damaging practices including the large-scale use of child labour. There will be some ongoing demand, but this can be further reduced if products are designed to last longer. As noted above, this needs to take place in the context of major shifts in production and consumption. This includes choice editing of products coming to market, restrictions on planned obsolescence, and limits on advertising, which fuels unnecessary consumption.

Finally, if the UK and EU both chose a post-growth path, might this lead to greater possibilities for collaboration in the future?

One of the main incentives for the UK to re-join the EU is the promise of reduced trade barriers and improved economic cooperation with its nearest and most important trading partner. That would still be an important driver under a degrowth scenario. Closer collaboration would also be useful for coordinating regional and international responses to a range of threats – disasters, environmental or health issues – as well as for development cooperation. There is a potential for the UK to have a stronger voice in acting with the EU in global fora when it finally comes to terms with the end of empire (which it clearly hasn't yet). These arguments might tip the balance in favour of re-engaging with Europe, even if core economic incentives are not the primary driver.

Endnotes

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Peter Newell is a professor of international relations at the University of Sussex. He works on the political economy of climate change and energy transitions. He previously held positions at the universities of Oxford, Warwick, and East Anglia and NGOs Climate Network Europe and Friends of the Earth. He has sat on the boards of Greenpeace UK and Brussels-based NGO Carbon Market Watch and is a member of the advisory board of Green House Think Tank. His books include *Governing Climate Change* (Routledge, 2023), *Power Shift: The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions* (CUP, 2021), and *Global Green Politics* (CUP, 2019).

Jonathan Essex is a sustainability researcher at Green House Think Tank, UK.

The EU-Chile Trade Agreement

A Degrowth Perspective

Interview with **Gabriela Cabaña Alvear** by **Jonathan Essex**

The recent trade agreement between the European Union and Chile was described by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen as a landmark of key geopolitical importance that strengthens the economic security of both parties. A key focus of the agreement is the importation of green hydrogen and lithium to power Europe's green transition. Chilean transdisciplinary scholar Gabriela Cabaña Alvear explains how this agreement, and the geopolitics that underpin it, can be viewed from a Chilean and degrowth perspective.

Jonathan Essex: What impact is the European energy transition having on Chile and other Latin American countries?

Gabriela Cabaña Alvear: Foreign relations and diplomacy are being shaped by geopolitical interests in lithium and energy, leading to significant pressure on countries including Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina to increase resource extraction for export. My research into energy planning in Chile uncovered how energy and material extraction policies were prioritising growth in the export of new commodities – principally green hydrogen and lithium – to support the energy transition elsewhere rather than Chile's own decarbonisation or energy needs. This ignores the concept of planetary boundaries and leads to environmental conflicts.

This trend is reflected across the region. Chile was the first to create a national policy to export green hydrogen, in 2020. A similar position is being promoted in Brazil and Uruguay. These policies are supported by trade agreements, including to drive European decarbonisation. For example, Chilean president Gabriel Boric has just toured Europe, setting out how Chile can contribute to the EU's strategic autonomy through the supply of green hydrogen and critical materials such as lithium for batteries.

These agreements reflect a securitisation perspective – securing the renewable energy and other resources needed to maintain the status quo in Europe. For example, some suggest that in the future we will have just as many cars as today, but that they will be battery- or hydrogen-powered. But maintaining this scale of private car use is unsustainable and would not represent a just transition. Europe should set limits on how much it needs to be sufficient – and no more. The EU needs to stop trying to seduce countries into increasing resource exports as this will only increase its consumption. Instead, there needs to be a focus on transforming energy systems worldwide, together – in this case in both Chile and Europe.

Why has Chile opted for this type of energy policy?

Chile's energy policy was proposed with the promise that the benefits of growth would trickle down and bring about a green industrial revolution in the country. The alternative would be to prioritise Chile's domestic energy needs first, implying a re-organisation of production followed by the development of the most appropriate export and trade policies. But the opposite is happening. First of all, Chile is aiming to secure new exports to receive the foreign currency it needs, and there appears no political will to challenge this.

In your paper *Only for the Global North?*[1] you state that we should move away from seeing degrowth as a nation-state problem and instead think about the poor in the North and the elites in the South. Can you expand on that?

