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Inside the European Union's Trade Machinery: Institutional Changes in an Age of Geoeconomics

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Abstract

In the context of increasingly assertive behaviour in international trade policy, various scholars seem to agree on the presence of a 'geoeconomic turn' in European Union (EU) trade policy. Whilst various aspects of this turn have been studied, the way in which the EU's trade institution might have adapted to this new context remains unclear. Therefore, this article addresses the following research question: how has the Directorate-General for Trade (DG Trade) adapted to the geoeconomic turn in international trade policy? Using an innovative historical institutionalist framework and directed content analysis, the article analyses EU official documents and 14 interviews with EU officials. We find that, despite apparent continuity, under President von der Leyen, a gradual process of institutional adaptation through different forms of layering and conversion has taken place within DG Trade, increasing the EU's geoeconomic capacities and geoeconomic thinking inside the EU's trade machinery.

Keywords: DG Trade; European Union; geoeconomics; historical institutionalism; trade policy

Introduction

Following China's assertive trade practices and the United States' economic bullying under President Trump, the liberal international order became increasingly challenged by a geoeconomic perspective on international trade policy. Whilst the re-emergence of these geoeconomic ideas initially revolved around tensions between the United States and China (e.g., Farrell and Newman, 2019; Gertz and Evers, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019), the pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine further accelerated the rediscovery of geoeconomic thinking in Brussels. Some have started to posit ideas of a European Union (EU) geoeconomic power (Biscop et al., 2022; Helwig and Wigell, 2022) or an EU geoeconomic revolution (Hackenbroich, 2022; Matthijs and Meunier, 2023). In this context, more scholars began to study and recognize the 'geoeconomic turn' in EU trade (Adriaensen and Postnikov, 2022), focusing on issues such as the EU's (new) trade instruments (Bohnenberger and Weinhardt, 2022; Weinhardt et al., 2022), the EU's geoeconomic potential (De Ville, 2022; Lavery et al., 2022), externalities of the new trade paradigm (Orbie, 2021) or the EU's discursive justification of its geoeconomic turn in trade (Couvreur et al., 2022).

Whilst the importance of the institutional dimension in achieving effective geoeconomic policies has long been recognized (Huntington et al., 1978), the way in which the institution behind EU trade policy, the Directorate-General for Trade (DG Trade), has adapted to this changed context attracts little attention. Furthermore, authors have acknowledged that if the EU wants to strengthen its position in a geoeconomic world, it needs an 'institutional and political transformation of the current setup of EU foreign economic policies' (Babić et al., 2022, p. 199). Yet, the question of whether any institutional transformation has taken place inside the EU's trade machinery remains unexplored. Therefore, we ask the following research question: how has DG Trade adapted to the geoeconomic turn in international trade policy? We particularly focus on changes since President von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Commission'.

Beyond the adoption of new 'assertive' EU trade instruments, no institutional overhaul or radical change in the functioning of the European Commission's DG Trade has been witnessed so far. EU trade policy is still situated within the same institution and is still functioning under the same EU treaty provisions. However, analysts assessing institutional developments in the United States' trade machinery have already observed substantive changes. It seems that below the surface, both the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative are functioning in a more geoeconomic way (Alden, 2023; Farrell and Newman, 2023; Meltzer, 2022).

Therefore, we need to look beyond the ostensible stability within the institution governing EU trade and consider more subtle and gradual changes in DG Trade's functioning. Based on the insights of historical institutionalism (HI) concerning gradual change, we use an innovative theoretical framework to assess the data. Using directed content analysis, we analyse official documents and 14 interviews with EU officials. We find that, despite apparent continuity, DG Trade has increasingly adapted to accommodate the geoeconomic turn in international trade policy. We observe significant institutional changes through different forms of institutional layering and, to a lesser extent, through different forms of institutional conversion. Concretely, we see an increase in DG Trade's geoeconomic capacities, adaptations in the way DG Trade functions internally and in its engagements with the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as adaptations in the priorities it sets for its instruments and staff.

