

THE EU'S ACCIDENTAL GEOPOLITICS

EUROPE'S GEOPOLITICAL ADAPTATION AND ITS LIMITS

Niklas Helwig

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This Working Paper develops the idea that the EU is engaged in accidental geopolitics. There is a lack of consensus among EU institutions and members on the extent of the EU's geopolitical role. The Union's structures and strategic culture do not reflect a focus on geostrategy and power. Instead, the environment of strategic competition has pushed the EU to act in geopolitical ways, for example through the financing of military aid or the imposition of sanctions.

The paper argues that these actions have been accidental rather than intentional. To substantiate this argument, the paper draws on an analysis of several key foreign and security policy developments during the EU's outgoing institutional cycle (2019–2024). The analysis reveals the EU's shortcomings in becoming an intentional geopolitical actor, and highlights the role of foreign policy agents within the Union in driving decisions. Accidental geopolitics and the reactive deployment of the EU's international leverage underline the impact of the Union's top jobs on its role in international politics.



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ISBN 978-951-769-803-0

ISSN 2242-0444

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Graphics: Otso Teperi

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INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics has been one of the buzzwords in this EU's institutional cycle. It began with the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen and her vow to create a "geopolitical Commission" in 2019.¹ Other leaders, such as High Representative/Vice President of the Commission (HRVP) Josep Borrell, chimed in, declaring that the EU needs to "relearn the language of power."² A dense accumulation of serious world events – the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the Israel-Hamas war – affirmed the narrative that the EU needs to adopt a different approach to global politics, one that is more mindful of its interests and capabilities.

The EU's turn to geopolitics has not gone unnoticed in academic debates, which generally struggle with the return of 20th-century thinking to world affairs.³ While some scholars diagnosed Europe's geopolitical "awakening"⁴ or "birth",⁵ others were more sceptical, seeing little evidence that the EU "will project a stronger or different form of power internationally."⁶ Balanced accounts pointed to elements of an "emerging geopolitical actor"⁷ regarding the EU's policy towards Ukraine and the provision of hard power. Given the inconclusiveness of the debate on the EU's changing nature as an international actor, the question remains: How to conceptualize the EU's limited yet observable turn?

This Working Paper contributes to the discussion on the EU's geopolitical trajectory by proposing the concept of accidental geopolitics.⁸ In contrast to the established thinking on geopolitics, accidental geopolitics points to the EU's lack of intention and strategic culture, leading

to an à la carte use of various geopolitical power attributes, ranging from hard to soft forms of influence.

The reason for the EU's accidental engagement in geopolitics is related to three questions that the EU faces as a geopolitical actor: a strategic one involving the EU's goals in international politics; an institutional one related to how the EU's foreign and security policy should be organized; and a policy question regarding the instruments that the EU should use to achieve its goals. Although the EU acts in geopolitical ways if needed, its actions are not the result of a deliberate choice, as the three questions remain unanswered. By defining the EU's geopolitics as accidental, the analysis focuses on the EU's observable actions and behaviour rather than on the shifts in the identity and interests of the Union. This approach allows for a more balanced assessment that acknowledges changes in the EU's international engagement, while also pointing to the Union's structural limitations.

The Working Paper begins with a brief overview of geopolitics as a concept and how it applies to the EU. The idea of accidental geopolitics is introduced as a way to describe the EU's use of geopolitics within the established canon of the term. The second section takes a deep dive into the three questions and how they have featured in the outgoing institutional cycle. The unresolved strategic, institutional and policy questions form the background to the EU's à la carte use of geopolitical power in an accidental manner. The paper suggests that EU member states should pay close attention to the selection and mandating processes when appointing individuals to the Union's top jobs in 2024, as accidental geopolitics highlights the agency of individual decision-makers in the EU's international engagement.

1. ACCIDENTAL GEOPOLITICS

It is hardly surprising that the EU's leadership never defined what it meant by its geopolitical reorientation. Concepts and terms that are central to the EU's foreign and security policy, such as 'strategic autonomy', 'de-risking' or 'resilience', are often purposefully ambiguous to provide an inclusive headline that suits

1 Her predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, had already begun to develop a more political profile for the Commission and to set ambitious policies on track in response to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president. Von der Leyen rephrased and intensified these efforts, explicitly underlining the geopolitical dimension of the Commission's work (European Commission 2019).