I have real concerns about who benefits from this focus on lithium and green hydrogen. To explore this, there is a need to zoom in on the differences within countries. In Chile, this policy mostly benefits the small rich elites who are already at a level of energy and resource consumption similar to that in Europe. It supports their businesses and their lifestyles. The policy doesn't help those living in energy poverty and needing access to cleaner energy, who represent an important part of Chile's population. Similarly, the use of batteries or green hydrogen in electric cars does not help those marginalised in Europe. The reality is that Chile's export of lithium, copper, and hydrogen will sustain the extremely wasteful and material - and energy - intensive lifestyles of richer households in Europe. For its part, Chile will remain dependent on fossil fuels and create new ecological sacrifice zones – all while failing to address its very real problems of energy poverty.

The same relations are mirrored elsewhere. In India, for example, many of the nation's policies support a small elite who have become incredibly wealthy, again reproducing the dynamics of extraction and dispossession inside national boundaries. They say, 'But we are a poor country, we need to grow', yet investment is not addressing poverty.

How might a country such as Chile break from this narrative of continued economic growth, and how might that impact on geopolitics?

The financial constraints shaping national economic policies are tied to current geopolitical relations. Unequal financial structures and incentives lead to developing countries depending on the currencies of developed countries, including repaying unfair forms of debt. Some countries then say they have the right to access wealth via fossil fuels to drive development because other countries have already done this. For example, Argentina is advocating the expansion of dirty fossil fuel exploitation, to pay off its debts. The alternative would

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be to reshape economies. This could start with reparations as a way to erase debt, as called for by the Debt for Climate movement[2], accompanied by rich countries relinquishing some of their power to bring about more equal international relations.

Geopolitics includes how governments act in subtle ways to put pressure on other countries. In Chile, our government has been reminded of the need to be enmeshed in globalised trade as it exists today. That was reflected in the new left-wing progressive government's explicit efforts to demonstrate that they were not that radical, that they still wanted the economy open to foreign direct investment and to maintain the default energy planning perspective for Chile as one that supports growth. Chile's economic objective is for its people to be better off, but doubling or tripling energy production and exporting this to Europe is unlikely to improve the living conditions of most Chilean people.

Change is suppressed by violence, and enforcement takes place at many levels. Militarisation happens within countries as well as between countries. It follows a known formula, whereby private property and extractive activities are protected by the police or even by the military, as is the case in some places in Latin America. One example is the 'state of exception' declared in southern areas of Chile, supposedly to help control the 'serious disturbance of public order' there. This was the government using the military to suppress, and thereby effectively criminalise, the indigenous struggle against private extractive industries. This is not a rare occurrence; it is an integral part of how the structures of dispossession are sustained. It sits alongside ownership strategies and institutional tools, such as the way environmental evaluation systems function, and how the spaces offered for participation exclude economic democracy. These structures make it even more difficult to change course – towards degrowth, for example. Instead, the need for development and economic prosperity is presented as 'catching up' with the West.

A more pragmatic goal could be to consider alternatives that include degrowth-inspired concepts such as limits and sufficiency. These could be put at the service of planning for energy descent. A step in this direction was the proposal of a new constitution that aimed to redesign Chile's political institutions, thereby restraining the neoliberal structures that currently dominate them. To be decided on via a national referendum, the proposed constitution was underpinned by the concept of *buen vivir*[3] – a political and philosophical approach articulated by indigenous peoples that aims to bring an end to extractivism and is to some extent aligned to degrowth. The draft constitution contained many promising proposals, including enshrining rights for nature. However, in the lead-up to the referendum, the stock markets fell in response to fears that constitutional change would affect economic stability. Public announcements aimed to address this, stating that Chile would not go down a path of radical change and that continued resource exploitation would be encouraged, including through foreign direct investment.

In spite of these efforts, at the referendum on 4 September 2022, the proposed constitution was rejected by 62 per cent of voters.[4] Chile's governance structures therefore remain unchanged. This highlights both the amount of political muscle and momentum that is required to bring about degrowth and the geopolitical context that is needed to make it possible.