These findings are particularly useful for the literature on the geoeconomic turn in EU trade, shedding light on how this turn manifests itself institutionally (e.g., Adriaensen and Postnikov, 2022). More generally, we contribute to the literature on the EU's global standing, highlighting how the observed changes have better equipped the EU in a world of geoeconomics (e.g., Babić et al., 2022, p. 199). Our findings also offer new insights on earlier debates regarding DG Trade's co-operation with the EEAS, questioning the predominant notion of silo thinking between both institutions (e.g., Bossuyt et al., 2020; Xavier-Bender, 2016). Furthermore, by assessing President von der Leyen's institutional reforms in DG Trade, we contribute to debates assessing the performance of the 'geopolitical Commission' (e.g., Håkansson, 2023; Lorenzani and Szapiro, 2022) and broader discussions on the adaptation to a post-liberal order (e.g., Debre and Dijkstra, 2021). Lastly, the article offers a useful overview for policy-makers.

We begin by identifying how the geoeconomic perspective on EU trade policy enters the broader debate about the functioning of DG Trade. Then, we introduce HI as a theoretical lens before presenting the methodology and our findings.

I. Geoeconomics and the EU

Although conceptual discussions on geoeconomics remain, most recognize the re-emergence of great power competition as a central force behind the return of geoeconomic thinking (e.g., Gehrke, 2022; Roberts et al., 2019; Wigell et al., 2018). Additionally, the idea that economic policies are increasingly perceived as zero-sum instead of positive-sum games is often linked to the geoeconomic narrative on globalization (Roberts et al., 2019; Weinhardt et al., 2022). Most scholars also agree that geoeconomics can have both a defensive and offensive character (e.g., Couvreur et al., 2022; Gehrke, 2020; Matthijs and Meunier, 2023). However, some scholars specifically understand geoeconomics as the increasing great power competition over one's relative position in the global economy (e. g., Gehrke, 2022; Roberts et al., 2019). Others use geoeconomics more pragmatically. Within policy circles, for example, geoeconomics is often interpreted as the increasing tendency to use economic policy tools to pursue broader foreign policy objectives (Blackwill and Harris, 2016, p. 9). Without entering into a discussion of these different views, we examine changes in the institutions where these 'geoeconomic' trade policies are shaped.

Although Young and Peterson (2014) rightly point at the complexity of the EU's trade policy institutional set-up, the European Commission's DG Trade is, until today, largely recognized to have a liberal ideological bias (e.g., Bollen et al., 2016; Hanson, 1998). Additionally, DG Trade is often seen as governed by 'trade purists', focused on a technocratic and free trade-oriented policy course (Young and Peterson, 2014, p. 186). Despite pressure from foreign policy circles to integrate EU trade policy within a broader foreign policy calculus, various authors see the use of trade as a foreign policy tool unattainable in a European context (Biscop, 2019; Bossuyt et al., 2020; De Ville and Siles-Brügge, 2018). Previous research highlights the EU's institutional challenges, for example, by pointing out the 'underlying tensions between the EEAS and DG Trade when it comes to defining and implementing EU economic goals abroad' (Xavier-Bender, 2016). Echoing these statements, Bossuyt et al. (2020) argue that DG Trade and the EEAS's officials operate in separate policy worlds.

More recent institutionally focused research illustrates the lack of unity between the European Commission and the EU member states, thus potentially limiting the EU's geoeconomic power (Gehrke, 2020, p. 1). Additionally, Weinhardt et al. (2022, p. 128) refer to the EU's lack of autonomy from the member states in matters of foreign investments to claim that, in contrast to Meunier and Nicolaidis (2019), the EU's institutional set-up at times prevents the EU from using economic statecraft to compete on a level playing field. Indeed, the EU often continues to be seen as institutionally ill-equipped to deal with the fusion of economic and security issues due to its founding bias towards the 'commercial peace' logic (Roberts and Lamp, 2021). However, taking into account the resurgence of geoeconomics, these claims need to be reconsidered.

II. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

HI provides a comprehensive prism to assess institutional change in the EU. The literature broadly differentiates between a first generation of HI and a second generation of HI. First-generation HI in EU studies mainly focuses on explaining institutional continuity (e.g., Carrapico and Farrand, 2020; Elgström and Pilegaard, 2008) and, less extensively, radical institutional change after the appearance of critical junctures (e.g., Debaere et al., 2014; Debusscher and van der Vleuten, 2017). Second-generation HI, however, focuses on gradual change through endogenous processes. Second-generation HI claims that although institutions may seem to show superficial continuity until a sudden external critical juncture, internal processes can also create a gradual dynamic leading to visible institutional change over time (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009).

So far, the insights of HI have not often been applied to the literature on EU trade policy (notable exceptions are, e.g., Bollen et al., 2016; De Ville, 2013; Garcia-Duran and Eliasson, 2022; Hanson, 1998). However, we use the insights of this second generation of HI to assess whether, despite apparent continuity, any institutional change has occurred within DG Trade. Mahoney and Thelen (2009) observe four modal types of institutional change: displacement, layering, drift and conversion. 'Displacement' means existing institutions are replaced by new ones. This may happen rather abruptly or after competition with an older institution. 'Layering' is a process whereby existing institutions are accompanied by new elements through the creation of new additions or amendments that alter the original institutions' behaviour. 'Drift' is when institutional structures are formally maintained but are increasingly neglected because of a changing political context, consequently losing relevance over time. In this regard, displacement may be a subsequent step after institutional drift. Lastly, 'conversion' entails institutional change, in which institutional capacities are being used in a different way than initially intended in order to align with a new policy context or agenda (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009).

Whilst these four modal types of change already qualify the nature of possible institutional change, it is also important to understand how we define an 'institution' in our research. Depending on the research discipline, the concept of 'institutions' can be interpreted differently. Within social science, scholars often interpret institutions in a broad way. Mahoney and Thelen (2009, p. 4) define institutions as the formal and informal rules, norms, procedures and decisions within political and social life that cannot be changed easily or instantaneously. Others define institutions as formal and informal rules that structure political behaviour (e.g., Keijzer, 2020). However, in this article, we view institutions in a strictly bureaucratic sense, focusing on gradual changes in, for example, the organizational structure, bureaucratic hierarchies or institutional procedures and processes that have taken place inside the EU's DG Trade. Although second-generation HI tends to broaden the definition of institutions beyond those of government, we deliberately use a more restricted definition. This allows us to thoroughly examine the various formal and informal ways in which institutional change has occurred within DG Trade. Whilst it is possible to interpret the creation of new EU trade legislation, such as new trade instruments, as part of institutional change, this article rather focuses on the more intricate and gradual forms of bureaucratic change inside DG Trade that are not as apparent on the surface. The creation of new 'assertive' EU trade legislation is therefore sometimes part of the preceding context and, at other times, a subsequent event after the changes we aim to uncover.

Taking into account this more narrow view of institutions, we can now apply the aforementioned types of institutional change. Given the fact that our article assesses institutional change inside DG Trade under the von der Leyen Commission, we do not focus on assessing drift and displacement. Both modal types of institutional change require a longer time span to become visible. Rather, our research focuses on uncovering the more intricate forms of institutional change inside DG Trade, as, on the surface, institutional stability seems to prevail.

Specifically, we see different ways in which layering and conversion have taken place inside DG Trade. However, the present historical institutionalist literature does not take into account differentiation in various forms of layering and conversion. To obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the gradual changes inside DG Trade, we contribute to the literature by adopting an innovative theoretical framework and observing three new sub-categories of layering and conversion. As operationalized in Table 1, the article sees the possibility for bureaucratic, hierarchical and inter-institutional layering, as well as instrumental, bureaucratic and process conversion. It is important to note that multiple interpretations of the four modal types of institutional change exist (e.g., Fioretos et al., 2016; Keijzer, 2020).