2 Borrell 2020.

3 Nickel 2024.

4 Bergmann 2020.

5 Blockmans 2022.

6 Youngs 2022.

7 Raik et al. 2024.

8 The unit of analysis in this study is the European Union. The focus is on official EU policies and instruments, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and on developments and activities related to EU institutions and their leadership. References to member-state policies are made to illustrate debates within and between these institutions.

Characteristics of geopolitical schools of thought

Geopolitical school of thought	Power factor	Underlying logic
Classical geopolitics	Geography	Control of space and resources
Realist geopolitics	Military power	Deterrence and balance of power
Critical geopolitics	Normative power	Competing norms and narratives
Geo-economics	Economic power	Economic binding and wedging

Table 1. Characteristics of different geopolitical schools of thought.

the different positions of the member states.⁹ Such concepts hardly ever serve as a guide for a tangible policy agenda. Geopolitics is commonly equated with an interest- and power-based approach to international politics, often rooted in physical aspects of geography and military capabilities. In the literature, however, geopolitics is a loaded concept. It is worth unpacking it to discuss the possible elements of a geopolitical EU. The characteristics of different types of geopolitics are covered in Table 1.

Classical geopolitical thinkers, such as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder, highlighted the need for states to dominate geographic regions, such as overseas territories or the Eurasian heartland, in order to endure as a nation and influence global politics.¹⁰ The early 20th century military strategy of geographical domination is clearly not at the core of the EU's current strategic thinking. However, classical geopolitical thinking is part of today's debate, if only to reject the return to "spheres of influence" that actors such as Russia are propagating.¹¹

During the Cold War, the debate focused more on the possession of military power as an instrument of international politics. Realist geopolitics is less concerned with geography and focuses instead on the relative distribution of power in the international system.¹² This version of geopolitics is reflected in the EU's efforts to advance its military capabilities in recent decades to become more strategically autonomous from the US. Despite these efforts, the EU has shown few signs of a realist geopolitical turn. For example, the Union has not increased its conventional and nuclear capabilities to an extent that would make it an independent actor in global affairs.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the military power logic gave way to softer forms of global influence. The

emerging critical geopolitics questioned the implied colonial discourses of established theories and their competitive implications.¹³ Instead, scholars started to look at the effects of discourses and norms in shaping competition between states. The 1990s were formative years for the EU as a security actor, and the Union naturally turned to more comprehensive and cooperative aspects of security. As a different kind of actor, the EU sought to increase its global influence through its norms and values.¹⁴

In the 2010s, scholars began to develop a new research agenda based explicitly on the distinct dynamics of economic competition and the implications of wielding economic power globally.¹⁵ As a variant of geopolitics, geo-economics testifies to the fact that traditional forms of coercion and warfare have given way to more covert, but nonetheless highly effective ways of influencing others through interdependencies in finance, trade and technology. The EU is also playing its part in the economic game and has adapted its economic toolbox to a more geostrategic approach.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the military response to Russia's war against Ukraine demonstrates the persistence of hard power logic in global politics, forcing the EU to act accordingly.

International actors (mostly states) operate on a range of different geopolitical dimensions and cannot be neatly fitted into the above categories, which remain theoretical constructs. However, the EU has a particularly tough time translating its "geopolitical confusion"¹⁷ into a clear narrative of global engagement. The EU argues for a more forceful approach in line with realist geopolitics, while at the same time trying to maintain its status as a critical voice, lamenting the rise of great power logic in international relations.

9 Helwig 2022.

10 Flint 2021.

11 Cadier 2021.

12 Mearsheimer 2001.

13 Tuathail 1999.

14 Manners 2002.

15 Wigell and Vihma 2016; Vihma 2018.

16 Helwig and Wigell 2022.

17 Kundnani 2023.

At best, the EU seems to be taking a dialectical approach, trying to stay true to its “Kantian heritage”, while accepting the “conflictual nature of the world systems”.¹⁸ Whether such a “postimperial empire”¹⁹ is geopolitically apt remains questionable, however.

This is where the concept of accidental geopolitics comes in. Accidental geopolitics highlights the missing intent and limited preparedness of the EU when it comes to playing the geopolitical game it is witnessing globally. The EU lacks an internal consensus on how to approach the geopolitical competition. Consequently, the Union acts eclectically when engaging with different dimensions of geopolitical competition or when wielding its military, economic and normative powers.