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Gabriela Cabaña Alvear is a Chilean transdisciplinary scholar originally trained in sociology who draws from political ecology and feminist theoretical perspectives. For her PhD in anthropology at the London School of Economics, she is exploring how social policy intersects with professional anthropological practice, including a focus on energy planning in southern Chile in the context of the climate emergency. Gabriela is part of the Centro de Análisis Socio Ambiental (Centre of Social-Environmental Analysis), Red Chilena de Ingreso Básico Universal (Chilean Network of Basic Income), and the Basic Income Earth Network. She is also active in the degrowth movement.

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What Stands in the Way of Post-Growth?

Interview with **Cristina Monge** & **Giorgos Kallis** by **Soledad García Consuegra**

Political scientist Cristina Monge and degrowth researcher Giorgos Kallis discuss the geostrategic and cultural barriers to a post-growth Europe.

S. García Consuegra: Is the European Union ready, at the political level, to take the first steps towards post-growth?

Giorgos Kallis: I don't think there are signs of any serious political commitment to move in that direction. There is an unprecedented openness to discussing post-growth, as evidenced by the Beyond Growth conference held at the European Parliament in May 2023. And there is, at last, some funding for research on this issue. Some ears are more open than they have ever been. But we have to remain realistic. Preliminary discussions may be taking place, but we are a long way from serious planning, especially in a context of the general conservative turn within most EU countries.

Cristina Monge: I agree. This debate has already taken place in the EU at the level of social and environmental movements, and the conference was a first step towards opening it up more widely. But we're still a long way from it being taken up by the institutional side of the EU. Even more so if we take into account how the correlation of forces in Europe is changing. The countries that make up the Visegrád Group [Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia], which have always been among the most reluctant on issues of ecological transition, have now been joined by countries such as Italy and Finland. In these countries, extreme right and far-right forces are coming to power. They see the fight against climate change and other international initiatives such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as establishment policies to be opposed. The growth of these forces, and their incorporation into certain governments, makes it difficult to believe that the European institutions are in a position to raise the debate on post-growth. The political and economic uncertainty in which we live makes it even more unlikely.

What are the main internal and geopolitical barriers to be overcome on the path to post-growth?

GK: The internal barriers are clear. The wealthy, who hold more political power, want growth so that their profits increase and they can keep getting richer and richer without the poor getting so much poorer that they revolt. Growth is necessary for the internal stability of the capitalist system. But this stability is temporary because, in the long run, compound growth is a very destabilising force – not only for the climate, but also for the economy itself, which cannot be forced to sustain this exponential race to infinity.

At the geopolitical level, the barrier is also clear: the competition for military power and geopolitical advantage is tied to economic growth. After all, GDP as a tool for measuring a country's economy was first put to use during the Second World War, and GDP growth really became a general goal in the context of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and the United States were trying to outpace one another in the arms race. It goes without saying that powerful nations vying for political and economic power need growth to control other nations by military or economic force.

CM: Apart from the current correlation of political forces I mentioned earlier, there are obviously other barriers. Even in countries where the far right is not in government or close to being in government, growth and post-growth is still a niche debate engaged in by social movements, environmentalists, and intellectuals. It hasn't yet made it onto the streets. It hasn't even made it into politics, either on the Left or on the Right. I can't imagine anyone in Spain standing in the general election on a post-growth or degrowth platform and winning.

The main barrier may well lie in the very term 'growth', which is something of a fetish in our culture and way of life. Post-growth or degrowth are automatically associated with the idea of impoverishment. We need to move away from this and start focusing on the positive – on reconsidering welfare or the social pact, always within the parameters of sustainability. When these discourses are introduced, they should be incorporated into a positive paradigm, a paradigm of desirability, focused on well-being. In this way, we may be able to find a way forward that is more attractive to citizens.

In your view, what are the main tensions and synergies between planned degrowth within the EU and the Union's ability to achieve its geopolitical objectives, such as strengthening security in a broad sense?

GK: I think Europe should adopt the role of the wise and peaceful elder that knows better than to pursue destructive world wars or cold wars and is ready to repair its past sins. This maturity should translate into acceptance of and adaptation to a new era in which constant expansion is no longer necessary – or even possible. Within these contours, Europe needs to develop a post-imperialistic and post-colonial form of coexistence with other nations and world cultures. It must act as a force for mediation and peace as opposed to pursuing a quest for supremacy and power. Degrowth, in the broad sense of the term, is perfectly compatible with such a path.

More realistically, given that the EU is trapped in global geopolitical competition manifesting as the race for military power, the tensions with degrowth are obvious.

