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A Soccer Match Just Explained Europe's Geopolitical Problem

The US–Belgium FIFA controversy was trivial. What it revealed was not.

When Belgium pushed to reverse a FIFA ruling that the United States strongly opposed, most observers treated it as a sports governance dispute. It was not. It was a live demonstration of the structural reality that every serious analysis of European geopolitics eventually encounters: that the European Union is a post-conflict coordination project, not a power projection system, and that this distinction is permanent rather than transitional.

The controversy was geopolitically trivial. Belgium's position carried no strategic weight, threatened no alliance, and resolved itself quickly. What made it analytically revealing is precisely its triviality: in a domain where nothing was genuinely at stake, the EU's structural limits were visible without the distortions of genuine crisis. Brussels had no authority to coordinate or restrain Belgium. No unified European position emerged. Other member states stayed silent or took contradictory positions. Washington, accustomed to expecting "the EU" to respond, received twenty-seven national positions instead of one.

If Europe cannot produce a unified stance on sports governance, the implications for defense commitments, China policy, and sanctions architecture are not reassuring. Small events reveal big truths. This one revealed the truth that European leaders have been avoiding naming plainly for thirty years.

There Is No Single Europe

The EU is a treaty-based coordination mechanism with twenty-seven sovereign governments, twenty-seven veto points, twenty-seven domestic political cycles, and no unified military command, intelligence service, or foreign policy. This is not a design flaw awaiting correction. It is the design. The EU was built after two catastrophic European wars to prevent conflict, integrate economies, and stabilize democracy across a continent that had tried to destroy itself twice in thirty years. It was specifically not built to compete with superpowers, project military force, or act as a single nation. The founders understood the assignment. The assignment was not geopolitical power.

The FIFA controversy mapped neatly onto the structural reality that any serious European analysis reveals: there are at least four Europes, each with different interests, different threat perceptions, and different definitions of what "the right answer" looks like in any given dispute.

Northern Europe — Germany, the Netherlands, the Nordics — cares about rule of law consistency in international bodies, fiscal discipline, and export competitiveness. Its instinct in the FIFA case was procedural: was the ruling correct by the applicable rules? Southern Europe largely ignored the issue, as it tends to when disputes do not intersect with debt relief, tourism, or social stability. Eastern Europe viewed Belgium's move through a security lens, instinctively alert to anything that might complicate the NATO relationship with Washington. Western Europe — Belgium and

France most visibly — treated it as a sovereignty matter: Brussels will not be pushed around by Washington, whatever the domain.

The US expected a single European position. Europe delivered twenty-seven. This is why Washington increasingly negotiates bilaterally with Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw rather than with “the EU.” The EU is the venue for regulatory harmonization and trade negotiations. It is not the venue for strategic decision-making, because strategic decision-making requires the ability to move quickly, speak with one voice, and enforce discipline on members who defect. The EU has none of those capacities.

The strongest counterargument deserves honest engagement. The Russia sanctions packages following the 2022 invasion are a genuine case of EU coordination under pressure — twenty-seven member states, including energy-dependent Germany and economically exposed Hungary, maintaining a sanctions regime against their immediate commercial interests. That is not nothing, and it would be intellectually dishonest to dismiss it. But the Russia case is the exception that illuminates the rule rather than refutes it: the convergence happened because Eastern European members faced an existential threat that concentrated minds in a way a FIFA ruling never could. Existential pressure produces temporary coherence. Remove the pressure and the centrifugal forces reassert themselves — as Hungary’s subsequent drift and Italy’s periodic defections have demonstrated. Coordination under maximum pressure in one domain is not evidence of strategic coherence as a general institutional capacity.

The Centrifugal Force Is Getting Stronger

Belgium’s move in the FIFA dispute was not driven by a considered European strategic interest. It was driven by domestic political pressure, nationalist framing about foreign interference, and coalition dynamics that had nothing to do with the merits of the underlying ruling. That dynamic is not unique to Belgium. It is the operating condition of European politics in the current era.