The EU’s accidental geopolitics comes in many forms, including the attractiveness of its single market to potential new member states, as well as its newfound role in providing military assistance to Ukraine and other partners. However, while the EU has “presence” and “impact” as a geopolitical actor,²⁰ it differs from other powers in the way it arrives at policies. With the EU facing unsettled debates on its strategic position, institutional setup, and direction of its instruments (see below), decisions are often taken on an ad hoc basis, with no default to fall back on.²¹ This highlights the activities of individual EU leaders in responding to crises and largely determines how the EU engages in geopolitics.

2. ACCIDENTAL GEOPOLITICS AT PLAY: THE LAST FIVE YEARS

In what ways does the EU differ from other actors engaged in geopolitical competition? Three persistent questions, which have also featured prominently in the outgoing institutional cycle, characterize the EU’s international activities:²²

- The strategic question: What are the EU’s goals in international politics?
- The institutional question: How should the EU’s foreign and security policy be organized?
- The policy question: What instruments should the EU use to achieve its goals?

The EU remains ambiguous regarding each of the three questions, with different EU institutions debating the best way to engage in international politics. Rather than determining a clear approach, the EU’s choices in each of these dimensions remains accidental.

2.1 The strategic question: norms or interests?

At the heart of the EU’s accidental geopolitics is a lack of consensus regarding the goals that the Union wants to achieve. This is clearly evident in the strategic question, which is closely related to the current shifts in the international order: should the EU prepare for a future multipolar world, or will the US–China rivalry force Europe to make a choice between the two major powers? Official EU documents put a strong emphasis on multipolarity and the need for the EU to develop “strategic autonomy”.²³ According to this view, US hegemony will be succeeded by a decentralized system of power centres around the world. For the EU to become one of the poles, it needs to develop the capacity to become a “shaping power” globally by setting conditions for rules-based cooperation.²⁴

However, the multipolar outlook is not shared by everyone in the EU. The Covid-19 crisis and Russia’s war against Ukraine have also reinforced the image of an international order characterized by rivalry between two poles, the US and China. Increasingly, the US is framing this competition in normative terms, pitting two irreconcilable systems – democracy and authoritarianism – against each other.²⁵ The growing US preoccupation with China affects the way in which EU member states approach alliance politics. Atlanticist member states in particular, such as Poland and the Baltic members, are keen to keep the US from shifting its attention to the Pacific and to ensure that it continues to invest in the transatlantic alliance in the

18 Laïdi 2023.

19 Garton Ash 2023.

20 The debate on the EU as an international actor refers to concepts such as a “presence” and “impact” to describe various ways in which the EU influences international politics without necessarily having the state-like qualities of other international actors (see Rhinard and Sjösted 2019). Similarly, the EU has a geopolitical effect abroad without the same geopolitical intent as other global powers.

21 Jones et al. 2021.

22 The three questions were loosely inspired by Major and Moelling’s (2020) overview of the military legacy of the EU’s security and defence policy.

23 On strategic autonomy see Juncos & Vanhoonaeker 2024. The need for the EU to engage in a multipolar world, with a focus on strengthening multilateralism, featured, for example, in the 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (European Union 2022) and in the Joint Communication by the European Commission and the HRVP on strengthening the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism (European Commission 2021).

24 Grevi 2024.

25 Brand 2018.

future.²⁶ Against this backdrop, a broader ideational framework, in which the West (i.e. Europe and the US) is facing a common enemy in China and Russia, is seen by some member states as helpful, as it could potentially strengthen transatlantic unity.

In recent years, the strategic question has surfaced particularly regarding the EU's relationship with China. It is well known that member states diverge on their China policies, depending on their strategic culture and economic relations with Beijing.²⁷ However, even among the EU institutions, perspectives on China have been incoherent, signifying a lack of coordination. Differences regarding the China portfolio have run deep between Charles Michel, President of the European Council, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and HRVP Josep Borrell as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) representative at the ministerial level.

Michel was the first EU representative to visit Beijing in late 2022, following a strategic discussion on China among leaders at the European Council. While China's growing assertiveness was also an issue for member states, Michel's overall emphasis was on cooperation and exploring avenues for dialogue on human rights, climate change, economic relations and global health.²⁸ Inspired by her recent trip to Washington D.C., von der Leyen took a more hawkish approach, underlining the need to "de-risk" economic relations with China.²⁹ This prompted HRVP Borrell to publish a blog post on EU-China relations, highlighting the need for cooperation and discounting the idea of "de-risking".³⁰ He saw the Commission President's hawkish stance on China as too closely linked to the US position. The EU's geopolitics towards China remained ambiguous, oscillating between engagement and a more aggressive approach.

