

# A ‘Geopolitical Commission’: Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition

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## Abstract

This article examines the origins and operationalisation of the concept of a ‘geopolitical Commission’, which has been promoted by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen since 2019. This concept has been used to guide the stronger co-ordination of the external aspects of the Commission’s work. It is also symptomatic of the growing role of strategic considerations in the Commission’s recent initiatives, particularly through the objective of strengthening the EU’s ‘open strategic autonomy’. To explain this phenomenon, I combine three different theoretical perspectives: neorealism, neofunctionalism, and geoeconomics. I conclude that the geopolitical Commission should be understood as the result of the interactions between exogenous factors – the intensification of global power competition and the rise of geoeconomic strategies – and endogenous factors, such as the rivalry between the Commission and the European External Action Service and the functional link between the Commission’s economic powers and international security issues.

**Keywords:** European Commission; geoeconomics; neofunctionalism; neorealism; open strategic autonomy

## Introduction

‘My Commission will be a geopolitical Commission’, declared Ursula von der Leyen in September 2019 before taking office as President of the European Commission (hereafter, the Commission) on 1 December 2019 (European Commission, 2019c). This concept has been used to refer to the enhanced co-ordination of the external aspects of the Commission’s work (European Commission, 2019b, p. 3). It is also the symptom of a broader trend that predates the new college of commissioners: the increasing integration of power competition and international security objectives into the Commission’s policies.

Foreign policy and international security have long been considered ‘high politics’ and, as such, the exclusive domain of European Union (EU) member states and intergovernmental co-operation (Hoffmann, 1966; Menon, 2014). When the 1992 Maastricht Treaty established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), it was conceived as an intergovernmental framework marginalising the role of the Commission (Buchet de Neuilly, 2005; Dijkstra, 2014). Supranational institutions were also given limited powers under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (Riddervold, 2016, p. 355). Although the Commission plays a role in the EU’s external influence, this role has long focused on strictly economic objectives through ‘economic diplomacy’ (Smith, 2018), development aid (Petiteville, 2001), or the externalisation of internal market regulation policies (Bradford, 2020; Damro, 2012; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009). Nevertheless, the Commission has also been able to develop

its role in international security through the implementation of external aid instruments (Lavallée, 2013; Bergmann, 2019). Finally, the Commission has shown itself capable of influencing intergovernmental CSDP decisions by highlighting their linkage with the economic and financial policies that fall within its remit (Riddervold, 2016). The 2016 *Global Strategy* stimulated this dynamic by promoting an approach covering not only the CFSP but also many sectoral policies enacted by the Commission (Barbé and Morillas, 2019).

However, some recent initiatives have suggested that the Commission is seeking to assert itself as an international security actor more forcefully than in the past through the use of its traditional economic powers. With the European Defence Fund (EDF), adopted in April 2019, the Commission has built on its research and industry competences to expand its role in the area of defence (Haroche, 2020; Håkansson, 2021). Similarly, in a March 2019 joint communication on EU–China relations, the Commission abandoned its traditional focus on economic interests and adopted a more strategic perspective, promoting a common approach to 5G network security and the screening of foreign direct investment based on security risks (European Commission, 2019a). Finally, the new Commission has not only promoted its ‘geopolitical’ identity from the outset but also translated this ambition into initiatives under the banner of ‘open strategic autonomy’ (Van den Abele, 2021). Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has only accelerated this trend, leading the Commission to emphasise its role in the design of economic sanctions as well as policy responses in the areas of financial assistance, energy, food security, and the defence industry.

Whilst the literature has offered normative assessments of the ‘geopolitical Commission’ concept and achievements (Koenig, 2019; Gstöhl, 2020; Zwolski, 2020; Roháč, 2022), this article seeks to highlight the key driving factors behind this evolution by examining the first 2 years of the von der Leyen Commission. Section 2 presents the different theoretical hypotheses that could explain the emergence of this phenomenon; Section 3 presents the method and empirical material; Sections 4 to 6 empirically examine the concept of a geopolitical Commission, its governance, and policy implications; and Section 7 discusses the hypotheses in light of the empirical findings. I conclude that the geopolitical Commission should be understood as the result of the interaction between exogenous factors – the intensification of global power competition and the rise of geoeconomic strategies – and endogenous factors, such as the rivalry between the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the functional link between the Commission’s traditional economic powers and international security issues.

