**Diversified in unity: The agenda for the geopolitical European Commission**

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**Abstract**

The idea of the “geopolitical European Commission”, as put forward by President Ursula von der Leyen, raises fundamental questions about the future direction of this international bureaucracy and the impact of current political choices on its international authority. As we are yet to learn the exact nature and scope of the Commission’s “geopolitical turn”, this paper argues that the European Union’s most unique institution risks undermining its own core strengths, which lay in a problem-driven, nominally depoliticized and human development-oriented approach to international security. There are established principles guiding the Commission’s approach to security, well-defined methods and even distinct policy instruments, which have allowed this institution to advance its unique identity and authority as a provider of security assistance. As such, the European Union should embrace the principle of diversity (of the Union’s approaches to security) in unity, represented by the Union’s shared overarching vision.

**Keywords**: European Commission, European security, international bureaucracy, geopolitics, geopolitical Commission

**Introduction**

Since 2019, the European Commission has become “truly geopolitical”. While the reality may not yet offer much evidence to support this statement, it is nonetheless an explicitly stated ambition of the Commission’s President Ursula von der Leyen – previously Germany’s Minister of Defence. The clear definition of geopolitics was never offered by the President, but early initiatives indicate that her Commission intends to be more strategic, more active and more visible as an actor in world politics (von der Leyen, 2019a). This article argues that the Commission’s understanding of “geopolitics” as an underpinning principle of its external action should not be such as to undermine its functional emphasis on problem-driven, human security focus and the support for progressive values such as human rights and democracy in vulnerable regions. The first part of the paper engages with the concept of geopolitics in a more systematic manner but if we take the mainstream understanding of geopolitics as entailing the assessment of opportunities and threats through the lens of the relationship between geography and power, the risks for the Commission are substantial.

First, its core strengths lay elsewhere. As Martha Finnemore and Michael Barnett note in *Rules for the World*, we can depict international organizations (IOs) as bureaucracies, which helps to understand how they can be so influential by representing values and patterns of behaviour *opposite* to those of the nation states (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; see also Raube and Tonra, 2018; Tallberg and Zürn, 2019). The Commission’s identity since its inception as a High Authority, at least in part, has been that of an international bureaucracy (Christiansen, 1997; Wille, 2013). It has advanced its international identity around addressing challenges affecting vulnerable individuals and societies, and pursuing goals, which are almost universally considered valuable (Risse and Börzel, 2004; Natorski, 2011). This is particularly true for its external security-development instruments, which are the focus of this paper: the Instrument for Stability (IfS) and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). It may not be the case in other areas, such as enlargement and neighbourhood policy, where the Commission’s role is more contentious (Jones and Clark, 2008). Second, this *modus operandi* serves international bureaucracies as a necessary source of their output-oriented international authority. International actors must view the Commission’s agenda as transparent and genuinely oriented towards improving people’s lives and infrastructures in order to constructively engage with the Commission’s initiatives, especially on matters of security (Berger, 2008).

The article begins by critically engaging with the notion of geopolitics as well as the idea that international bureaucracies, such as the European Commission, exert a certain kind of authority, which is fundamentally different from the authority of the states. This output-oriented authority of the Commission has enabled it to develop security projects ranging from providing non-proliferation assistance to Russia to supporting Syrian refugees in Turkey. We should not take the Commission’s authority as an international bureaucracy for granted, however, as the subsequent sections argue. In recent decades, the Commission’s executive has become increasingly political, arguably resembling the “normal” structure of a national political-administrative divide (Wille, 2013). The politicization of the Commission, in turn, established the normative basis for President von der Leyen to introduce a “geopolitical Commission”, the details of which will be subsequently outlined and compared with the existing conceptualisations of geopolitics. The final section suggests that the Commission should build on its existing strengths and modes of operation and to that end it elaborates on (a) the principles, which should inform the Commission’s international security agenda, (b) the methods it should adopt (or rather continue to adopt) and (c) the unique instruments, which should be preserved in the new European Union (EU) budget.