Beyond questions about the future of the international order or relationships with major powers, the strategic question also concerns the EU's treatment of norms in international relations: should the EU adhere to the universal norms that inform its international identity as a "civilian power",³¹ even if doing so goes against its geopolitical instincts?

In the case of Russia's war of aggression, the EU was able to align its values and geopolitical interests.

The attack on Ukraine, a sovereign nation, and the suffering of the local population in Russian-occupied territories not only ran counter to the EU's security interests, but also violated the principles that the EU seeks to universally uphold. In stark contrast, the Israel-Hamas war exposed the fact that the EU's moral compass remains an imperfect guide for its geopolitical engagement. Critics from the Global South pointed to the limits of the EU's normative power and the geopolitical rationale for the EU siding with Israel and the US.³² The EU was divided on its position in the Middle East, leading to the perception that it is ultimately much softer in its support for universal values when its own interests are at stake. In this case, one can argue that alliance politics and realist geopolitical considerations trumped the EU's ambition for normative power.

The unresolved strategic question of which general goals to pursue in the increasingly competitive environment favours a rather accidental use of the EU's geopolitical resources. At times, the EU might highlight norms as the basis for its international actions, vowing to shape multilateralism or defend human rights in the face of unfettered aggression. On other occasions, a realist geopolitical reflex might emerge, leading to more straightforward alliance politics. The EU's unfinished organizational setup reinforces the uneven geopolitical engagement, as will be discussed next.

2.2 The institutional question: supranational or intergovernmental?

The EU's accidental geopolitics can be interpreted as a consequence of the organizational challenges that the Union is facing as an international actor. At the EU level, different modes of policymaking overlap and compete. Supranational aspects of external relations are for the most part planned and implemented in the European Commission, including sectoral policies, such as those related to finance, trade and energy. By contrast, the EU's foreign, security and defence policies are still dominated by the member states and organized and implemented by the Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

The EU's incomplete organizational setup often leads to rivalry between the European Commission and the EEAS. As many of the Commission's competences on economic issues have become increasingly relevant in the EU's response to international crises, the

26 Lanoszka 2020.

27 Saari et al. 2023.

28 Financial Times 2022.

29 Von der Leyen 2023.

30 Borrell intended to visit China in person, but was prevented from doing so by a Covid-19 infection. The blog post was originally planned to be delivered as a speech (Borrell 2023).

31 Orbie 2006.

32 Islam 2024.

Commission frequently seeks to widen its mandate in foreign and security policy. Von der Leyen's ambition for a "geopolitical Commission"³³ with a stronger profile in international affairs marked a significant break in the long-term development of the Commission, which used to be more of an impartial arbiter and treaty watchdog by design. While the idea of a geopolitical Commission has been widely seen as a call for a more globally engaged EU, it was argued that the move was part of the Commission President's agenda to increase the institution's power and standing vis-à-vis the EEAS and the Council.³⁴ Following this line of thinking, the EU's turn towards geopolitics was more of an accidental result of internal power struggles rather than an intentional agenda.

The shortcoming of accidental geopolitics is that it is not backed up by sustainable institutional reforms that would allow for a more permanent strategic engagement. The development of the EU's sanctions policy in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is a case in point. The Russian war elevated the role of the Commission in the sanctions policy dramatically, with von der Leyen's Cabinet hammering out the first sanctions packages in bilateral meetings with groups of member-state ambassadors.³⁵

Organizationally, the Commission's sectoral portfolios – energy, finance and tech – play an outsized role in the attempt to cut Russia off from European economic resources and technological supply. For some time, the geopolitical move by the Commission dramatically accelerated the EU's sanctions policy, which in normal times is characterized by a slow deliberation process between member states in the Council working groups.³⁶ Despite the ability to adapt swiftly in moments of crisis and to defy "the Kremlin's expectations of internal discord and sanctions fatigue",³⁷ the EU's decision-making and implementation system regarding sanctions is a decentralized web of powers and responsibilities spread across EU institutions and member states.