CM: I dare not give an answer, because talk of planned degrowth within the EU right now is distant 'political fiction'.

Much of the degrowth movement is inclined towards pacifism and anti-militarism but, at the same time, insists that the transition towards a degrowth society must be democratic. How should degrowth approach the defence of democracy against hostile autocracies? Can it be defended without investing in armaments?

GK: Yes, why not? Most EU countries belong to NATO and NATO has enough armaments to destroy the whole world a few times over if it were to be attacked.

I understand that you are asking this question with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in mind, but I don't think the causes of Russia's aggression can be reduced to some sort of hostility towards democracies in general. The causes were much more specific and, as in other wars and invasions by great powers, relate to competition for zones of influence, internal politics, historical myths and fantasies, and much else. I don't think Russia invaded Ukraine just because the latter had elections. For its part, the United States – the world's so-called oldest democracy – has waged a number of illegal wars as well as covert operations against elected leaders in the last decades, again driven by what American elites perceived as the defence of the country's narrowly defined national interests and the quest for global supremacy. So I fail to see this existential military threat to democracies from autocratic powers, at least up to now. I worry much more about the internal erosion of democracies with the rise of anti-democratic parties, leaders, and practices, even in countries that ostensibly see themselves as bulwarks of democracy.

We need to mark a very clear line between reasonable defence with an eye on peace and gung-ho armament.

CM: This is a fundamental question, especially in the context of a war like the one in Ukraine. We are seeing that European societies have not mobilised strongly against the war as they did on other occasions. This is undoubtedly because, in this case, we are talking about an invasion, with a clearly identifiable aggressor and aggressed, which, moreover, is taking place on the EU's doorstep. As a result, the pacifist discourses that were once more prevalent in Europe, for different reasons in each country, have broadly fallen out of favour.

GK: I think pacificism is and should remain at the heart of the Green movement, though lamentably this is less and less the case. The war in Ukraine has put the Western peace movement in the rather rare situation where it is not the West itself invading another country, in a preventable war. A peace movement in the West to convince Putin to stop the war in Ukraine is obviously a futile exercise, as the last thing Putin cares about is peaceniks in Europe.

That said, there is still the need for a peace movement within Europe to curb the belligerent excesses that are emerging right now, with this sudden love for NATO. We need to mark a very clear line between reasonable defence with an eye on peace and gung-ho armament in preparation for fights over zones of influence and against potential challengers to Western hegemony.

Europe increased military spending by 13 per cent in the first year of the war in Ukraine. Is it possible to reconcile increased defence and security expenditure with energy transition and climate commitments?

GK: I don't think the two are compatible. This spending should stop. Europe and NATO have enough nuclear warheads to protect themselves if it gets down to that. Military expenditure should be cut to the absolute minimum, not increased. All the money there is should be invested in climate mitigation and social protection and forgiving loans to the Global South, not in building tanks and submarines, for god's sake. How can we Greens seriously be discussing this in an era of climate breakdown?

How do large multinational companies fit into a post-growth scenario? Are they a brake or an ally?

GK: A brake, obviously. Multinationals are the embodiment of the hyper-accelerated globalised economy that depends on the extraction of underpaid labour and resources from the rest of the world.

CM: Indeed, these types of companies are embedded in the growth model, without which they cannot survive, so they are unlikely to be allies. However, business movements are emerging, such as, for example, B Corp, with different approaches and a clear understanding that, to be viable in the long term, they have to operate within a paradigm of sustainability. While they have neither the power nor the capacity of the large multinationals, such companies do pave the way for a new business model and a different approach to economic development that is closer to the criteria of sustainability.

What role should be played by the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund? And should the economic governance functions of the United Nations be expanded?

GK: In their current condition, the first three serve mostly as tools for protecting the economic hegemony of the West and the interests of creditors and financiers.In an ideal scenario, the UN would develop economic institutions that allow for balanced, democratic, and fair economic relations between different countries.

CM: The United Nations has no executive capacity and is unable to manage even conflicts. Beyond declaratory issues, it is very difficult for the UN to implement policies and the corresponding sanctions. The three other institutions respond to the ideology and interests of the famous Bretton Woods Agreements. In order for them to raise debates such as post-growth, they would have to completely reinvent themselves, and that is highly improbable.