Methodologically, we start by assessing DG Trade's organization chart since the arrival of the von der Leyen Commission and comparing this with DG Trade's previous organizational structure. Second, given the non-public nature of the institutional dynamics we try to assess, we interview 14 EU officials involved with the geoeconomic dimension of EU trade from a security, technology, strategy, legal, regional or inter-institutional perspective. At the request of the interviewees, statements used are referred to as 'by an EU official'. The data cover the period since the arrival of Commission President von der Leyen in 2019. The von der Leyen Commission not only positions itself in the middle of an increasingly salient geoeconomic narrative but also has adopted a more assertive trade–security discourse, making this period of particular interest (Couvreur et al., 2022).

Table 1: Possible Institutional Change in DG Trade.

Type of change	*Definition*	*Operationalization*
1 Layering	Additions or amendments to DG Trade to adapt to an increasingly geoeconomic context.	• Bureaucratic: new geoeconomic units are added to the structure of DG Trade, or geoeconomic units receive more capacity. • Hierarchical: new amendments are made to the hierarchical relationships inside DG Trade's structure to ensure a more geoeconomic direction for the bureaucracy. • Inter-institutional: new additions are made to DG Trade or parts of DG Trade's co-operation with other EU institutions to ensure a more geoeconomic trade policy.
2. Conversion	Institutional capacities are being used in a different way than initially intended, in order to align with a new geoeconomic context.	• Instrumental: conventional trade instruments within DG Trade's toolbox, for example, FTAs, are increasingly used for geoeconomic purposes. • Bureaucratic: existing bureaucratic units or actors inside DG Trade are now increasingly tasked with geoeconomic functions. • Process: the Commission's role within existing policy processes of trade instruments is interpreted differently by DG Trade in order to achieve a geoeconomic policy outcome.

To analyse the interview data, we use directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Specifically, we build on the historical institutionalist literature and the defined framework of possible changes inside DG Trade (see Table 1). In line with this framework, we distinguish between the parent codes layering and conversion, which are then dissected into the three aforementioned subcode variants. Guided by these subcodes and their operationalization in Table 1, we code the data by mapping the ways in which layering and conversion may have occurred. Hence, the identified subcodes provide a clear framework that guides the coding process and the analysis underneath. By applying this theoretical framework to our data analysis, we are able to assess gradual changes inside DG Trade that would otherwise be less visible from the data. It is important to note that the types of institutional change we identify are not mutually exclusive. Rather, we assess the data for multiple possible institutional changes.

III. Layering: Significant Changes

We observe significant changes inside DG Trade through bureaucratic-, hierarchical- and inter-institutional layering.

Bureaucratic Layering

Before the von der Leyen Commission, trade–security issues were not completely absent from DG Trade. Some units within DG Trade have already dealt with the implementation of previous trade–security initiatives, such as the foreign direct investment (FDI) screening mechanism. However, with the adoption of the EU's trade policy review and its new focus on 'assertiveness' next to 'open' and 'sustainable' trade, a shift in the EU's thinking became clear. Yet, the von der Leyen Commission needed the institutional capacity to implement this vision. When assessing the new DG Trade organization chart alongside the interview data, it becomes apparent that bureaucratic layering has occurred, resulting in various additions to DG Trade's bureaucracy.

It is important to note that DG Trade consists of various directorates, which are categorized alphabetically and focus on separate thematic and regional trade issues. For example, under the Juncker Commission, Directorate F consisted of four F-units that focused on World Trade Organization (WTO) affairs, legal affairs and trade in goods. Several officials, however, stressed that the trade policy review set in motion a reorganization of DG Trade, stating that 'the assertiveness part of the new trade strategy translated into the new organigramme of DG Trade' (EU Official 5, 2023) or that the 'three pillars influenced the transformation of the house' (EU Official 8, 2023). This 'transformation of the house' firstly entails that various new geoeconomic units were added, thus changing the thematic focus of Directorate F. Indeed, four new 'F-units' were created, focusing on 'enforcement, market access, SMEs, legal affairs and technology and security' (European Commission, 2014, 2023). The F-units' particular focus on geoeconomic issues reflects a departure from business as usual. With the creation of the geoeconomic F-units, both older trade–security initiatives and new ones are now integrated within a coherent structure and managed with trade–security in mind.

