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[Shaping Europe Pragmatically](#)

# The EU as a Global Power?

The “Geopolitical Commission” between Ambition and Reality

Felix Manuel Müller

The term of office of the European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen is drawing to a close. It started out with the aspiration to be a “geopolitical Commission”. But even though the administration set priorities in the COVID-19 pandemic and in the face of the Russian war against Ukraine, there is still a gap between aspiration and reality in the EU’s external action outside of acute crises.

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### **The Geopolitical Ambition of the European Commission**

A new European Commission took up its work at the end of 2019, explicitly aspiring from the very beginning to take on a highly active role in shaping foreign policy. Its President, Ursula von der Leyen, repeatedly emphasised that it was her aim to lead a “geopolitical Commission”. The EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, also called for the EU to “relearn the language of power” and to see itself as a “top-tier geostrategic actor”.<sup>1</sup>

These statements indicated a shift in self-perception. After all, the EU was long considered a “normative power”<sup>2</sup> that cultivates a culture of political restraint and attempts to influence its partners through the use of “soft power” – power that is not based on military coercion or economic pressure, but on the attractiveness of ideals, values and political institutions.

It is true that for several decades now there have been calls for the EU to take on a more active foreign policy role. But in a changed global context, these resonate much more widely. The world order is in upheaval. In particular, the gradual erosion of rules-based multilateralism as a fundamental principle of international relations, the deterioration of transatlantic relations during the Donald Trump presidency, Brexit, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the intensifying Sino-American rivalry are all developments that give cause for concern from a European perspective. As a result of these global political developments, there is

growing pressure on the EU to adapt its self-image to the global power dynamics. These are not only determined based on norms and rules: they are increasingly shaped by geopolitical and also geo-economic factors.

In view of poorly developed and relatively diffuse foreign policy decision-making competences, however, it has appeared questionable whether the ambition of a “geopolitical Commission” can be aligned with practical realities. The EU’s foreign policy can essentially be described as a multidimensional mosaic.<sup>3</sup> The core area is the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which was established under the Maastricht Treaty, and its security policy arm, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). As policy areas that are particularly sensitive in terms of sovereignty, these fields of action are still strongly intergovernmental and require unanimity for decisions to be made: in other words, the influence of member states is particularly great, with the Commission traditionally playing no more than a supporting role.<sup>4</sup> The Commission can have an impact on foreign policy primarily through recourse to competences that lie in the economic sphere, including foreign trade policy, development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

### **Successful Policy-making in Crisis Mode**

Even in the case of international threat scenarios, the European Council is usually expected to assume the role of crisis manager, with key decisions being taken at the summits of heads of state and government.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand,

exceptional situations always open up new options for political actors. In the past, the Commission has repeatedly been able to use these windows of opportunity to strengthen its position.<sup>6</sup>

### *COVID-19 Pandemic*

Only a few days after the new European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen took office, a crisis of global proportions began to unfold. The COVID-19 pandemic confronted the EU with a number of unprecedented challenges, particularly at the level of public health and the economy. Under the leadership of the first female President, the Commission acted quickly and proactively in the early stages of the pandemic.

At the beginning of January 2020, its Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) already warned that the situation was deteriorating through the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS). When the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a “public health emergency of international concern” at the end of the month, the Commission had already taken initial action,<sup>7</sup> such as providing EU funding for research into the virus. As events progressed, it also took on an important coordinating role, as demonstrated by the joint procurement and distribution of vaccines within the EU, for example. By contrast, the European Council rarely put forward its own proposals, but instead supported the Commission’s initiatives.<sup>8</sup> The latter significantly extended its influence to policy areas that had previously been considered more the responsibility of member states.

In addition to internal EU measures, the Commission also pushed for partnerships and initiatives with external actors as part of the global crisis response. It worked closely with the WHO and the G20 – also supporting the COVAX initiative (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) from the beginning, for example. This campaign was launched to give countries with low purchasing power access to the vaccines, which were in high demand.

Team Europe was likewise formed in April 2020 with similar objectives. For the first time, the approach here was to pool the development policy contributions of the European Commission, the EU member states and the EU financial institutions (European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development). By the beginning of 2022, Team Europe had made 46 billion euros available and supported 130 states in responding to the pandemic and its consequences. African countries benefited the most, receiving some ten billion euros.<sup>9</sup> Team Europe has since evolved into an overarching approach to common European foreign and development policy. The aim is to help increase the effectiveness and visibility of EU activities on the global stage.