**Unpacking geopolitics**

This section critically engages with the notion of geopolitics in order to better understand the conceptual underpinnings of President von der Leyen’s ambitious agenda. Broadly speaking, the notion of geopolitics can be divided up into the “mainstream” study of the relationship between geography and state power, and the critical study of how power relations manifest themselves in different aspects of studying and practicing geopolitics (Dodds, 2007; Kuus, 2017). Mainstream, or classical geopolitics is associated with, among others, Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen (who coined the term in 1899), American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, English geographer Halford Mackinder and German professor (and general) Karl Haushofer. The association of Haushofer with the Nazi party establishment and his arguable influence on the German expansionist agenda has rendered the entire field of geopolitics taboo in the decades following the war (Dodds, 2007). Since then, “geopolitics” has not revived in its original, “scientific” form, but the relationship between geography and foreign policy continues to inform the strategies of countries such as the United States, China and Russia. Should it also inform the global strategy of the EU, and specifically the European Commission? More fundamentally, however, is it even fair to assume that President von der Leyen operates with the classical understanding of geopolitics?

Critical geopolitics may be helpful in answering this last question. One key distinction the scholars of critical geopolitics have proposed is that between formal, practical and popular geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, 2007). Formal geopolitics is concerned with the subject matter, i.e. what we study under the geopolitics label. Popular geopolitics investigates how geopolitics is depicted in the popular culture. Practical geopolitics, in turn, is interested in how policy practitioners interpret and invoke the notion of geopolitics in their engagement with the world. Predictably, it is futile to assume that policy practitioners share a fixed understanding of geopolitics. As Gearóid Ó Tuathail observes, the understanding of geopolitics is shaped by the geopolitical culture, which evolves across time and space. The understanding of geopolitics in Germany in the 1920/30s was different from the United States when Henry Kissinger popularized the term in the 1970s. Equally, it is bound to be different in modern Europe, and especially at the EU level.

The case of the EU is particularly interesting as not only is it a non-state actor, but also the European integration project has traditionally been construed as the anti-thesis of geopolitics and balance of power (Waever, 1996). As such, European integration proceeded specifically based on the rejection of the geopolitics-driven past – a sentiment amplified by the involvement of Haushofer in the Nazi establishment. How is it, then, possible for the institutional engine of the EU to suddenly define itself in geopolitical terms? The close reading of von der Leyen’s statements and actions, which the paper later undertakes, indicates that she does not operate with the classical understanding of geopolitics. At the same time, however, her idea of geopolitics remains ambiguous. Based on available evidence, we can infer that her “geopolitical Commission” is meant to build on the EU’s unique international identity and to reify this identity through a more purposeful, meaningful external action.

As Luiza Bialasiewicz (2016) competently elucidates, the EU’s international identity is being constantly (re)constructed, including the depictions of the EU as a normative, civilian and soft power (among others). What matters for us, however, is that the EU’s international identity also remains aspirational, which means, in the words of Italian political philosopher Massimo Cacciari, that “Europe has always been a term that designates what Europe will be, or would like to be, or should be. The figure of Europe has historically always been a task” (quoted in Bialasiewicz, 2016, p. 3). From the critical geopolitical perspective, therefore, we can conclude that the practical performance of geopolitics by von der Leyen represents another instance of a particular vision, an aspiration for how the Commission and the EU should engage with the world. The paper later elaborates on the contents of this vision.

**Geopolitics and the authority of international bureaucracies**

The paper, thus far, has established that the concept of geopolitics, in its practical, policy dimension, is inherently embedded in the (institutional) culture where it is performed. The EU’s culture is certainly unique, if not revolutionary, for the traditionally state-based notion of geopolitics. The question that we need to address now, however, is why does the Commission’s interpretation of geopolitics matter? In short, it matters because the Commission has developed a unique identity of its own within the EU’s institutional structure and its “geopoliticising” risks undermining the Commission’s international authority. The Commission’s unique international identity is predicated on the idea that at least part of its role is that of an international bureaucracy (Wille, 2013).

The idea that IOs can be conceptualized as international bureaucracies has been advanced by Finnemore and Barnett (2004). Drawing on Max Weber (1978), they identified IOs to be morally superior compared to self-serving nation states as well as enjoying higher levels of expertise on specialist modern problems. The moral superiority of international bureaucracies stems from the objectives they pursue and the manner in which they pursue them. Typically, IOs are created by states to pursue progressive, socially valued goals such as the promotion of international cooperation, non-proliferation, peace, economic development or the rule of law. States can raise similar claims about their international agenda, but their assertions will be less credible than those of the IOs.