Of particular importance is the creation of the 'F4' unit dealing with 'technology, security and FDI screening' (European Commission, 2023). This unit is fully focused on trade–security issues and can be seen as a direct response to the emerging importance of geoeconomics inside the EU. As officials note, 'the F4 unit really goes into the geopolitical dimension, with a full focus on economic security' (EU Official 7, 2023); 'the F4 unit is completely new and is very much linked to trade–security' (EU Official 5, 2023); or 'the F4 unit is where they put all of the security and geoeconomics stuff' (EU Official 1, 2023).

The increased attention for geoeconomic thinking did not just affect the F4 unit; it reverberated also inside DG Trade. Interestingly, we see a spillover of the geoeconomic focus of the F4 unit within the other F-units and within the hierarchy, interacting with F4. Several officials confirm that 'the unit of course has triggering effects throughout the structure' (EU Official 1, 2023). To bring out the more assertive dimension in EU trade policy, the F4 unit, for example, has to co-operate with the other F-units focusing on market access and legal affairs (EU Official 7, 2023). Furthermore, due to the novelty of the trade–security focus of the F4 unit, the director of the four new F-units invests more time in managing F4, making geoeconomic issues a key priority. As officials mention, 'Because it was an area I wouldn't say neglected, but it got less attention. [...] And because those things are new, it means that the Director of these F-units spends more time on that than on the two legal units or on the market access' (EU Official 1, 2023).

The von der Leyen Commission also added an additional Deputy Director-General, Denis Redonnet, who also acts as Chief Trade Enforcement Officer, to DG Trade's organization chart. This appointment is of particular importance from a geoeconomic perspective. Within the new organization chart, the Deputy Director-General is responsible for co-ordinating both the units that focus on 'trade defence', which already existed, and the new geoeconomic F-units. By overseeing these units in a combined structure, the new Deputy Director-General adds to the coherence of the EU's geoeconomic approach. Various EU officials note that 'the creation of an enforcement directorate, allowed to bring together different strands of the house which relate and pertain to the geoeconomic side of the policy' (EU Official 3, 2023). Furthermore, by coherently representing the work of the geoeconomic units at the Deputy Director-General level, the new function enhances visibility and acknowledges the importance of the geoeconomic perspective within the broader administration (EU Officials 1 and 3, 2023). EU officials confirm that 'the more geoeconomic thinking, enforcement thinking, is now also more actively present at the higher level' (EU Official 1, 2023), and with the new Deputy Director-General, 'there's a greater understanding that there is a continuum of policy' in which the geoeconomic side of EU trade policy is increasingly acknowledged (EU Official 3, 2023).

Bureaucratic layering continued beyond the addition of new F-units and a geoeconomically focused Deputy Director-General to the organization chart. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the consequent prominence of the geoeconomic perspective, the capacity of new geoeconomic F-units has increased through the addition of staff. Whilst most F-units were strengthened in some way, a dramatic surge in staff occurred, particularly within the F4 unit. Whilst it had 12 people in place in September 2020, it rose to more than 20 staff members after the Russian aggression had started (EU Official 5, 2023). Indeed, the sudden policy priority to adopt significant economic sanctions against Russia, such as export controls, created the need for more staff inside the F4 unit (EU Official 5, 2023). Also, the F1 unit dealing with enforcement issues received seven additional colleagues solely because of the trade-related sanctions against

Russia (EU Official 8, 2023). As the context in which EU trade situated itself shifted, the institutional capacity of relevant geoeconomic units followed suit. Whilst a gradual increase in staff over time is not abnormal, for example, as a result of new trade–security instruments, our research reveals a sudden rise in staffing numbers due to the policy demand for the sanctions against Russia. Several officials underscore this assessment, noting that Russia's invasion was a 'real trigger' and a 'game changer' leading to an 'explosion in staff in a few months times' (EU Official 5, 2023). Other officials note that 'the organisation needed to be dynamic to reflect the new focus' (EU Official 8, 2023) or that 'Russia's aggression was violent in one go and demanded more rapid institutional action' (EU Official 5, 2023).