### **Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was perceived as a direct attack on the EU’s understanding of freedom and order.**

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Although the EU provided substantial financial resources to support third countries during the COVID-19 pandemic and was the largest donor and exporter of vaccines, this commitment was not always noted accordingly in the target countries. This can partly be accounted for by the fact that action was taken through multilateral organisations such as the WHO, resulting in the EU being less visible as an individual actor in the partner countries. And since the EU focused mainly on supplying its own member states with vaccines at the beginning of the vaccination campaign, the accusation of “vaccine nationalism” became entrenched in countries of the Global South.<sup>10</sup>

### *Russian Attack on Ukraine*

24 February 2022 then marked another major turning point, when Russia launched its military offensive against Ukraine in violation of international law. Only a few months earlier, political observers did not believe that the EU states





Perception and reality: While it is true that the EU played an important role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, not least providing other nations with vaccines, it was still accused of “vaccine nationalism”. The picture shows the delivery of vaccines to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photo: © Eldar Emric, AP, picture alliance.

would be able to agree on a uniform strategy towards the Russian Federation.<sup>11</sup> The invasion was perceived as a direct attack on the EU’s understanding of freedom and order, however, and within a few days, the Union provided billions of dollars in military aid to Ukraine – an unprecedented step. In addition, the aggressor was slapped with several sanctions packages that are unmatched in their severity. Although this touched on areas that were politically sensitive for the EU member states, the Commission became more actively involved in the process than usual. The immense pressure to take action in the first few months after the attack meant that almost all the Commission’s sanction proposals were accepted.<sup>12</sup> This very quick response was

possible because von der Leyen and her cabinet had been preparing for the worst-case scenario of a Russian attack since the end of 2021, having coordinated closely with US partners early on.

Although EU security policy actually falls into the domain of intergovernmental coordination, the European Commission took a leading role in responding to the Russian war of aggression, too. In addition to sanctions against Russia, it also advocated financial, humanitarian and military support for Ukraine. Here it proceeded cautiously and gradually, however, remaining open to the member states’ proposals.<sup>13</sup> As a result of this swift and consistent sanctions policy, the EU rose to become a central player in

the Ukraine crisis. This fact was also recognised by the United States, as underlined by President Biden's visit to the EU summit a month after the start of Russia's attack.

## The economic sphere is becoming increasingly relevant to security policy.

### A Payer but Still Not a Player? Global Perception of the EU

In order to credibly aspire to take on an active role in shaping geopolitics, the crucial factor is acceptance as an equal partner or serious adversary by other global political actors. Though

obscured by Russia's brutal actions against Ukraine, the trial of strength between the major powers is not primarily being fought by military means but in the field of commerce and industrial policy. For this reason, the economic sphere – in which the European Commission has far-reaching competences – is becoming increasingly relevant to security policy.

The EU has been weakened by Brexit and the crises of recent years, but it is still a global economic power on a par with the United States and China. Since it has long presented itself as a “normative civil power” at the global level, however, it is seen in other regions of the world as both an economic giant and a weak political dwarf. This image has actually become more pronounced in certain parts of the world. Take Southeast Asia, for example. The EU enjoys a



Tough competitor: Chinese newspapers report on President Xi opening the third Belt and Road Forum in October 2023. Whether the European Global Gateway Initiative will prove an attractive alternative is anything but sure. Photo: © Andy Wong, AP, picture alliance.

comparatively high level of confidence in this region, particularly because of its economic prowess. Yet people there have become more sceptical because they do not believe that the EU has either the ambition or the capabilities to assume a global leadership role.<sup>14</sup>

However, the notion of a “geopolitical Commission” implies a desire to be perceived not just as a payer but also as a player that is able to confidently stand up for its own interests. Ursula von der Leyen’s Commission has attempted to substantiate this aspiration through several initiatives. In May 2020, for example, it promoted the concept of “open strategic autonomy”, aiming to position the EU as a strong and independent global actor able to protect its interests while at the same time remaining open to international cooperation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that the EU is dependent on external supply chains, especially for medical goods. Based on this experience, the aim was to reduce dependencies on other actors and strengthen resilience. This approach is a rather defensive one: instead of using the economic dependencies of others to actively pursue independent strategic goals, it focuses on reducing interdependencies in order not to become a victim itself of the geo-economic initiatives pursued by others.<sup>15</sup>

The Global Gateway Initiative announced by President von der Leyen in her State of the Union address at the end of 2021 was a direct response to the success of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The latter is at the heart of China’s connectivity strategy and seeks to promote economic cooperation and networking between countries along the traditional Silk Road routes. According to official figures, more than 140 countries had participated in the Belt and Road Initiative by the end of 2021. The EU’s global infrastructure campaign aims to push back Chinese influence.