The bureaucratic mode of pursuing these objectives further contributes to the legitimacy of IOs. In contrast to states” inherently political nature, IOs strive to present themselves as neutral, depoliticized and technical. Instead of getting involved in political bargaining and other games that states routinely play in international affairs, IOs claim to be merely concerned with solving social problems in an as effective and neutral manner as possible. What is helping IOs uphold those claims and boost their credibility is access to experts and expertise. Their expertise can stem from in-house experience gained by permanent staff but also from close collaboration with expert and higher education institutions (Zwolski, 2014). More recently, the problem of IOs’ legitimacy has been undertaken by Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn (2019) and the contributors to their special issue. They define legitimacy as “beliefs within a given constituency or other relevant audience that a political institution’s exercise of authority is appropriate” (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019, p. 585). In this context, for the “geopolitical Commission” the audience consist as much of the EU public and member states, as of external stakeholders, which the Commission seeks to engage.

**The Commission’s international bureaucratic identity**

The European Commission is not a monolith and distinct visions of this institutions compete and coexist among its staff members (Hooghe, 2002). Still, from the International Relations perspective, the Commission does represent an instance of an international bureaucracy and so it relies on its moral and expert authority to achieve its objectives. The Commission’s architect, Jean Monnet, envisioned the High Authority as an expert bureaucracy, relatively autonomous from its founding national governments and entrusted with the pursuit of valued objectives. On one hand, he was frank in admitting to ignore the heated debates on the possible European federation electrifying the delegates to The Hague, and insisted instead that an impartial, expert-driven authority was necessary to solve a specific European problem (Monnet, 1978). On another hand, although his means were highly delineated, his ultimate objectives were no other than peace and economic development in Europe. Neither Monnet’s means nor his ends were considered particularly controversial by European states, even if camps emerged around the best way to take European integration forward in the run up to the Messina conference in 1955 (Stirk, 1996). There was no reason for them to raise controversy. After all, Monnet’s innovative approach ticked all the boxes for an impartial, expert-driven and output-oriented international bureaucracy existing only because states value its outcomes, which they are ill equipped to achieve independently.

Fast-forward to the more recent history, the European Commission has applied the same legitimacy-enhancing principles to how it views international security problems after the Cold War. For the most part of the last 30 years, the Commission’s approach has been to harness the vast access to European and global expert, financial and technical resources in the service of pursuing a range of seemingly universal objectives, such as international peace, multilateralism and the rule of law (Duchêne, 1972; Manners, 2002; Stewart, 2011; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014). Predictably, like every other international bureaucracy, the Commission has been approaching problems through the lens of its own DNA: promoting impersonal rules and interpreting the outside environment in a manner, which makes it amenable to the Commission’s bureaucratic intervention (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). The Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) represents one example of such an approach. Concerned with poorly secured nuclear weapons and material in Russia, the Commission joined the American efforts in providing financial and technical assistance to improve the security and safety of nuclear installations. In contrast to the American officials, who worked with the Russian military, however, European efforts were channelled through the Commission’s Joint Research Centre. This seemingly unimportant distinction was fundamental, as it made the Commission’s involvement appear technical. In turn, it proved uncontroversial to the member states (Kaunert and Zwolski, 2013, p. 155).

What TACIS and numerous other Commission’s initiatives in the area of international security indicate is that the “ideal” model of international bureaucracy, as outlined above, continues to represent one part of the Commission’s international identity. This identity, however, has been evolving in recent decades and becoming more political (Nugent and Rhinard, 2019). As a result, this paper argues that there are risks associated with this new direction. Most notably, the Commission risks undermining its international bureaucratic authority, which can, in turn, affect the effectiveness of its external financial instruments. As noted, the Commission was, originally, designed as an expert bureaucracy, relatively autonomous from its founding national governments and entrusted with the pursuit of valued objectives. That ideal model, however, only partially passed the test of time. While the Commission’s core administrative component remained largely technical and continues to resemble Weber’s depiction of bureaucracy, the executive layer (the College) became political (Christiansen, 1997; Wille, 2013; Nugent and Rhinard, 2019).