## 1. Theorising the Geopolitical Commission

The Commission’s ambition to rely on its economic powers to become a ‘geopolitical’ actor speaks to several bodies of literature. First, in international relations theory, the argument that the powers originally granted to an institution for economic purposes can be converted into a stronger role in terms of international security is at the core of state-centric realist theory (Zakaria, 1998). According to Zakaria, in the United States, industrialisation and the emergence of a single national market in the late 19th century led to reforms that strengthened the presidency, which, in turn, allowed it to become more active in international affairs. For Zakaria, this evolution was essentially endogenous: the

federal state became more assertive internationally as a result of its growing capacity (particularly in terms of legal authority and financial power) but in the notable absence of any international pressure (Zakaria, 1998, pp. 94–95). This account is in contrast to the standard neorealist argument that units' behaviour is essentially shaped by the international system through competition (Waltz, 1979, pp. 76–77), which leads international actors to imitate their successful competitors (Waltz, 1979, p. 127). European integration in particular has been analysed as a way to advance European states' competitive position vis-à-vis external powers (Niemann, 2006, p. 33; Rosato, 2011).

H1a: According to state-centric realism, the aim of strengthening the Commission's international role should result from and shortly follow its empowerment in domestic economic affairs (Selden, 2010, p. 410).

H1b: According to neorealism, the geopolitical Commission should respond to and emulate the practices of external great powers.

In European integration theory, the Commission's ability to expand its role to new policy sectors has been highlighted mainly by neofunctionalism, particularly through the concept of 'functional spillover' (Haas, 2004, p. 297; Lindberg, 1963, p. 10; Niemann, 2006, pp. 30–31), which refers to situations in which the policy goals pursued in an integrated sector cannot be achieved without expanding integration to new related sectors; an 'offensive' variant of this functional spillover also appears when the policy goals pursued in a nonintegrated sector are more easily achieved with the support of the legal and policy instruments established in already integrated related sectors (Haroche, 2020, p. 857). In addition, because they benefit from integration, supranational actors are expected to promote functional spillover dynamics, a mechanism referred to as 'cultivated spillover' by neofunctionalists (Niemann, 2006, p. 42). Whereas some authors have insisted on the relative immunity of international security policies to supranational integration (Börzel, 2005), several recent studies have sought to apply the neofunctionalist framework to this area (Bergmann and Niemann, 2018; Bergmann, 2019; Haroche, 2020; Bergmann and Müller, 2021; Håkansson, 2021). However, new intergovernmentalists argue that neofunctionalism is unable to explain the evolution of the EU since the Maastricht Treaty because of member states' unwillingness to expand the role of the Commission (Bickerton et al., 2015, p. 14). According to new intergovernmentalist hypotheses, even the Commission has become reluctant to promote the expansion of its tasks, particularly because it anticipates opposition by member states (Bickerton et al., 2015, p. 31; Hodson, 2013). When delegation occurs, it would benefit *de novo* institutions that are closer to the Council and to the intergovernmental logic, such as the EEAS (Bickerton et al., 2015, p. 32; Dijkstra, 2014).

H2a: According to neofunctionalism, functional connections between the Commission's established economic powers and international security issues should encourage its promotion of the expansion of its tasks.

H2b: According to new intergovernmentalism, the Commission should be reluctant to defend the expansion of its tasks, and the EU should address new international challenges by strengthening the role of the EEAS instead.

Finally, a third relevant theoretical debate focuses on the increasingly economic nature of today's great-power competition (Blackwill and Harris, 2016; Leonard, 2016; Wright, 2017; Wigell et al., 2019). Recent studies have highlighted the 'geopoliticisation' of international economic policies (Cadier, 2019; Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019). Examples include Western sanctions against Russia and Iran, the US–China trade war, and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as security concerns over Huawei's 5G infrastructure or the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. One stream of research has analysed this trend particularly through the concept of 'geoeconomics' (Luttwak, 1990), which can be defined as 'the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests and to produce beneficial geopolitical results' (Blackwill and Harris, 2016, p. 20) or as 'the application of economic means of power by states to realise geostrategic objectives' (Wigell et al., 2019, p. 9). According to some authors, contemporary great-power competition, unlike during the Cold War, is characterised by deep economic interconnection and interdependence amongst competitors (Wright, 2017, p. 127), which explains why asymmetric interdependence has become a 'currency of power' (Leonard, 2016, p. 15) and has been increasingly 'weaponised' (Farrell and Newman, 2019). Following this approach, the geopolitical Commission would then be a symptom of the increasingly intertwined relations between economic policies and international security issues. Interestingly, this argument highlights not so much how the Commission enters the field of great-power competition but rather how great-power competition is moving closer to the field of the Commission's competence.

H3: According to the geoeconomic approach, as great-power competition increasingly mobilises economic instruments, the EU's single-market-related policies are becoming de facto more strategic.

Although some of these hypotheses are in direct competition, the three perspectives presented here are not necessarily contradictory but aim to shed light on potentially complementary aspects, namely, the international, institutional and policy drivers of the geopolitical Commission.