Finally, what should be the EU's main geostrategic objectives in a post-growth context?

GK: We are still very far from even debating post-growth, so this is pure speculation. I would wait for a major EU country to express an interest in moving in a post-growth direction, then this debate could start to have some meaning. If we go further in imagining such a scenario, then I would repeat what I said before. Europe's geostrategic interest should be to maintain some sort of active neutrality and independence, becoming an agent of peace and stability around the globe and focussing internally on strengthening democracy and on finding new forms of social security and well-being without growth.

CM: We are indeed a long way from that scenario. This is not the debate at present, and we must focus on the more urgent challenges. EU member states that want to keep the European Green Deal will have to make a major effort to defend it against governments where the presence of the far right is so significant as to bring the very existence of climate change into question.

Cristina Monge is a political scientist with a PhD from the University of Zaragoza, where she teaches sociology. Her areas of interest are sustainability and the quality of democracy, with a particular focus on governance for the ecological transition. Cristina works with research centres including Globernance, BC3, and ECODES and is a political analyst for *El País*, *Cadena SER*, *RTVE*, *infoLibre*, and the *Green European Journal.* She participates in the Open Government Forum (Foro de Gobierno Abierto) and in the Advisory Council for Development Cooperation (Consejo Asesor de Cooperación al Desarrollo).

Giorgos Kallis is an ecological economist and political ecologist working on environmental justice and the limits to growth. He has a bachelor's in chemistry and a master's in environmental engineering from Imperial College London, a PhD in environmental policy from the University of the Aegean, and a second master's in economics from the Barcelona School of Economics. Giorgos has been a professor at ICREA (Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies) since 2010. He is best known for his numerous publications on degrowth.

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Recom-
mendations

Geopolitical Pathways for a Europe Beyond Growth

By shifting its course from pursuing economic growth to reducing its environmental footprint in an equitable way, the European Union would enhance its credibility in the global fight against the climate and biodiversity crises. Furthermore, moving beyond neocolonial extractivism and freeing up natural resources for the world's poor might open the way to more equal partnerships between the EU and the Global South.

However, geopolitics is not just about engaging through cooperation; it is also about addressing conflict. A post-growth EU would be more resilient in the face of resource-based conflicts, thereby gaining in strategic autonomy. But it would be unable to isolate itself from violent conflicts entirely. It would therefore be unwise for it to neglect its defence or simply outsource it to others. This is all the more so because the EU has a responsibility, enshrined in its treaties, to uphold the international rule of law, defend human rights, and promote democracy, whether in the face of aggressive autocracies or unscrupulous multinational corporations.

A world where 'might makes right' will never develop the unprecedented level of cooperation that is necessary to avoid ecological breakdown. In order to safeguard the rules-based international order while trying to make it more just and effective, the EU's involvement is essential. But the Union cannot do this alone. Post-growth would only strengthen the case for the EU as a global actor, combining strategic autonomy to defend its values and strategic interdependence to protect life on Earth.

Economic strength matters in geopolitics. A post-growth EU is likely to see its share of global GDP and trade fall even faster than it is at present. In order to be a global actor, the Union would have to mobilise a broader set of instruments and policies that allow it to work for human and ecological security both in Europe and worldwide. A post-growth EU would need to be more united, more creative, more proactive, and more trustworthy.

The following recommendations on geopolitical pathways to a post-growth Europe have been jointly developed by the partners in the Green European Foundation's transnational project *Geopolitics of a Post-Growth Europe*: BlueLink (BG), Center for Green Politics (RS), Etopia (BE), Fondation de l'Écologie Politique (FR), Green House Think Tank (UK), Transición Verde (ES), and Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks (NL).

Pooling forces

1. Work for more unity in the EU's external action in order to use diplomatic, financial, and military resources more effectively. This includes abolishing vetoes in foreign and security policy, speaking with one voice, merging

diplomatic services, creating an EU seat on the United Nations Security Council, and integrating member states' armed forces.

2. *Jointly* develop and procure the weapon systems needed for the EU to protect itself, its allies, and the international rule of law. This would save costs, foster the interoperability of member states' armed forces, and reduce the commercial pressure to export arms. In order to reduce the environmental footprint of the armed forces, the EU should fully report military greenhouse gas emissions and introduce sustainability requirements for new military hardware, including for projects funded under the European Defence Fund.

