EUROPE 04.12.2019 | Marius Müller-Hennig

A truly geopolitical EU Commission?

Rather than playing geopolitical games itself, von der Leyen's Commission should be critical of the very notion of geopolitics

Read this article in German or Russian.

Read Stefan Steinicke's article 'Geopolitics is back — and the EU needs to get ready' which argues that in a changing world order, the EU needs to be prepared to think and act geopolitically.

By any sober assessment, the world order is once again fraught with uncertainty. Both established and emerging regional and global powers are disregarding international law and pursuing traditional power politics. Sometimes this happens covertly, but more and more often countries misbehave quite brazenly. How Germany and the European Union should respond is a matter of increasing urgency. How can they cope with a world out of joint?

Germans seeking more involvement and even major strategic successes may, in their frustration, look beyond the country's border. And at first glance that might pay dividends. In her Mission Letter to her designated EU commissioners Ursula von der Leyen declared that 'this will be a geopolitical Commission'. Indeed, in her Mission Letter to the High Representative the term 'geopolitical Commission' appears twice and in her speech at the Paris Peace Forum von der Leyen even spoke of wanting to foster a "*truly* geopolitical Commission."

Paris was perhaps exactly the right place for Ursula von der Leyen to invoke such a vision. The host of the Peace Forum, French president Emmanuel Macron, is also overly enthusiastic about promoting strategic orientation. His speech to the Ambassadors' Conference in August 2019 provides a perfect illustration. It also gives considerable cause for concern. From its echoes of Samuel P. Huntington's jeremiad about civilisation through a French strategy for an 'Indo-Pacific axis' to the Maghreb, which according to Macron has ceased to be a 'geopolitical reality': it's

geopolitics, everywhere you look. Why not in the new European Commission too, then?

The ugly history of geopolitics

The notion of a geopolitical Commission is clearly important to the new Commission president. But like many others who are reviving the word today, she has so far failed to convincingly define it. Is that because it's self-evident? Or because it isn't?

In fact, it's not. For a start, let's not forget that it was taboo in Germany for a long time. And quite rightly so. From the end of the nineteenth century, the emerging school of geopolitics supplied the breeding ground and sounding board for the expansive territorial ambitions of the German leadership. Even before the First World War, naval expansion and a 'place in the sun' were on everyone's lips. And in the run up to the Second World War, the alleged need for *Lebensraum* ('living space') for a growing population found particular resonance in National Socialist circles.

Looking at its results, however, geopolitical action warrants caution. The carving up of the Middle East during and after the First World War is a classic example.

Geopolitical scholars are unlikely to have welcomed the Nazis' perversion of their ideas. But it's important to keep this historical background in mind. The fact that now von der Leyen, a former German minister of defence, is using the term uncritically, without saying what she means by it, is questionable to say the least. Sadly, however, it's perfectly in tune with the revival of the language of geopolitics in Germany across wide parts of the political spectrum.

What geopolitics means today

Clearly, Germany's historical legacy is no longer sufficient to discredit geopolitics as a false model for a new European Commission. Advocates of stepping up a geopolitical approach and action maintain that 'modern' geopolitics has nothing in common with the late nineteenth century's Darwinistic geodeterminism and insist that today it is indispensable.

But what geopolitics actually means remains obscure. So what's fuelling this conceptual renaissance? Ian Klinke offers the following more intuitive interpretation of the term: '[G]eopolitics articulates a vision of the world that thinks predominantly in terms of Great Powers, spheres of

influence and large political spaces (Eurasia, the Middle East, the West etc). In its most basic form, geopolitics seeks to explain state behaviour, war and alliances through reference to *space.*'

Precisely because this kind of geopolitics is still being used in other countries to develop strategy, we have to ask whether such a geopolitical (re)orientation would be good for the EU. Especially as, in many respects, debates in France, Great Britain and the United States are being decisively shaped by geopolitical arguments and ideas.

Geopolitics' conceptual shortcomings

Looking at its results, however, geopolitical action warrants caution. The carving up of the Middle East during and after the First World War is a classic example. Seemingly plausible plans were sketched out at the stroke of a pen. The consequences of such geopolitics – and the spectre of Sykes-Picot – continue to haunt the peoples affected, but also Europe and the entire world, to this day.

In other regions, too, the inter-war period was the high-water mark of geopolitical experimentation. For example, after the First World War the idea arose that the newly established nation states in central Europe should function as a 'cordon sanitaire' to protect western Europe from Soviet expansion. Not long afterwards, the region was carved up in a secret protocol between Hitler and Stalin in one of the most infamous examples of geopolitical scheming.

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.

After the Second World War, the United States' geopolitical course led from containment through the domino theory to a doomed conflict in Southeast Asia. The fact that, afterwards, the states of Southeast Asia did not fall victim to communism one after another, did not tarnish the geopolitical aura one bit. Taking the example of domino theory it's particularly clear – and this is both a key characteristic and a real weakness – that geopolitical theories inordinately exaggerate the spatial dimension of international politics. They tend towards simplistic, mechanistic interpretations and models that fall short of – and fatally distort – complex social and political reality.

If worse comes to worst, geopolitical distortions can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Clearly, geopolitics has an unrivalled ability to tell riveting

stories. The ‘axis of evil’, the ‘arc of instability’ and ‘being encircled’ by malevolent foes come to mind. Such fancy constructs, however, often have too little to do with complex reality to be of any use as meaningful guides.

The European way

On the other hand, can we really afford to forgo geopolitics if actors such as Russia and China really do think and act on that basis? The geopolitical ideas and actions of others also harbour risks for us and the international community. That applies wherever regional and global powers indulge in geopolitical games, as well as in the relevant geopolitical power centres themselves.

It’s thus imperative to try to avoid being caught up in geopolitical adventures. They tie up resources and divert political attention from domestic problems. This may pave the way for future instability and decline. Anyone failing to learn this from history only has themselves to blame.

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 recognise and understand geopolitical paradigms, without themselves falling prey to similar sirens.

In contrast to her most recent statement, it was this kind of credo that permeated Ursula von der Leyen’s candidacy speech to the European Parliament on 16 July: ‘Some are turning towards authoritarian regimes, some are buying their global influence and creating dependencies by investing in ports and roads. And others are turning towards protectionism. None of these options are for us. We want multilateralism, we want fair trade, we defend the rules-based order because we know it is better for all of us. We have to do it the European way.’ This European way isn’t marked on black and white geopolitical maps.



Marius Müller-Hennig
Berlin

Marius Müller-Hennig is responsible for foreign and security policy in the section on International Policy Analysis in the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Previously, he headed the foundation's office in Bosnia-Herzegovina.