Defence policy is another example of how the EU's geopolitical ambitions are in practice constrained by its institutional divisions. While the Commission has traditionally been a minor player in defence issues, the growing focus on the EU's defence industrial capacity has boosted the role of the Commission, which has some

abilities to fund and regulate the armament sector.³⁸ Von der Leyen's announcement of the creation of a Defence Commissioner if she is reappointed makes sense as the next step in further institutionalizing the Commission's role in defence issues.³⁹ However, it is clear that this new position would not be focused on the political and operational dimension of defence under the current treaty framework. Instead, the new position would likely attempt to centralize the oversight of various defence industrial and procurement programmes within the Commission and the European Defence Agency. The more joined-up defence capability planning and procurement role constitutes a Herculean task in itself, given the national fragmentation of the field.

The logic of accidental geopolitics is particularly evident in crisis situations, when the agency of individual leaders is highlighted, and formal EU decision-making is a step behind. The ad hoc nature of cooperation between EU institutions became apparent when von der Leyen visited Israel shortly after the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023, drawing heavy criticism for her perceived one-sided, pro-Israel stance on the war. Although she was representing the Commission, her comments were seen as being representative of the position of the EU as a whole. The European Council had to step in and "set the EU's common position"⁴⁰ on the Middle East, which was more balanced, also pointing to Israel's obligations under international law in its counter-offensive against Hamas.

The episode highlighted the dualism in the EU's external relations, particularly evident in the Commission's growing international ambitions, as well as the European Council's continuing efforts to set the Union's agenda and priorities, and to take landmark decisions after intensive deliberations. While the EU's integration dynamics explain the competition between EU institutions,⁴¹ they also create fertile ground for accidental geopolitics. Despite the discussions on treaty reform and the widening of qualified majority voting in the CFSP,⁴² no 'major leap' in the institutional development of the EU's foreign and security policy is in sight. The EU's geopolitical position will continue to be supported by an imperfect foreign and defence policy architecture, which has nevertheless proved its ability to produce results.

33 Fiott 2023; Håkansson 2024.

34 Haroche 2023.

35 Portela 2024.

36 Helwig et al. 2020.

37 Raik et al. 2024, 50.

38 Håkansson 2021.

39 Politico 2024a.

40 European Council 2024.

41 Bickerton et al. 2015.

42 Müller 2023.

2.3 The policy question: defensive or offensive?

The third question that contributes to the EU's unsteady relationship with geopolitics concerns the choice of instruments: to what extent should the EU forgo existing policy paradigms in order to engage in and adjust to geopolitical competition? The policy question particularly concerns the external economic dimension, where a market-liberal paradigm prevails.⁴³ It also extends to other fields in which the EU has recently contemplated a geopolitical turn, including EU enlargement and military operations.

The EU is faced with the question of how the market-liberal orientation squares with the more strategic and coercive orientation of its economic and trade policies.⁴⁴ There is no lack of recognition of the shifting nature of international politics. In recent years, the debate in Europe has been saturated with contributions that point out the redeployment of economic interdependencies as offensive weapons in a geoeconomic war.⁴⁵ The EU, and the European Commission in particular, has actively sought to respond to aggressive economic policies with a host of instruments aimed at addressing unfair disadvantages in trade relations with major powers and malign exploitation of vulnerabilities in European supply chains.⁴⁶ As part of this endeavour, the Economic Security Strategy of June 2023 outlined several initiatives to promote competitiveness, protect the economy, and enhance trade partnerships.

Critics point out that the EU's efforts in geoeconomic competition have largely remained on the defensive.⁴⁷ Most current economic initiatives, such as improved export controls, foreign direct investment screening, and supply chain diversification represent important steps in creating a level playing field and enforcing the EU market principles globally. As defensive policies, they safeguard the EU "against other countries' instruments that exploit economic openness to gain leverage".⁴⁸ Offensive strategies would require the EU to expand infrastructure in third countries, implement industrial policies to create 'European champions' or control and leverage critical technologies and resources.

By and large, the EU has undergone "reluctant geopoliticisation"⁴⁹ and has remained committed to its liberal paradigm, rendering its geopolitical engagement accidental in nature.

