



CANADA-EUROPE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE: SEEKING TRANSNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO 21ST CENTURY PROBLEMS¹

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Geopolitical Expertise in European Institutions: Or, How Do Diplomats Know What They Know?

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The doubts about Europe's power in its neighborhood and globally challenge us to better understand how the European Union produces knowledge about the world. We must step back from the debates on what happened yesterday and who gained power from these events to examine the long-term struggles over expert authority in Brussels. The question is not who is expert—many people are—but how particular claims gradually come to be considered expert. We must grasp what counts as expertise in Brussels: whose expertise succeeds and whose fails, and why and how this is so.

The rise of an approach in the EU that sees power in state-centered zero-sum terms underscores the importance of understanding what counts as expertise in Brussels. Overtly geopolitical argumentation is created in particular political circumstances. It must be analyzed not as an inevitable reality, but as a contingent process of knowledge production. The question is not what does geopolitics tell us, but how geopolitical claims are created in specific political and institutional settings. Maps say nothing; maps are interpreted by political agents for their particular objectives.

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The challenge for the EU is not only how to act, but also how to think about possible actions: how to balance different understandings of how the European Union should relate to the member states and third countries. Before we can evaluate how the EU acts or recommend how it should act, we need to understand how certain actions come to be conceived as desirable and feasible inside EU institutions.

This brief is based on a seven-year study of geopolitical knowledge production in EU institutions.³ It draws primary evidence from 110 loosely-structured qualitative interviews with 73 foreign policy professionals, mostly in Brussels. The non-attributable conversations took place between 2007 and 2013 to probe the everyday practices through which geopolitical expertise is created in the post-2004 EU. My aim was not to assess the validity or accuracy of any claim. I rather elucidated the daily and often informal workings of expert knowledge in EU institutions: the intangible resources and skills, such as erudition or sophistication, that enter into the making of expert authority in Brussels. This brief is analytical in orientation. The point is not to propose policy measures, but to recommend a set of lenses for the analysis of European decision-making.

Findings: The Social Lives of Geopolitical Knowledge

The findings of direct policy relevance can be summarized in three points.

First, the informal social dynamics of knowledge production are as important as the formal procedural facets of the process. In EU policy-making, the ‘low’ diplomacy of civil servants as distinct from the ‘high’ diplomacy of politicians requires closer attention. European decision-making creates trans-national (rather than inter-national) compromises. Given the number of actors and interests in a fast-paced crisis-heavy environment, considerable political, institutional, and intellectual flexibility is required from all actors. No rule trumps negotiation upon negotiation upon negotiation, not all of which is an inter-state affair. In that process, informal social networks and resources are vital for success.

Second, the traditional categorizations of interest have modest utility in these circumstances. The customary models of EU action, such as the realist frames of state interest, the liberal institutionalist ideas of normative power, or the functionalist visions of an emerging European polity, cannot capture the fluidity of EU policy-making. The neat terminology of levels and stages of decision-making—national, European, Brussels, and so on—is of limited value analytically. The actual horse-trading does not follow

³ Kuus, Merje. *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and Authority in European Diplomacy*, London: Wiley, 2014, <http://ca.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1118291700.html>

the binaries of national/European, intergovernmental/supranational, soft power/hard power, internal identity/external interest, and so on.

EU policy-making challenges the approach that frames social processes in national terms, and views political and social difference as national in origin. That approach creates blind spots about relationships that transcend nationality. It feeds the illusion that loyalties are clear or stable and that we can neatly separate the national and the European. To grasp EU policy-making, we should think of the European and the national as a blend in which neither is identifiable or analyzable without the other. National pressures on the staffing of the EU diplomatic service, for example, do indicate the reach of nation-states in Brussels. However, these pressures also illustrate the often unsuccessful attempts by the member states to domesticate a process that is not entirely inter-national or inter-governmental.

The geopolitical argumentation that has gained ground in Brussels over the last decade is not simply a response to the external world. It also reflects different understandings of what the European Union is for, how it should formulate common positions, and how it should exercise power. To understand geopolitics in today's Europe, we must examine the daily struggles over these questions inside the Union.

Third, working in Brussels requires a certain kind of smooth style. Amidst the talk of a new kind of diplomacy that relies less on direct human interaction and more on technology, this brief underscores the personal skills and dispositions of diplomats. For the EU, the staffing of its civil service is of paramount importance. Precisely because EU institutions are bigger and in flux, imaginative thinking about possible futures and an ability to work with diverse actors are pivotal. Such thinking requires a good understanding of other actors: not just the stated interests of states, but the historical processes that create interest and identity in Europe and beyond.

Recommendations: Asking Different Questions

The recommendations likewise come in three points.

First, the informal is not insignificant. I advocate a qualitative and open-ended approach instead of the customary focus on formal institutional procedures. Too often, questions asked about Brussels are formulated so as to fit them into pre-existing answers about national and institutional interests. Asking the same questions from the same angles yields the same results. To get different results—to see familiar things in different combinations—we need different questions.

Second, analytical tools matter. I counter two assumptions about today's Europe: (1) that EU power can be measured by the yardsticks created for nation-states, and (2) that the nation-state and the EU can be kept analytically distinct. Our thinking about EU power should move beyond the effort to separate the national and the European. Although this counterpoint is known in theory, it is generally ignored in practice in the discussion of EU external action.

The appropriate response to the quip attributed to Henry Kissinger—'You say Europe, but can you tell me which number I should call?'—is not a search for one number. The question is premised on a state-based system of power that cannot capture the blurring of interest in Europe. Embedded in the actions of any one actor in the EU are its relations with other. The search for one number or many misses the relational quality of interest and identity in Europe and should be abandoned.

The analysis of EU power should pivot on open-ended questions: how is power exercised, rather than who has it; how should the EU act, rather than whose strategy it should emulate; what is the power of the civil service, rather than whether the service has the right amount of power; what kind of Europe we want in the future, rather than what institutions (state or otherwise) want today.

Third, creative thinking requires creative thinkers. The complexity and fluidity of European diplomatic practice underscores the human capacity to re-imagine what is desirable and possible. The union should cultivate open-ended thinking among its civil servants: their ability to forge new trans-national compromises and pathways in multilateral settings. The task is not to balance existing interests (as if taking an average), but to create compromises that reach beyond the lowest common denominator. This requires that Brussels-based policy professionals have the capacity to imagine European interest as something other than the average of national perspectives. A close look at EU knowledge production reveals the vital role of intangible skills like erudition among Brussels-based professionals: their knowledge of history, culture, and politics much beyond the education system of any one member state. The EU needs individuals who can envision as well as implement long-term strategies for Europe.