## 2. Methods

This article relies mainly on Commission press releases and communications and 16 interviews with representatives of the Commission's cabinets, services, and Secretariat-General as well as eight interviews with EEAS and member state officials who regularly interact with the Commission. Commission officials, in particular, were targeted on the basis of a combination of positional and reputational criteria to cover a broad sample of policy areas potentially affected by the geopolitical Commission principle (trade, technology, finance, industry, competition, development aid, and health). These interviews were conducted between November 2020 and October 2021 under the condition of anonymity.

This article examines the emergence of the geopolitical Commission concept, as well as its governance and policy implications, which allows for the testing of the abovementioned hypotheses through 'explaining-outcome process-tracing' (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, ch. 10). Since the objective is not to demonstrate the general validity

of one causal mechanism but rather to identify the main drivers behind a single phenomenon, this research strategy typically combines multiple theoretical approaches (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, p. 282). In the final discussion section, I assess to what extent the theoretical mechanisms reviewed in Section 2 are present and have played out as expected in the empirical record.

### 3. Concept

The concept of the geopolitical Commission was put forward by Ursula von der Leyen as soon as she was appointed. The mission letter to High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell Fontelles also underlined the ambition to lead a 'more strategic' external action and to better link internal and external policies (von der Leyen, 2019, p. 5).

#### *International Roots*

The concept of the geopolitical Commission is widely seen as a response to the hardening of international relations: 'We live in a world in which geopolitical conflicts are more present' (Interview H), and 'we are surrounded by countries that practice a logic of empire: Turkey, China, and Russia' (Interview A). Transatlantic tensions under the Trump presidency, the assertion of China's power, and Brexit were the main developments cited by Commission officials. As one member state representative put it, 'These issues crystallise the problems of the world for the EU. They create strong pressure for the EU to redefine its role' (Interview I). From this point of view, the Commission's ambition appears largely reactive. Faced with international actors promoting their interests by using all the tools of power, the Commission has sought to adapt. In particular, the Commission became aware of a certain 'European naivety' with regard to Chinese power (Interview A). This trend does not date back to the von der Leyen Commission, as it was already underway under the Juncker Commission. The 12 March 2019 Communication on EU–China relations was a turning point because it highlighted the security issues posed by economic exchanges with China. What was perceived as 'increasing pressure from China' (Interview C) acted as an 'accelerator' (Interview G) of the Commission's reflection. For their part, the United States has 'abused' its power in recent years, notably by imposing extraterritorial sanctions on Europe (Interview I): 'Trump was an important driver because we thought, "If we are having problems with a friendly country, then what will it be like with China?"' (Interview L). The growing role of economic coercion in the United States and Chinese policies has been widely seen as a 'strategic change' (Interview M). Moreover, Brexit, by encouraging the United Kingdom to assert itself on the international stage and to defend interests potentially opposed to those of the EU, pushed the EU to follow the same path (Interview F). More generally, President von der Leyen considered that given the EU's openness and vulnerability to external factors, it was condemned to becoming 'more geopolitical' to achieve its internal objectives (Interview G). In this context, 'the old distinction between internal and external policies was no longer relevant' (Interview A). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic was an 'accelerator' (Interview R): 'COVID-19 has been a shock for the Commission. It has led to a

growing awareness of the EU's dependence in key sectors and that international value chains create vulnerabilities' (Interview E).

### *Institutional Roots*

However, these systemic factors have been mediated by lower level interinstitutional and bureaucratic factors. First, since 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron has promoted the concept of European 'sovereignty', that is, the 'ability to exist in today's world to defend our values and interests' (Macron, 2017). In a similar vein, since late 2018, the EEAS has reflected on how to operationalise the concept of 'strategic autonomy', which was notably promoted by the 2016 *Global Strategy* (Interview R). A task force was set up within the EEAS, and the Secretariat-General's strategic policy planning unit commissioned a study by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), which was published in June 2019 (Leonard and Shapiro, 2019; Delphin, 2021). According to the head of strategic policy planning,

The prevailing view at planners level, which was also reflected in the ECFR report, was that the EU needed to approach strategic autonomy not just through the narrow prism of security and defence but in a more comprehensive way, covering also economic and financial aspects as well as critical sectors and systems such as digital, space and energy (Delphin, 2021, p. 47).

Similarly, in the strategic agenda adopted by the June 2019 European Council, member states stated that the EU needed 'to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously' on the international stage and give 'a clearer priority to European economic, political and security interests, leveraging all policies to that end' (European Council, 2019). According to a member state representative, 'We did not talk directly about geopolitics, but that is exactly what it can mean' (Interview I). Therefore, the geopolitical Commission concept 'symbolised a change that was also pushed by the leaders of Europe' (Interview N).

