



The 'Geopolitical' Commission in an Increasingly Multipolar World: Analyzing the EU's Quest for International Actorness within the Sino-American Rivalry

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Abstract

As the EU emerges shaken from a decade of crises and enters the 2020s facing mounting external challenges, the global rivalry between the US and China appears to be the defining characteristic of the international landscape, and this calls for a strong EU reaction. Upon taking office, President von der Leyen promised to lead a 'geopolitical' Commission – a conception of EU external action encompassing strategic interests as well as values. However, doubts remain regarding the EU's ability to deliver on these new stances and to chart its own path as a geopolitical actor. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the effects of the new working methods and political guidelines since President von der Leyen took office and to assess the EU's actorness in the geopoliticization of its external action in the context of the Sino-American rivalry. It is hypothesized that these innovations brought important improvements regarding in-house coordination, and more limited ones in terms of coherence, which, in turn, do not fundamentally alter the EU's actorness vis-à-vis the US and China through the geopolitical mindset.

Via a hybrid comparative-inductive research design, this study is based on an analysis of official EU documents pertaining to the 'geopolitical' Commission and strategy papers defining the EU's relationship with the US and China, as well as interviews with Commission and EEAS officials. The comparative analysis contrasts the EU's external coherence towards the US and China against the backdrop of the official documents and strategy papers, whereas the inductive, interview-based analysis allows to assess the coordination mechanisms born out of the EXCO process and to peer into the minds of EU officials' conceptualizations of the geopoliticization of the EU's external action. This study finds that the EXCO process produces enhanced intra- and inter-institutional coordination, which leads to slightly improved coherence in external action. It also reveals that the geopoliticization of the EU's external action towards the US and China takes place in a previously uncharted conceptual space where language performativity is assumed. The 'geopolitical' framing of the Commission is not deemed to be geopolitical according to rigorous definitions, but acquires a new, *sui generis* meaning when employed in an EU environment.

The study concludes with an analysis of the policy implications of the findings, namely that the EU must not attempt to morph itself into a Westphalian great power, but rather embrace its singular nature and chart its own path as a liberal globalist actor practising principled pragmatism by developing into a third, distinct 'political pole' protecting the rules-based multilateral order. It is argued that if the EU manages to define a clear role and narrative for its external action within the Sino-American rivalry, it might pave the way for true EU strategic autonomy and international actorness in the 21st century.