Across the continent, populist and sovereignty-first governments have made EU-wide coordination harder rather than easier. Hungary has blocked sanctions packages. Italy shifts migration policy with each election. Poland and France clash over agricultural rules. The resistance to Brussels’ authority is not limited to the obvious obstructionists — it is distributed across the membership in proportion to how much any given government needs a domestic political win at any given moment. The EU cannot prevent member states from turning minor international disputes into domestic political theater, because it has no mechanism to do so without triggering the very sovereignty-first backlash that makes coordination harder in the first place.

The result is policy whiplash, incoherent long-term planning, and weak enforcement of EU-wide commitments. Governments change faster than EU strategies can be implemented. The institutional memory of a commitment made under one government does not bind the next. China and Russia understand this. They calibrate their engagement with individual European capitals accordingly, making offers to Berlin that Paris would refuse, making commitments to Budapest that Warsaw would reject, and exploiting the fragmentation systematically.

The Reaction Gap

The contrast between the US response to the FIFA controversy and the European response was itself the diagnosis. Washington’s reaction was fast, political, strategic, and narrative-driven. Europe’s was slow, reactive, procedural, legalistic, and fragmented across institutions. This

mismatch repeats itself across every domain where Europe and the United States interact: tech regulation, trade disputes, sanctions architecture, defense procurement, and — as the FIFA case demonstrated — even sports governance.

Europe excels at regulation. It has produced the world's most sophisticated regulatory frameworks for data privacy, competition policy, and environmental standards. It is genuinely good at the slow, deliberative, consensus-based work of building durable rules across twenty-seven legal systems. What it cannot do is act strategically at speed. Strategic action requires unified command, accepted hierarchy, and the ability to override individual member preferences in the service of collective interest. The EU's design makes all three of those things either impossible or so slow as to be functionally equivalent to impossible.

This is why Europe repeatedly loses agenda-setting power in every domain where speed and coherence matter. It arrives at the table after the frame has been set, having spent the preceding weeks negotiating internally over a position that then shifts again when the smallest member state objects. The Brussels machinery produces the most sophisticated position paper in the room, delivered after the room has moved on.

What Europe Is, and What It Is Not

None of this is a verdict on European failure. It is a verdict on European misidentification — the persistent confusion of what Europe is with what analysts, commentators, and European leaders themselves sometimes wish it were.

Europe is wealthy, educated, technologically advanced, socially stable, and culturally influential. Its combined GDP exceeds that of the United States. Its regulatory standards shape global markets. Its universities produce world-class research. Its citizens enjoy standards of living that are among the highest in human history. None of that is in question.

What Europe is not is a geopolitical actor in the sense that China, the United States, or increasingly India are becoming — and the distinction matters. In regulatory and economic domains, the EU is genuinely formidable: the GDPR reshaped global data privacy standards, the Digital Markets Act is rewriting the rules of platform competition worldwide, and the Green Deal has moved more industrial policy at scale than any comparable initiative. Brussels is the most consequential regulatory power on earth. That is a real and underappreciated form of global influence. The structural constraint is specific. It applies in domains requiring fast, unified, coercive action — defense commitments, crisis response, foreign policy positions that must be held against internal dissent, strategic decisions where speed matters more than consensus. In those domains, the EU was not designed to perform and does not perform. The PESCO defence initiative and the European Defence Fund are real but genuinely underpowered — €8 billion over seven years against hundreds of billions in national defence budgets that remain nationally controlled. The direction of travel is toward greater strategic autonomy. The pace is insufficient to change the structural picture in any policy-relevant timeframe. The constraints are institutional, demographic, and strategic. They are not ideological, and they are not temporary.

The US–Belgium FIFA controversy will be forgotten within a year. What it illustrated will not change. A coordination mechanism that cannot coordinate on sports governance will not coordinate on defense commitments when the cost is real, the timeline is compressed, and the domestic political pressure runs in the other direction. The gap between Europe's economic weight

and its geopolitical coherence is not a problem awaiting a solution. It is the architecture of the project, visible in everything from FIFA rulings to NATO burden-sharing — and the sooner Western strategic planning is built around that reality rather than around the Europe that analysts wish existed, the better the planning will be.

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