In this context, the concept of the geopolitical Commission presented in September 2019 by President von der Leyen could be interpreted as a 'response to the EEAS and member states' (Interview R). First, this concept showed that the new Commission was willing to assert its own power, even if doing so raised concerns:

The Commission has always been geopolitical. However, it never put that on paper. The problem is that when you say it, it creates a debate: 'What do you mean? Do you have a mandate for this? What are your intentions? What is the treaty background for this?' By not saying it, you protect yourself. If you spell it out, you should prepare for the questions (Interview F).

Second, it showed that the Commission was ready to compete with other institutional actors to promote its own leadership on the evolution of the EU's international role. According to a member state diplomat, 'There is also an institutional idea: the battle against the EEAS... We cannot say that von der Leyen does not think about it' (Interview I). Another interviewee explained, 'Whatever the EEAS does causes jealousy among the Commission' (Interview P).

In turn, HR/VP Borrell responded by highlighting his own key role as an intermediary between member states and the Commission:

In fact, what has to be geopolitical is the European Union as a whole. Not only the Commission, but the merge of the European Commission and the member states joining their strength and resources to be present and winning the global competition (Borrell Fontelles, 2021, p. 166).

In the same spirit, President of the European Council Charles Michel argued that all EU instruments should aim at the goal of strategic autonomy, including the Commission's competences: 'trade agreements, development aid, economic governance, financial market supervision, an industrial strategy, a digital agenda, a space strategy ...'. However, for Michel, the co-ordination of these instruments had to be led by the HR/VP, acting as 'a super-Minister for Foreign Affairs' (Michel, 2020). The concept of the geopolitical Commission thus did not emerge *ex nihilo* but rather within a context in which many actors were promoting their own vision of how the EU should respond to international challenges. As one EEAS official put it,

Our discourse on strategic autonomy has facilitated the geopoliticisation of the Commission. President von der Leyen would not have used this term if there were only the US, China and COVID-19. The Commission would have carried on as before. However, if it wanted to maintain its leadership over these issues, then there was a battle of narratives to be fought (Interview R).

Finally, the geopolitical Commission principle was also a way to assert the von der Leyen Commission's role *vis-à-vis* previous Commission colleges: 'Every Commission says, "The previous team was bad"' (Interview G). In this case, 'There was a nod to Juncker's "political Commission"; at the same time, this was a way to get out of it because the "political Commission" had been criticised' by many governments (Interview I). In sum, the geopolitical Commission concept emerged from the conjunction of several competing logics surrounding the Commission at the international and interinstitutional levels.

#### 4. Governance

The main way in which the principle of the geopolitical Commission has been enacted is a more systematic co-ordination of the Commission's work to better consider international aspects.

##### *Intersectoral Coherence*

For the Commission, the implication of this co-ordination is twofold. First, it means 'thinking about the international dimension more actively: whether it is agriculture or the multiannual financial framework, the international dimension is present, like it or not' (Interview G). As a consequence, 'Whenever we design a policy, we ask ourselves how it would impact the outside world. In all our papers, there is a chapter on the external dimension' (Interview J). Second, the geopolitical Commission principle means increasing the co-ordination of the work of different services:

The Commission is such a collection of different sectoral policies that people are often not aware of what different DGs do. When DG Agriculture is negotiating with a third country, it is important that it keep the EU's relationship with that country in mind (Interview A).

This co-ordination primarily occurs at the level of the president's cabinet (Interview L). The HR/VP also chairs a commissioner group called 'A Stronger Europe in the World'. However, the von der Leyen Commission innovated by establishing a new collegial preparatory body, the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) (European Commission, 2019d, pp. 14–16). This group was modelled after the Groupe des Relations Interinstitutionnelles, which monitors legislative procedures. EXCO meets every Wednesday at the commissioners' cabinet level, and a preparatory meeting takes place every Tuesday at the service level. At the service level, the work is chaired by the Secretariat-General of the Commission; at the political level, it is cochaired by the diplomatic adviser of the president of the Commission and the deputy director of the HR/VP cabinet (Interview G). The Secretariat-General of the Commission drafts the meeting minutes. EXCO addresses all international issues, except those related to legislative procedures. Its main tasks are as follows (European Commission, 2019d p. 15; Interview A; Interview F):

- Co-ordinating the Commission's positions in international fora, which may involve agreeing on a message, selecting a candidate for an international post, or determining which service is competent to represent the EU externally regarding a sectoral issue.
- Acting as a 'clearing house' to validate the Commission's official line on a sensitive international issue or the message to be conveyed to a specific third country. For example, setting the line for commissioners to follow in relation to the new US administration so that they do not travel to Washington in dispersed order.