This “normalization” of the Commission in the form of the classical political-administrative dichotomy has enabled, or even requires, the executive to formulate a political agenda – a standard feature of representative democracies. In the EU context, it has become a norm for each new Commission President to outline their policy priorities for the coming years or to present the State of the European Union to the European Parliament. The logical outcome of politicization is that the Commission’s goals do not always need to be seen as progressive, low-key, technical and focused on improving human security. Instead, they can be seen as contentious, ideologically charged and concern high profile issues. If Monnet’s mantra was to focus on the *specific* (regulating the market for coal and steel) in order to achieve the *general* (lasting European peace), today’s Commission must do the opposite. Its leaders are expected to offer a compelling and ambitious political strategy and iron out the specifics later. This assertion brings us to Ursula von der Leyen and her “geopolitical Commission”.

**Unpacking “the geopolitical Commission”**

Von der Leyen announced her intention to build a “geopolitical Commission” in her so-called mission letter to the new High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell from September 2019 (von der Leyen, 2019a). Without offering a concrete definition, she underscored the significance of linking internal and external aspects of policies. She noted that the Commission must become “more strategic, more assertive and more united”, including in how it distributes its financial instruments. She also underlined the need for the European defence union. Compared to the mission letter, which President Juncker sent to his newly appointed HR/VP Federica Mogherini in 2014, von der Leyen’s letter signals greater focus on the external dimension of the Commission’s action. Notably, whereas Juncker requested Mogherini to “regularly report back” on world’s geopolitical developments, von der Leyen specified that foreign policy updates should be received by the College on a weekly basis. These are prepared by the newly established Group for External Coordination (EXCO), which meets every Wednesday afternoon and comprizes of the standing members of each Commissioner’s cabinet (European Commission, 2019a). Interestingly, the EXCO composition assumes that the portfolio of each Commissioner has an external policy dimension – an aspect, which is also noted in individual mission statements. The outcomes of the meetings are then discussed by the Heads of Cabinet in their weekly meetings (so-called Hebdo), which decides on items to be referred to the College. Enhancing the relative weight of the Commission’s external action, and strengthening the profile of the HR/VP in the process, at this point constitute the key highlights of the “geopolitical Commission”.

Other hints can be found across speeches and documents. For example, in her mission statement to the Commissioner-designate for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, von der Leyen suggested that she is concerned about “external influence” in the Western Balkans and insisted on keeping the membership route open for the countries in this region (von der Leyen, 2019b). Further, when speaking at the 2019 Paris Peace forum, she referred to “existing powers” becoming more unilateral and “new powers” emerging (European Commission, 2019b). This arguably renewed importance of “powers” in international relations, according to the President, calls for a “truly” geopolitical Commission and requires increasing the EU’s external action spending by 30 per cent in the new budget. Although von der Leyen has modestly operationalized some of her “geopolitical Commission” ideas, she is by no means the first Commission President to express them. Notably, Juncker delivered a powerful call for the EU to become more sovereign and assertive in his 2018 State of the Union address to the European Parliament (European Commission, 2018a). His justification sounds familiar: the changing geopolitical situation in world politics. It is thus clear that the politicized European Commission executive, encouraged and even required to speak the language of high politics, interprets the current international political environment as dominated by geopolitics expressed in the form of power and competition.

Does it mean, however, that the Commission should aim to respond in the similar fashion? This is not necessarily the case, although von der Leyen’s remarks remain vague in that respect. In her address to the World Economic Forum in January 2020, she proclaimed: “We need to rediscover the power of cooperation, based on fairness and mutual respect. This is what I call ‘geopolitics of mutual interests.’ This is what Europe stands for” (von der Leyen, 2020). She also clarified that while the EU needs a stronger military defence capability, “[h]ard power always comes with diplomacy and conflict prevention; with the work on reconciliation and reconstruction.” These statements do not appear out of line with the overarching EU’s commitment to multilateralism and the mixture of soft and hard(ish) instruments. One novelty in the Commission’s stated approach is commitment to become more assertive and more strategic. This theme already appeared during work on the EU Global Strategy when, apparently, “many [in the Commission] were aware of the need for a more strategic approach to the use of the potentially extremely powerful instruments at its disposal” (Tocci, 2017, p. 25).