A more offensive reorientation of the EU's economic policies is currently under discussion. In April 2024, the European Council discussed the long-awaited report on the future of the single market.⁵⁰ The proposals put forward by former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta included, for example, the creation of a European state aid mechanism and steps to deepen the capital union to unlock more investments for European businesses. While heads of state and government welcomed many of the proposals in principle, national economic interests sometimes stand in the way of more ambitious steps to deepen the Single Market.⁵¹

It appears that a geopolitical reorientation of the Single Market would entail a significant shift in Europe's political economy. However, when it comes to energy policy, a "deep" geopolitical turn already seems to be on its way.⁵² The picture is not always rosy for proponents of a normative EU stance. For example, in its quest to replace Russian energy imports, the EU turned to authoritarian Azerbaijan, aiming to double its gas contracts by 2027.⁵³

On the military side, the EU took a historic step by using the European Peace Facility (EPF) to provide lethal military aid to Ukraine from 2022. The EPF, largely designed as a conflict prevention tool to assist partners coping with regional instability, was repurposed to meet the hard power needs of a land war on the European continent.⁵⁴ Similarly, EU missions and operations have taken a geopolitical turn in recent years. The EU's military assistance mission to Ukraine coordinates the training of soldiers across the EU and marks a qualitative shift in the way that the EU is involved in geopolitical conflicts. The EU's launch of EUNAVFOR Aspides – a maritime mission in the Red Sea to counter Houthi attacks against commercial Western vessels – was interpreted as a sign of a more offensive use of EU instruments and a foray into the geopolitics of the seas.⁵⁵ European politicians underline the purely defensive nature of the operation, framing it as a normative mission "in protection of the rules-based

43 Damro 2012.

44 Herranz-Surrallés et al. 2024.

45 Leonard 2021.

46 Helwig and Wigell 2022.

47 Gehrke 2022.

48 Danzman and Meunier 2024: 3.

49 Herranz-Surrallés et al. 2024: 7.

50 Letta 2024.

51 Politico 2024b.

52 Jerzyniak and Herranz-Surrallés 2024.

53 Van den Bossche 2023; Siddi 2023.

54 Mustasilta 2022.

55 Biscop 2024.

international order”.⁵⁶ Yet other actors in the region may see it as escalatory in relation to the broader conflict in the region.⁵⁷

Enlargement policy provides a strong argument that the EU has turned towards a more offensive use of its instruments and adopted a more realist orientation in its geopolitical role. The Russian war of aggression has resulted in a situation in which normative considerations (e.g. accession criteria) are discounted, making room for the geopolitical imperative of enlargement policy.⁵⁸ It can be argued that the EU’s enlargement policy has always included a strong geopolitical dimension and objectives linked to ensuring the Union’s influence in its immediate neighbourhood, for example in connection with the 2004 Eastern enlargement or the all-but-failed negotiations with Turkey.⁵⁹ Within the EU, however, enlargement policy is not planned in a strategic way that takes foreign policy goals into account. As a result, the geopolitical implications of the forthcoming enlargement rounds are largely accidental in nature.

3. LEADERSHIP FOR A GEOPOLITICAL EU

The EU’s accidental geopolitics highlights the role of decision-makers in shaping Europe’s global engagement. Whether we look at the emergence of a de-risking strategy towards China or the ambitious development of an EU sanctions framework, the actions (and inaction) of individual EU leaders matter. Hence, if the EU wants to become a more purposeful geopolitical actor, this should be reflected in the selection and mandate of its leadership personnel. The upcoming institutional cycle presents an opportunity to put the EU on a more deliberate footing in the strategic competition.

The EU’s new leadership will be chosen after the European Parliament election. The choice will be paramount in signalling that the member states have understood what is at stake in a year in which the re-election of Trump is looming as a possibility and Ukraine is on the back foot in its battle against Russia’s offensive. The chances of Ursula von der Leyen’s reappointment as Commission President were high after she announced she would be running as the *Spitzenkandidat* for the centre-right European People’s

Party in February 2024. As in previous years, the appointments of the President of the European Council and the EU High Representative/Vice President of the Commission (HRVP) will follow a political bargain, with national and party-political considerations leading to a narrow set of possible candidates.

As the analysis above shows, the President of the European Council is a key figure in the EU’s strategic decision-making and external representation. Their capacity to steer and chair European Council meetings has an outsized impact on the institutional balance with the Commission and a more even and strategic engagement of the EU in geopolitics. Member states have so far preferred this position to be filled with leaders who serve as brokers and are able to bring together the views of various member states. Charles Michel, who is stepping down as President of the European Council, fits this description well – even though he was not in a position to leave a bigger mark on the foreign policy profile of the institution. Looking ahead to the next term, a strong personality would benefit the EU in its dealings with a possible US President Trump and other diplomatic high-level encounters.