As a result, many Commission officials considered that 'the Commission is better coordinated. Before, each DG had its own agenda' (Interview L). 'Before, there were ad hoc points raised in the college by the HR/VP. Now, it is more systematic' (Interview G). Cross-sectoral co-ordination allows for a more transactional approach to international negotiations: 'The EU is the largest donor at the international level but does not have the same political weight [...] We see that countries that receive our aid vote against us in international fora' (Interview A). For Commission services, this approach implies putting their instruments more at the service of the EU's foreign and security policy objectives (Interview H). According to one Commission official, '[In the case of an African country], connectivity is not directly linked to migration, but we proposed an overall package, which provided us with more leverage' (Interview K). According to one member state diplomat, this kind of 'strategic' and 'integrated' approach was 'obvious at the national level, but it was not obvious at the European level'; however, the EU could no longer 'afford' to 'work in silos' (Interview I). Interestingly, such statements suggest that international competition dynamics have tended to encourage the Commission to behave more like a state government, able to effectively defend the EU's position on the world stage. As one Commission official put it, 'In the eyes of third countries, the EU is a coalition of 27 states, not a geopolitical unity. The Commission creates a framework to defend the EU at the international level, but as a unity' (Interview J).

### *Internal Power Redistribution*

From a bureaucratic point of view, increased co-ordination has implications both within the Commission and in the relationship between the Commission and the EEAS. Within



the Commission, EXCO contributes, on the one hand, to 'disciplining' those services that might be tempted to pursue their own external agenda (Interview G). When a position is adopted by EXCO, no service can claim not to have been consulted. On the other hand, EXCO significantly strengthens the ability of commissioners to intervene in international issues outside their own portfolio (Interview G). Commissioners who would previously have stayed away from certain sensitive international issues (e.g., the Navalny affair or the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment) are now informed and involved in decisions via EXCO and thus feel better able to contribute to the debate upstream and defend the Commission's position downstream.

The creation of EXCO can also be interpreted in the context of the rivalry between the Commission and the EEAS. EXCO is often seen as an instrument of the 'takeover of the EEAS' by the Commission (Interview E). The objective would be to 'challenge the institutional primacy of the EEAS in external action' (Interview V). This ambition can be interpreted as one step in a longer-term strategy seeking to 'recover what [the Commission's] DG RELEX was doing' before the creation of the EEAS in 2010; 'Already under Juncker, the Secretariat-General of the Commission had created a Directorate for External Relations' (Interview V). Indeed, although EXCO is formally cochaired by the Commission and the EEAS, the secretariat tasks are carried out by the Secretariat-General of the Commission, which thus holds the pen and distributes documents. The Commission justifies this choice by the desire to avoid cumbersome double co-ordination (Interview F). In addition, some interviewees argued that only the Secretariat-General of the Commission has the resources and skills to co-ordinate its services (Interview G). Conversely, some in the EEAS expressed that the co-ordination of EXCO should have been left to them, given their expertise on international issues (Interview G). Some Commission officials also noted that the EEAS is not always fully transparent with EXCO, transmitting documents only at the last minute and preferring to follow its own agenda without interference from the Commission (Interview F). Similarly, the points raised by the HR/VP at college meetings are often disconnected from EXCO's agenda.

## 5. Policies

The link between a particular policy initiative and the concept of the geopolitical Commission is rarely explicitly presented by the Commission (European Commission, 2021c, p. 1). As one Commission official put it, 'It is true that for the moment, it is more a spirit that infuses—consisting of injecting more external aspects and more cohesion—than a well-defined programme' (Interview V). Nevertheless, a clear trend of increasingly linking economic policies with considerations of international security and great-power competition can already be identified.

### *Defensive Policies*

On the one hand, the Commission has pursued its traditional domestic economic objectives, but in a context in which these objectives are increasingly vulnerable to external powers' strategies and thus connected to international security issues: 'We defend our internal interests through the international level [...] The objective is to protect our internal market externally. The first lines of defence are outside' (Interview A). A typical example

is the regulation on the control of foreign investments with regard to security risks, which was adopted in March 2019 but became fully operational under the von der Leyen Commission. Whilst it was largely motivated by level-playing-field considerations vis-à-vis China, it led the Commission to ‘communitise a vision of security’ (Interview C). Similarly, the May 2021 Commission’s proposal for a new regulation to address the distortions caused by foreign subsidies in the single market sought to implement Action 8 of the 2019 communication on EU–China relations (European Commission, 2021a). ‘China was largely the trigger of this reflection’, particularly the BRI and its acquisition strategy (Interview B). The Commission highlighted cases in which foreign subsidies were ‘not driven by normal commercial considerations’ but ‘by strategic goals’ (European Commission, 2020e, p. 8). As one Commission official put it, ‘We refuse to allow different visions from outside to be imported home’ (Interview B). More generally, in its March 2020 industrial strategy, the Commission relied on the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’, which had thus far been used mainly in the area of defence:

Europe’s strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas (European Commission, 2020d, p. 13).