Based on the discussion thus far, we can identify a degree of tension in the Commission’s approach to international security broadly construed. On the one hand, both Juncker and von der Leyen appear to have a very realistic, if not realist vision of the international order, where power and national interest remain paramount and cannot be ignored. In reaction to this recognition, they both want to see the Commission and the EU more capable, more assertive, more unified and more active on the world stage. On the other hand, however, they do need to reconcile their perception of the world with the Commission’s unique identity as that of an anti-thesis of everything that great national powers represent in foreign policy. They cannot escape the institutional culture in which they are embedded, and which must shape their proposed response to the perceived challenges. This is, of course, congruent with the critical approach to geopolitics, but it does not help in understanding what kind of an actor the Commission actually wants to be in international security. Notably, we could replace “the power of cooperation” with “the value of cooperation” and the meaning remains the same, but the phrase becomes less loaded. The phrase “geopolitics of mutual interests” is vague and it does not improve our understanding of the Commission’s interpretation of “geopolitics” or how it links with “mutual interests”.

**Geopolitics and authority in the functional model of the Commission**

The argument ofthis paper is that despite being less high-profile compared to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Commission should continue to cultivate its own distinctive vision of international security. This is not to exacerbate the pre-Lisbon duality of the EU’s external policy divided up between the Commission (and now forgotten DG Relex) and the Council’s CFSP. Rather than making it incoherent, the idea is to make the EU’s foreign policy genuinely comprehensive (Faleg, 2018). “Comprehensive”, however, should not entail employing the vast resources of the European Commission in the service of the CFSP. Instead, “comprehensive” should entail combining the more political approach of the Council and the CFSP with the functional philosophy of the Commission. The Commission has the human, technical and financial resources required to articulate the alternative strategic vision for the EU’s foreign policy. This vision can still reflect the general guidelines as set out by the EU Global Strategy, but it should also embody the progressive values as defined in the treaties. Underpinning this distinctive strategic vision should be the Commission’s vast experience in managing its foreign policy instruments (FPIs) (European Commission, 2018b).

These are financial tools allowing the EU to pursue policy objectives in a range of areas, including competitiveness, research and innovation, migration, election observation missions, but also security broadly construed (European Commission, 2008; 2009a; 2009b). The exact nature and scope of those instruments is regularly revisited with each new multiannual financial framework (MFF). One of those instruments, specifically concerned with international security, was called the IfS in the MFF 2007–14 and is known as the IcSP in the current MFF (2014–20). It links security with development and its idea is twofold: to allow the Commission to offer rapid assistance in crises situations, but also to allow the financing of trans-regional security-development projects in areas such as non-proliferation of small arms (Gänzle, 2009). If moral authority of international bureaucracies stems from the pursuit of socially valuable goals, then the way the objectives have been formulated for both the IfS and the IcSP leave no doubt as to the moral authority of the Commission. In only the first two years of the IfS, the Commission funded over 75 actions in over 30 countries worldwide, with the bulk of support going towards crisis response (Ferrero-Waldner, 2009). The longer-term component of the instruments has been funding initiatives as diverse as fight against organized crime, counterterrorism and climate security. Further building on this experience will allow the Commission to make a credible case for international legitimacy and authority as an international bureaucracy.

At the same time, when building on its strengths, the Commission does not need to be blind to the power politics and geopolitical realities of the 21st century. In fact, the comprehensive understanding of the world is fundamentally important to direct the Commission’s resources in the most effective and efficient way. The Lisbon Treaty laid the groundwork for the tighter integration of the Commission to the EU’s external activities and President von der Leyen, as noted, appears to have taken full advantage of these innovations by elevating the role of the HR/VP. The “geopolitical Commission” should draw on its understanding and recognition of geopolitical realities to reinforce its core strengths and continue to promote its own, problem-driven vision of international security policy. Marius Müller-Hennig summarized this point in his critique of the “geopolitical Commission”:

One can only hope that Ursula von der Leyen’s “truly geopolitical Commission” will in fact turn out to be a Commission critical of geopolitics. In other words, that it will help to surmount geopolitical logic worldwide and enable effective global governance instead of helping to restore geopolitical great power thinking and action. To that end, the Commission needs to recognize and understand geopolitical paradigms, without themselves falling prey to similar sirens. (Müller-Hennig, 2019)

Underpinning the Commission’s problem-driven vision of international security should be *sectoral EU strategies* and strategy-like documents on tackling specific problems. For example, the IfS Strategy published by the Commission in 2007 drew on the EU Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Strategy from 2003 and the Council’s Declaration on Combating Terrorism from 2004 (European Commission, 2007). This relatively technical focus allowed the Commission to concentrate on solving specific problems in line with the IfS mandate. Sectoral strategies can be expected to be lighter on ideology as compared to the general “security” or “defence” strategies, which makes them more suitable as guidelines for the Commission’s action. In addition to strategies, however, the Commission should also rely on the vast pool of *experts and expertise* to ensure that its strategising is always up to date with the political, technological or economic developments in a given policy area. One example of good practice in this regard is the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium – an EU-funded European network of higher education institutions and non-proliferation think tanks. Extended in 2018 for another 42 months, the Consortium brings together hundreds of stakeholders to support the implementation of the EU’s WMD Strategy.

**The principles, methods and instruments of the geopolitical Commission**

There is a scope for the European Commission to become more “geopolitical” but in order to remain true to its own DNA as well as preserve the source of its international authority, the EU should respect and enable the unique set of Commission’s principles, methods and instruments.

*Principles*

The principles underpinning the European Commission’s involvement in international security policy should be aligned with its international bureaucratic identity in order to reinforce, instead of jeopardising, its authority. To that end, the Commission should continue to pursue the human-focused international security in the manner represented by the IfS and IcSP. More specifically, the Commission should be given explicit mandate by the member states to ground its security-oriented external instruments in the principle of human security, underpinned by the long-standing recognition of the interconnectedness between security and development (Keukeleire and Raube, 2013; Smith, 2013; Furness and Gänzle, 2017). As they have been developed, the IfS and the IcSP reinforce the “core norms” constituting the basis for the entire European integration project, including the centrality of peace as well as the ideas of liberty, democracy, rule of law, and human rights (Manners, 2002). The authority-enhancing quality of organising the Commission’s external activities through the lens of these norms has been recognized in the external evaluation of the IcSP. The 2017 assessment report states that “in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, its [IcSP’s] multilateral nature and the European values it promotes (support democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law) enhance its acceptability to beneficiary governments and organisations” (Consortium, 2017, p. 39). A former Commission official Christian Berger further reiterates this point by noting that the perception of the EU’s credibility by external partners is enhanced by the view that the EU has no hidden agenda underpinning its policies and that its approach to security policy ultimately serves the purpose of helping countries develop (Berger, 2008).

Naturally, this perception of the Commission may be changing in line with the possible EU’s gradual turn towards the more strategic, even *realpolitik* approach to international security. This rhetorical shift, however, makes it even more important to maintain and reinforce the diversity of the EU’s principles, methods and instruments, so that the EU’s unique identity – its key asset – is not lost. Of all EU institutions, the Commission is best placed to continue with its problem-driven, security-development approach because this is the very same approach, which helped reconciling Germany and France, contributing to the transformation of Europe into the zone of peace. Importantly, diversity in the EU’s external relations does not need to be associated with the lack of coherence and unity. As noted, the Commission’s actions have a chance to be more effective if *geopolitical* conditions on the ground are well recognized. To that end, the Commission’s close cooperation with other institutions (European External Action Service (EEAS) and policy frameworks (CFSP) is indeed required (Hauck, Sherriff and Sherlock, 2016). The “geopolitical Commission”, in this proposition, continues to exercise its international security agenda based on the authority-enhancing principles underpinning its own DNA, but its actions are also based on the sound assessment of the security, political and geopolitical situation on the ground. In this interpretation, and in line with the Müller-Hennig’s argument quoted earlier, “geopolitics” signifies the recognition and understanding of often difficult realities shaping dynamics in vulnerable countries and regions without adopting the crude principles associated with “the science of geopolitics” as advanced by classical thinkers.