The Global Gateway Initiative can only be seen as a key initiative in the systemic rivalry with China to a very limited extent. Firstly, this is because the initiative was not backed up with the necessary financial resources. Secondly, it has

not proved possible to establish a coherent overall strategic concept in which foreign, economic and development policy are skilfully interwoven. At present, these policy areas still operate alongside each other in a largely uncoordinated fashion. Although the initiative was supposed to involve a genuine reorientation in terms of the allocation of funds, it includes development projects that were already at the planning stage anyway.

One general problem already mentioned is that people in third countries are usually barely aware of the Commission’s initiatives and projects. With a few exceptions, the EU’s public relations work is in need of significant improvement, especially in neighbouring countries to the south. As part of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU Delegations are supposed to inform the public and decision-makers about EU policies and programmes, but apparently they are hardly noticed.

### **The EU’s public relations work is in need of significant improvement, especially in the southern neighbourhood.**

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Apart from this, bilateral investment and trade agreements also fulfil an important function from a geopolitical perspective: they secure access to remote markets and critical raw materials. It is foreseeable that these alliances will become increasingly important for the EU in future in terms of the diversification it is striving for. The Commission is the EU body that negotiates with third countries on behalf of member states in the global market. Its task is to coordinate the differing positions and develop a common negotiation strategy. However, the consent of all 27 states is required to ratify agreements. This is not always possible to achieve, since interests frequently diverge. For this reason, the EU is often perceived in other countries not as a geopolitical entity but as a coalition of 27 individual states.



One example is the EU-Mercosur agreement, which has now been under negotiation for more than 20 years and has still not been brought to a successful conclusion. Among other things, this association agreement with the states of the Mercosur region (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) could save almost four billion euros annually in customs duties. Yet some EU member states are blocking the agreement due to domestic political considerations, also damaging the EU's credibility as a reliable trading partner in other regions of the world.

### **It will be essential for the EU to make more use of its economic clout than it has done to date.**

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#### **Global Power at the Development Stage**

At the beginning of its term of office, it was not even remotely foreseeable what global political challenges the European Commission under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen would be confronted with in the five years that followed. Managing the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to the Russian war of aggression against a state in the immediate vicinity of the EU were certainly among the biggest of these challenges.

All in all, it can be said that in both cases the Commission skilfully harnessed the momentum of the crisis – caused by the limited time available and the pressure to take decisions – to strengthen its own foreign policy role and substantiate its aspiration to be a “geopolitical Commission”. But the geopolitical race is a marathon, not a sprint. In future, it will be essential for the EU to make more use of its economic clout than it has done to date to defend its own values and interests. This implies an ambitious trade policy that is more aligned with strategic interests and focuses on the following goals: promoting mutual access to open markets, ensuring security of supply and reducing European dependencies in key areas, and expanding

partnerships with third countries outside the EU, NATO and the G7. Here the EU must position itself as an attractive option, make offers based on an equal partnership and set itself apart from systemic rivals.

At present, the EU's global market power is still not reflected in a corresponding global political role. But it is also clear that in the long term, none of the member states will be able to play a prominent role in the rivalry between the major powers on its own: this prospect only exists in the association of European nations.

With regard to EU external action, the biggest political challenge remains the question of unity and coherence. In the absence of acute crisis scenarios, the EU is still too often perceived as a fragmented actor that has difficulty in articulating its interests clearly. This limits its ability to exert effective influence, thereby weakening its role as a global actor.

Institutional changes are necessary in order for the EU to increase its flexibility and capacity to act. This was something that Commission President von der Leyen has pressed for, too: in her first State of the Union address in September 2020, she called for the introduction of the majority principle in foreign and security policy. A report published in September 2023 by a Franco-German group of experts shows that the extension of qualified majority voting in this area is feasible even without treaty changes. According to this report, the creation of a “sovereignty safety net” could ensure greater acceptance. Should a member state see its essential national interests as being threatened, it can request that the issue be referred to the European Council and that a consensual agreement be reached at the highest political level. Reservations on the part of smaller EU states could be addressed through a re-weighting of voting rights, for example.<sup>16</sup>

It remains to be seen whether or not proposals of this kind will actually be implemented politically and lead to greater flexibility in practice. There is certainly pressure to take action,

however. The global political situation is shifting and the EU is at a critical crossroads. But as a global power, the EU is still at the development stage. There continues to be a discrepancy between rhetoric and political reality: since the Commission led by von der Leyen took office, however, the gap between the two has at least become a little smaller.

*- translated from German -*

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