Here, again, the objective was primarily economic in nature: ‘We focused on economic needs. We used geopolitical instruments to defend our economic interests’ (Interview W). However, there was initially considerable political scepticism within the Commission, and it took the COVID-19 crisis to make the objective of autonomy more acceptable: ‘Export bans and logistical disruptions convinced even the most sceptical’ (Interview T). In May 2020, the Commission’s crisis response promoted the concept of ‘open strategic autonomy’, aimed particularly at reducing the EU’s vulnerability vis-à-vis external powers (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 12–13). Subsequent initiatives in the fields of critical raw materials (European Commission, 2020b) and pharmaceuticals (European Commission, 2020a) have been justified in the name of the principle of ‘open strategic autonomy’.

### *Tools of External Influence*

On the other hand, the Commission also seeks to mobilise its economic instruments as levers of influence or deterrence over external powers:

The traditional instruments of EU diplomacy, the CFSP and the CSDP, are useful but must be complemented by the whole range of the EU’s sectoral policies (agriculture, energy, trade, etc.). Everything that was the core business of the Commission can be used for the external protection of our interests (Interview A).

For example, in the area of development aid, the geopolitical Commission principle means ‘not just giving money but also explaining our interests to our partners, becoming players, not payers’ (Interview V). In other words, the Commission seeks to use aid to influence external countries, an approach that has been prompted by China’s and Russia’s own influence strategies (Interview V). Similarly, the Global Gateway infrastructure programme, announced by President von der Leyen in her 2021 State of the Union speech, seeks to present a direct response to the Chinese BRI (Interview V). A key objective is to reduce partner countries’ vulnerability to ‘economic coercion for geopolitical

aims' (European Commission, 2021d, p. 3). Commission powers can also be used to allow the EU to respond to external powers' pressure, as in the case of the planned new instruments to deter and counteract 'coercive actions by third countries' as well as the 'unlawful extraterritorial application of unilateral sanctions by third countries to EU operators' (Hackenbroich, 2020; European Commission, 2021c). The anticoercion instrument was originally intended to respond to President Trump's threats of sanctions against member states (Interview X). By facilitating the adoption of countermeasures, the goal of such instruments is to protect the EU and its members against states seeking to interfere with their policy choices. As VP Valdis Dombrovskis put it,

At a time of rising geopolitical tensions, trade is increasingly being weaponised and the EU and its member states [are] becoming targets of economic intimidation [...] This instrument will allow us to respond to the geopolitical challenges of the coming decades, keeping Europe strong and agile (European Commission, 2021b).

In some cases, the Commission's economic policies have also had an indirect effect on the EU's relations with external great powers. For example, a key issue highlighted in the March 2019 communication was the security of 5G networks, which eventually led to the establishment of a toolbox in January 2020 under the von der Leyen Commission. This initiative was largely adopted in response to strong pressure from the United States in the context of fierce US–China rivalry and illustrated the EU's will to develop its own autonomous approach and not to 'decouple' itself from China. It was thus 'a diplomatic instrument of a special kind' (Interview D). Another example is the export control mechanism put in place in January 2021 for COVID-19 vaccines, which, by signalling the EU's ability to impose its own restrictions, led to 'smoother' discussions with the US administration on its export bans (Interview T).

The first function of these policy initiatives was to strengthen the EU's ability to compete internationally: 'It is clear that the EU became a stronger actor with these unilateral instruments [...] While talking with the US or China, you need power [...] and the threat has to be credible' (Interview T). However, these initiatives can also be analysed through the lens of bureaucratic competition. Indeed, even if the EEAS and the Commission can both promote strategic concepts and objectives, only the Commission truly has the power to implement them: 'For the implementation phase, the ball is in the Commission's court [...] The power and money are there. It is going pretty fast; it is going deeper than what the EEAS can do' (Interview R). Similarly, as one member state representative observed, 'The levers of action are in the Commission's hands. In this game, the Commission is more powerful' (Interview I).

### *Policy Debates*

The growing importance of considerations in terms of security and power competition in the Commission's policy initiatives is not without debate. On the one hand, there is a tendency to consider all the Commission's policy instruments as potentially contributing to the objective of strategic autonomy: 'Strategic autonomy covers everything that has to do with the defence of our interests in the world' (Interview A). Some member states seem to encourage this approach. As the defence ministers of France, Germany, Italy and Spain have stated, 'Building Europe's industrial, technological and digital

sovereignty requires us to link our economic policies more closely to our security interests' (Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has greatly promoted this evolution by widening the spectrum of 'strategic' sectors: 'Before COVID-19, it was the high value-added systems that embodied strategic autonomy: artificial intelligence, the electric car battery, microprocessors...With COVID-19, it is now pharmaceuticals, paracetamol...It is becoming a general concept' (Interview I).