*Methods*

It has been long recognized in the EU, and not always received with sympathy, that the Commission has been advancing its own set of unique methods in international security, including in such sensitive matters as non-proliferation. Annalisa Giannella, who was Personal Representative on Non-proliferation of WMD to EU High Representative Javier Solana, complained about this:

[T]here are procedures which are different; there are prerogatives which are different in the two pillars; and there are financial resources which are very different. Despite the fact that I believe non-proliferation is mainly a foreign and security policy area, I think there is a tendency to try, through the budgetary procedures and instruments, putting it in a simplistic way, to “communiterise” non-proliferation. (House of Lords, 2005, p. 38)

Another Council official boasted that, after adopting the WMD Strategy in 2003, the EU was no longer “exclusively about financial assistance and grants any more”, and instead it was developing its own sense of political direction.[[1]](#footnote-1) The longing for the more explicit geopolitical profile among EU officials and the cheerleaders of integration is well recognized and understandable (Rogers, 2009). This drive does not entail, however, that the unique, problem-driven and project-based methods of the Commission should be subsumed within the (geo)politically minded decision making underpinning the CFSP. The Commission can (and should) become more geopolitically aware and its activities should broadly reflect the EU’s priorities as set out in key strategic documents. At the same time, however, the EU’s *acquis communautaire* and *acquis politique* offer ample normative basis for the EU to entrust the Commission with addressing concrete threats and challenges to human security. Specific examples of how the Commission has utilized the IcSP to advance its security-development and problem-driven approach include:

* establishing multi-service community centres for Syrian refugees in Turkey, offering them access to cultural events, medical and legal help, education and vocational training;
* providing financial and technical support to the Special Monitoring Mission overseeing peace in eastern Ukraine;
* supporting the Free Fields Foundation – a Libyan non-governmental organization concerned with clearing the land from explosive remnants of war (landmines, etc.).

The Commission’s method in these projects is representative of international bureaucracies in that it strives to be specific in addressing problems and work towards uplifting progressive, socially valued goals. As such, it should not be considered an obstacle for the increasingly strategic EU. Rather, it should be viewed as one of the EU’s core assets, complementing the more politically minded CFSP and thus positively contributing to the Union’s international authority and credibility as an actor “with no hidden agenda”. As “critical geopolitics” emphasizes, the understanding and performance of geopolitics varies across time and cultural contexts. The Commission’s FPIs can thus be understood as a particular expression of geopolitics which is representative more of the methods adopted by international bureaucracies than those we typically associate with the foreign and security policies of the nation states. This cultural context, as noted, is the key reason why the Commission’s top officials struggle to operationalize the “geopolitical Commission”. As such, the Commission’s international security *methods* are distinctively *not* geopolitical in nature.

*Instruments*

The final aspect of the agenda for the “geopolitical Commission” concerns the instruments the Commission should adopt in order to operationalize its unique international identity, as embodied by its principles and methods. This paper specifically focuses on the instruments at the intersection of development and security policy: the IfS (2007-13) and the IcSP (2013-20). At present, the most important question concerns the fate of the IcSP in the new MFF for 2021–27. Following the Commission’s new budget outline, some organizations promoting stability and peacebuilding are concerned. Under the new MFF, as many as 10 external instruments are planned to be subsumed under a single mega-instrument called Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) (European Commission, 2018c). In consequence, after 14 years in existence, the Commission will lose a dedicated security-development instrument, which Angelica Beer (MEP, Greens) hailed as defining “the Grey Zone between the Council's CFSP, ESDP and the Commission's development policy” (Beer, 2006, p. 34). The Commission’s stated rationale for such a drastic shake up of its instruments is to make its policy more flexible and more efficient, with reduced bureaucracy and oversight responsibilities (European Commission, 2018d). Further, the new architecture should also allow the Commission to better focus on implementing the EU’s political objectives. These potential opportunities, however, must be weighted against the risks, as the new budgetary structure risks undermining the Commission’s unique international identity.