The HRVP position was introduced with the idea of connecting the Commission’s work on sectoral external policies with CFSP decision-making in the Council. However, incumbents have time and again struggled to carve out a space between the resourceful Commission portfolios and powerful member states. An experienced person can use the chair of the Foreign Affairs Council to marshal political agreement behind robust policies and mandates. As Vice President of the Commission, he or she can use its resources to leverage the full spectrum of economic and partnership instruments in implementing policies. Instead of a big ego and strong ideological convictions, the job calls for a person with extensive foreign policy experience and managerial prowess to identify and connect the overlapping interests of different member states and EU actors.

Over the past five years, the cooperation between the Commission President, European Council President and the HRVP has been underwhelming, to say the least. Various episodes, such as the uncoordinated outreach to China analyzed above, exemplify the lack of cooperation. Interviewees report a widespread lack of trust between the incumbents, difficulties for the EEAS in providing joint support to the leadership, and generally low levels of communication between

⁵⁶ Pistorius 2024.

⁵⁷ Tocci 2024.

⁵⁸ Karjalainen 2023; Lippert 2024.

⁵⁹ Lippert 2023.

cabinets.⁶⁰ The three leaders lacked a joint agenda and protected their own institutional turf. Given the politics involved in the selection process, it is of course difficult to arrive at a set of EU leaders that share a similar political outlook and a willingness to work together. A certain degree of contention can never be ruled out. One way for the European Council to instil a better spirit of cooperation from the beginning would be to formulate a joint mandate for the leadership team, emphasizing the importance of cooperation.

A key contribution of the new EU leadership could be to conduct an integrated review of the EU's external economic, foreign and security policies. The last time the EU published a comprehensive analysis of its various external policies was in 2016 with the EU Global Strategy. Since then, the world has seen a ramping up of great power competition, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a return to war and conflict in the Middle East, and a new assertiveness of the Global South. The EU has produced many sectoral strategic documents, most notably the Strategic Compass on security and defence and the Economic Security Strategy. However, an integrated review bringing together policies and actors from various parts of the EU institutional landscape has not been a priority so far. This is understandable, given the necessity to focus on immediate solutions that help the Ukrainian war effort and the need to address other pressing matters with regard to the EU's global competitiveness. However, past strategic exercises have served an important function in bringing together member states and various actors from governments, think tanks and civil society to recalibrate the EU's purpose and direction. A strategic exercise remains homework that cannot be skipped, as it serves a larger purpose of making the EU a more coherent, less accidental geopolitical actor.

CONCLUSIONS

The EU has become more geopolitical in its actions. Whether by sending military aid to Ukraine or launching a freedom of navigation maritime mission to the Red Sea, the Union is showing a readiness to

deploy hard power capabilities in ongoing conflicts over territory and shipping lanes. However, this Working Paper argues that merely using hard power tools does not necessarily make an intentional geopolitical actor. For better or worse, the EU lacks the features that would enable a more strategic and intentional global engagement of the full range of its economic and political leverage. The way in which it pursues geopolitics appears to be accidental, merely the result of the EU's often haphazard responses to the crises it is currently facing.

While this might seem like a trivial observation, the concept of accidental geopolitics can help us understand and evaluate the EU's foreign and security policy in a more nuanced way. By defining its geopolitics as accidental, we can be clear about what the EU can and cannot do. It can, for example, coordinate military procurement, decide on and coordinate the implementation of sanctions, or deploy a naval operation. We can, however, also point to the limitations that the EU will face if it attempts to project geopolitical power in the near future. More often than not, the EU's potential for geopolitical assertiveness lies not in its military capacity, but in its normative and economic appeal. This raises the question of whether the EU will be able to turn its enlargement policy into a geopolitical success. In other cases, the EU's values and interests diverge, stopping the geopolitical role of the EU in its tracks, which is the case in the Middle East.

This Working Paper is a first attempt to test the idea of accidental geopolitics. The scope of the paper only allows for an incomplete and superficial engagement with the many aspects of the EU's global role. Other areas that could be examined include the EU's multi-lateral engagement or a more in-depth analysis of its relationship with the US and China, particularly on the economic side. Although more research is needed to test the ideas behind the concept, it is important to bear in mind that geopolitics is more than just the provision of hard power. The EU's actions across the policy spectrum can have a geopolitical impact even when not guided by intention or strategy. /

60 Interviews with EEAS officials on 23/24 November 2023.

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