On the other hand, the addition of the term 'open' to the concept of 'strategic autonomy' reveals reluctance from certain Commission services. In particular, Commissioner Phil Hogan and DG Trade fought to ensure that the notion of openness tempered a concept that could seem to legitimise a form of neoprotectionism (Interview H). The 2021 Trade Review stated that open strategic autonomy 'reflects the EU's fundamental belief that addressing today's challenges requires more rather than less global cooperation' (European Commission, 2021e, p. 4). Some Commission officials mentioned a divide between services that support strategic autonomy (DGs Defence Industry and Space, Internal Market, Research and Innovation, Communication Networks, and Health) and its opponents (DGs Trade and Competition) (Interview E). Similarly, the objective of 'achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy' was adopted in the European Council conclusions of October 2020 as a compromise amongst member states (Van den Abeele, 2021, p. 17). Some member states argued that the EU's action had to be guided by a principle of proportionality, as openness and global value chains were not only a source of vulnerability but also made the EU's economy more efficient (Spain and the Netherlands, 2021). These states sought to resist the 'geopoliticisation' of trade, fearing that for France and Germany, the EU 'should be open only when they can afford it economically' (Interview N).

## 6. Discussion

At the international level, the geopolitical Commission phenomenon is consistent with Zakaria's observation that powers originally granted to an institution for domestic economic purposes can be converted into a stronger role in international affairs. Whilst most of the EU's formal foreign policy powers remain with the Council and the HR/VP, the Commission relies on the external dimension of its economic powers, particularly its financial and legal instruments, to assert its international role. However, in contrast with the US experience, in which, according to Zakaria, the federal state and the president became more active in international security as a result of their growing capacity but in the notable absence of any international pressure, the 'geopoliticisation' of the Commission's economic policies has clearly been a response to renewed great-power competition. The geopolitical Commission phenomenon has not so much followed the Commission's economic empowerment and capacity growth (H1a) as the crisis of multilateralism, the growing role of economic coercion under President Trump and the intensification of US–China competition. Several interviewees even underlined the fact that the geopolitical Commission principle was a way to reinforce the role of the Commission *in the notable absence of any formal extension of its competences*: 'There is no need to change the Commission's competences. Even in areas of state sovereignty, there is an advantage in working together, and for this, the Commission is useful' (Interview L); 'We need to find political, not legal, instruments to move forward' (Interview V). As such, the evolution of

the Commission is more in line with the neorealist logic of competition (H1b), which 'produces a tendency towards the sameness of the competitors' (Waltz, 1979, p. 127). By seeking to emulate the practices of external great powers (e.g., through the Global Gateway, inspired by the Chinese BRI) and by strengthening its ability to defend its own interests on the world stage, the EU tends to draw closer to the model of the national state rather than that of an international organisation pursuing global objectives (Interview I).

At the EU governance level, the geopolitical Commission phenomenon can be analysed as a case of functional spillover. First, there is a clear functional connection between the Commission's traditional economic powers and international power competition: 'We realised that the defence of European interests required the use of economic and internal market levers' (Interview A). Second, the new Commission's initiatives have often responded to dysfunctions caused by the insufficient consideration of the effects of international power competition in the EU's economic policies or by the insufficient mobilisation of economic levers in EU foreign policy. For example, in competition policy, 'There was a gap to be filled. In the same way that distortions linked to aid from member states are combated, distortions linked to aid from third countries should be controlled' (Interview B). Similarly, in regard to responding to external coercion strategies, 'Without a dedicated instrument, the Union and member states will fall back on standard diplomatic means, which may not always be sufficiently effective, as they may not exert the necessary deterrent effect' (European Commission, 2021f). Some of these functional spillover mechanisms follow a *defensive* logic; that is, external action is used to preserve traditional domestic economic objectives (e.g., regulation of foreign subsidies distorting the internal market). Others follow a more *offensive* logic; that is, economic instruments are used to achieve new strategic goals, particularly to strengthen the EU's power position vis-à-vis external actors (e.g., the anticoercion instrument).