As it stands, the proposed new MFF aligns the Commission’s instruments closer with the EU’s increasingly traditional approach to international security by emphasising headings focusing on defence and external borders (Monzani, 2018). Shifting in funding priorities is also notable as the European Defence Fund budget is set to grow by 2,200 per cent compared to the previous MFF[[2]](#footnote-2) but the new NDICI will only be increased by 30 per cent compared to the previous allocations to individual instruments comprising it (European Commission, 2018c).[[3]](#footnote-3) This shift in funding allocation and instrument architecture appears to give substance to the EU Global Strategy. This new budgetary direction, however, should be reconsidered. In order to maximize the EU’s potential, harness the Commission’s experience and authority, as well as reinforce the EU’s international image as a *different* kind of power (whatever specific adjective we prefer to apply), it is best for the EU and its member states to make a strategic decision to preserve the diversity in the EU’s international security policy. The EU’s overarching external priorities can indeed be unified, but the specific methods and instruments deployed should remain diversified. There are good reasons to allow the Commission to remain true to its founding principles and its problem-solving methodology. While the Commission should not be deploying instruments in disregard to the EU’s overall outlook and geopolitical realities on the ground, it should still work towards circumventing the specific “high politics” obstacles, just like Monnet circumvented the well-grounded mistrust between Paris and Berlin by directing his efforts towards working solution to a shared problem.

**Conclusion**

The argument of the paper is that the EU should pay attention to the direction it would like the European Commission to take in how it approaches international security issues. This will likely happen anyway, as member states may be reluctant to see the Commission gaining greater autonomy in matters traditionally reserved to national governments (Bayer, 2019). What is needed, however, is a more positive attention, whereby the EU nourishes the Commission’s distinct international identity and further builds on the Commission’s strengths when considering its principles, methods and available instruments. Over decades, the Commission has come a long way gradually transforming from a humble technocratic body overseeing the common market in one sector only and across six member states, all the way to the all-comprehensive bureaucratic powerhouse with representations and policies in all corners of the world. Along with this expansion came greater expectation for the Commission to become more accountable and efficient. It became more political as a result, arguably resembling the national divide between the political executive and administrative core. From this point forward, it became normal and even expected to appoint Commission Presidents with an ambitious political agenda. Von der Leyen, who came from the Germany’s Ministry of Defence, has a special interest in geopolitics, international security and defence.

The European Commission is thus at the crossroads. Recent evidence suggests that influential stakeholders would like it to become more closely aligned with the CFSP and contribute to the EU’s more strategic approach to international security. The proposed reforms of the Commission’s instruments further reinforce this observation, as the new MFF envisages the end of the Commission’s unique IfS/IcSP. The stated rationale for combining virtually all external instruments of the Commission into a single NDICI is to lessen the administrative burden, but also to allow the Commission to become more strategic – both geographically and thematically. An alternative direction for the Commission is possible, however, and it offers distinct advantages compared to the preferences presently displayed in different corners of the EU.

In this alternative scenario, the Commission would indeed become more geopolitical through advancing its understanding of the political, economic, security and cultural realities on the ground where its projects are implemented. This objective is unproblematic considering the Lisbon Treaty reforms. At the same time, however, it would remain substantially focused on deploying its dedicated security-development instruments in a problem-driven, human-centred fashion. In this “diversified in unity” scenario, the Commission would continue to build on its core strengths as an international bureaucracy by prioritising solving security-development problems. Its actions would, of course, need to be aligned with the general priorities of EU foreign policy but its principles, methods and instruments would continue to prioritize functional projects, the examples of which are numerous (Zwolski, 2014). To that end, it would be desirable for the Commission to extend the IcSP with some degree of distinctiveness beyond the current EU budget, as it is worth remembering how important an achievement for the UE it was to establish the IfS and how many valuable projects it supported.

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1. This research interview was conducted on September 1, 2009 in Brussels as part of a series of semi-structured elite interviews on the EU’s comprehensive approach to international security. These interviews were generously supported by the UACES Scholarship. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This original figure of 13 billion (2,200 percent increase) for the European Defence Fund in the 2008 Commission proposal was reduced to 9 billion in the revised budget proposal published in May 2020 in response to the COVID-19 crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The original figure allocated for NDICI for MFF 2021-27 was 89.5 billion. In the revised budget proposal, this figure was reduced to 84.9 billion, but additional 11.5 billion was allocated to NDICI as part of the COVID-19-related European Recovery Instrument (‘Next Generation EU’). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)