3. Develop and enforce a European model of innovation. Public investment should favour value-driven and open-source innovations that maintain Europe's relevance as a technology hub while facilitating technology transfer to the Global South and closing the gender gap in innovation.

4. Increase fiscal space for public investment in the EU through joint debt issuance (Eurobonds).

Welcoming new members

5. Work towards the EU accession of Ukraine, the Western Balkan states, and others in order to strengthen the Union's security, geopolitical clout, and legitimacy. Make sure the EU is ready for enlargement. Preserving core values and mutual trust requires stronger EU oversight of the rule of law, human rights, and democracy – both in candidate countries and member states. Candidate countries must align themselves with the EU's foreign and security policy well before accession.

6. Keep the door open for the United Kingdom. A well-considered re-entry into the EU would not only favour cooperation in Europe but also increase the Union's standing in the world.

Partnering with the Global South

7. Couple strategic autonomy with solidarity. A Europe without economic growth would find it easier to reduce its overreliance on imported energy and materials, but it shouldn't neglect the various impacts this would have on exporting countries, especially in the Global South. Solidarity requires that the EU support them in creating new sources of income and jobs.

8. Make sure the EU and its member states live up to their commitments regarding development cooperation (0.7 per cent of gross national income) and international climate finance and provide compensation for climate loss and damage in the Global South. In development cooperation, prioritise the improvement of public services to the benefit of women and other disadvantaged groups. Gender equality is conducive to peace and development.

9. Promote value addition in metal-mining countries. Even a post-growth Europe would need to import metals for its energy transition. It should not only push back the numerous abuses in the mining sector, inter alia through requiring sustainability due diligence from companies along the value chain, but also assist mining countries in adding value to their metal ores through processing and manufacturing. This calls for joint investments and technology transfer.

10. Take the lead in debt erasure so that over-indebted governments in the Global South can instead invest in improving public services. The extraction and export of natural resources must no longer be driven by debt repayment obligations but should only result from democratic decision-making that involves the communities affected.

11. Formally apologise for slavery and colonialism. The EU should put pressure on all member states involved to offer official apologies for slavery and colonialism and enter into talks on reparation programmes.

12. Promote greater balance in global institutions. The EU should team up with democratic governments in the Global South to develop proposals for the better representation of the Global South in the United Nations Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

Making the world safer

13. Pursue ecological diplomacy amid geopolitical conflict. Tackling the climate and biodiversity crises requires the EU to cooperate with geopolitical rivals that are open to international agreements, without becoming indulgent when it comes to human rights abuses or aggression. In the case of China, de-risking economic ties would make it easier for the EU to work with Beijing where possible and push back where necessary.

14. Strive to revive negotiations on arms control. Nobody benefits from a global arms race – least of all a post-growth EU. Regarding nuclear arms control, an effort should be made to re-engage Russia and involve China. The EU and NATO should be transparent about their current and planned military capabilities as a first step towards building the necessary trust for arms control agreements.

15. Be cautious about arms exports. Strict criteria should be laid down in an EU regulation that is enforceable by the European Commission. This should rule out arms deliveries to autocratic regimes and explicitly provide for supplying democratic governments with the weapons they need to defend themselves against aggression.

16. Stand up for human rights and democracy. Support human rights advocates, democracy activists, environmental defenders, women and gender activists, and independent media worldwide. Hold corporations to account for abuses in their value chains. Open up legal pathways for refugees instead of building Fortress Europe. Only with consistent policies can the EU credibly convey the message that human rights and democracy have universal value and are key elements of human and ecological security.

17. Promote an international dialogue on post-growth in industrialised countries as a pathway to averting ecological breakdown, improving social outcomes, and delivering ecological justice. The EU should lead by example, proving that it is possible to grow well-being without growing GDP.

Geopolitics of a Post-Growth Europe

It is unlikely that we will be able to defuse the climate time bomb, let alone other ecological threats, as long as our economy continues to grow. But what would the end of economic growth mean for geopolitics? Could a European Union that is the first to embrace post-growth still be a global actor? Would it be able to defend itself, its allies, democracy, human rights, and the international rule of law at a time when aggressive autocracies are invading or threatening their democratic neighbours? This report addresses uneasy questions that few have dared to ask.

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