This functional spillover dynamic is clearly 'cultivated' by the Commission, which, with its concept of the geopolitical Commission, exposes its international and bureaucratic ambitions (H2a). These ambitions are in relative continuity with those of Juncker's 'political Commission' (Kassim and Laffan, 2019). As one Commission official put it, 'The Commission wants to take the reins' (Interview V). This observation directly challenges the new intergovernmentalist hypothesis (H2b) that the Commission should be reluctant to expand its own role and that new tasks should benefit *de novo* bodies such as the EEAS. Conversely, my findings tend to corroborate recent studies highlighting cases of cultivated spillover at play in the area of EU international security policy (Bergmann, 2019; Haroche, 2020; Håkansson, 2021). In particular, the Commission's willingness to challenge the EEAS can be compared to its encroachment on the responsibilities of the European Defence Agency in the context of the EDF initiative, suggesting a growing tendency on the part of the Commission to assert its role in international security at the expense of the very bodies that member states had established to contain its influence. An interesting finding is thus that the Commission seeks to become more 'geopolitical' not only to respond to external powers' pressure but also to avoid this role falling to the EEAS. In other words, here, the cultivated spillover is closely linked to a 'bureaucratic spillover' (Haroche, 2020, p. 858), through which bureaucratic rivalry encourages institutional actors to assert their respective roles vis-à-vis one another, thus stimulating task expansion from one sector to another.

In terms of geoeconomics, the concept of the geopolitical Commission clearly illustrates the increasing salience of economic instruments in today's power competition: 'It is clear that the politicisation of the economy is underway. Even if we did not want it, it is being imposed by China' (Interview R). However, this study also partially falsifies H3 in the sense that the global rise of geoeconomic competition does not automatically translate into more strategic EU economic policies. Indeed, playing the geoeconomic game requires some internal adaptations on the part of international actors. In particular, it necessitates strong bureaucratic co-ordination between foreign policy and sectoral economic policies, as illustrated by the creation of EXCO. This is especially true in regard to the use of economic instruments as levers of influence over external actors. In addition, the mobilisation of economic instruments for strategic purposes can generate tensions between conflicting economic and security interests, as demonstrated by the debates surrounding the concept of 'open strategic autonomy' amongst the Commission's DGs and amongst member states. These findings are in line with recent studies highlighting the internal conditions and obstacles to the implementation of a geoeconomic strategy (Olsen, 2022).

## Conclusions

Even before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical Commission was already a significant and broad development. This phenomenon deserves to be studied because it highlights the *de facto* partial supranationalisation of EU international security policy, an unexpected development in a sector that was supposed to be the exclusive domain of intergovernmental co-ordination.

To explain this phenomenon, I have combined three different perspectives in terms of international relations, EU governance, and geoeconomics. The main conclusion from this investigation is that these three perspectives not only highlight complementary dimensions of the geopolitical Commission phenomenon but are also deeply interactive. First, the intensification of global power competition largely drove the geopolitical Commission through cultivated spillover and the Commission's interest in asserting itself in the interinstitutional debate on 'strategic autonomy'. Conversely, the functional spillover between economic power and strategic objectives was not automatic and immediate but was activated by the recent evolution of great-power competition, with many EU initiatives designed as responses to China's growing economic influence. Third, the Commission's adjustment to the global geoeconomic turn was made possible by bureaucratic spillover, through which the Commission strengthened its co-ordination capacity, but was nonetheless limited by the internal tension between strategic and economic objectives. In other words, these exogenous and endogenous drivers were intertwined.

In addition to these three perspectives, more granular sociological hypotheses could be tested in future research, focusing on EU officials' different capitals and expertise to explain their attitudes towards the geopolitical Commission agenda (Georgakakis and Rowell, 2013). Such analysis could offer more precise understanding of why the Commission's new strategic approach has been embraced or resisted, depending on the service or policy area.

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## Interviews

- Interview A: EEAS, 17/11/2020
- Interview B: Commission, 04/12/2020
- Interview C: Commission, 08/12/2020
- Interview D: Commission, 17/12/2020
- Interview E: Commission, 17/12/2020
- Interview F: Commission, 11/01/2021
- Interview G: Commission, 14/01/2021
- Interview H: Commission, 15/01/2021
- Interview I: Member State, 18/01/2021
- Interview J: Commission, 05/02/2021
- Interview K: Commission, 16/02/2021
- Interview L: Commission, 15/03/2021
- Interview M: Commission, 19/03/2021
- Interview N: Member State, 26/05/2021
- Interview O: Member State, 27/05/2021
- Interview P: Member State, 02/06/2021
- Interview Q: Member State, 11/06/2021
- Interview R: EEAS, 13/07/2021
- Interview S: Commission, 15/07/2021
- Interview T: Commission, 27/07/2021
- Interview U: Member State, 27/07/2021
- Interview V: Commission, 14/09/2021
- Interview W: Commission, 07/10/2021
- Interview X: Commission, 11/10/2021