Hierarchical Layering

Institutional changes have also taken place regarding the hierarchies inside the EU's trade administration. It is particularly apparent that officials who have a close affinity for the geoeconomic perspective increasingly take on influential positions within the administration. The aforementioned new Deputy Director-General is a case in point. As one official notes, 'There is a contamination where people who think in a more geoeconomic way are increasingly in charge of files' (EU Official 5, 2023). These amendments in the hierarchical structure of DG Trade coincide with and are further accelerated due to the political context. The highest levels within the European Commission, including the President of the European Commission and her cabinet and DG Trade's Director-General, stimulate the geoeconomic trade perspective in a top-down way. As one official confirms, 'It is increasingly driven by the political level or by hierarchy [...] a bit top-down' (EU Official 1, 2023). This top-down dynamic has created difficulties for some officials who had to adapt to this new demand for more geoeconomic thinking, as it went against their long-term liberal bias (EU Official 1, 2023). However, EU officials equally note that adaptation to a new policy direction is part of being a civil servant: 'It's an army [...] there is a line and civil servants need to apply the policy' (EU Official 3, 2023). Furthermore, the same officials with liberal trade preferences tend to justify their falling into line with the top-down demand for geoeconomics by noting that only the hierarchy has a full grasp of the context in which EU trade policy situates itself, whereas desk officers focus only on narrow technical or legal issues (EU Official 1, 2023).

Various officials further underline that this top-down dimension is also characterized by increased co-ordination between the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, her chief of staff and the Director-General of DG Trade, Sabine Weyand (EU Officials 1 and 5, 2023). Direct bilateral contacts with the administrative head of DG Trade are becoming more important, thus signalling President von der Leyen's willingness to implement her geoeconomic commitments. At the same time, it also brings up questions regarding the role of the Vice President and Trade Commissioner, Valdis Dombrovskis, who seems to be left out of these interactions. Whether these direct bilateral interactions between the Commission President and the administrative head of DG Trade are an intentional exclusion of the Trade Commissioner based on geoeconomic interests or only the result of efficiency considerations remains unclear. Yet some officials seem to indicate the latter: 'We have an intensely political Director-General. I think she's put under more pressure because the Vice-President has such a broad portfolio that he cannot devote all of his time to trade. And she has frequent interactions with the President and the President's chief of staff. And I think in those discussions, she's very aware of the political environment that we're operating in as well' (EU Official 1, 2023).

Inter-institutional Layering

The data show that new formal and informal structures were added in order to improve co-ordination between DG Trade and the EEAS. The fact that inter-institutional layering is observed, particularly between DG Trade and the EEAS, is remarkable, as both institutions were previously not recognized for having a co-operative relationship.

In fact, the von der Leyen Commission came in with a priority to improve co-ordination on external relations issues, including trade and foreign policy. Hence, new high-level co-ordination mechanisms such as the 'Group for External Coordination' (EXCO) and the 'Group on a Stronger Europe in the World' were created. EXCO is set up to prepare the weekly discussions in the College of Commissioners on the external aspects of each portfolio. It consists of members of the cabinets of the EU Commissioners, co-chaired by the Diplomatic Advisor to the Commission President and the Deputy Head of Cabinet of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP). The Group on a Stronger Europe in the World is often seen as the re-branding of 'the Commissioners' Group on External Action' (CGEA), an earlier initiative to overcome silo thing between the Commissioners predating the von der Leyen Commission (Stueber, 2022). Under its new name, it consists of the Commissioners for Trade, Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Crisis Management and International Partnerships, co-chaired by the HR/VP. Whilst EXCO was set to meet on a weekly basis, the Group on a Stronger Europe in the World needed to meet at least once every 3 months (European Commission, 2019a, 2019b).

When it comes to EXCO, most officials seem to recognize the good intentions behind the initiative, aimed at more coherence and co-ordination, including on trade and security issues (EU Officials 1 and 5, 2023). One official describes EXCO as 'it is probably serving quite a good function of coordinating and making sure the cabinets are aware of what the service is doing, of what the other Commissioners are doing. So I think all of that is, broadly speaking, positive' (EU Official 1, 2023).

Yet, whilst officials tend to describe EXCO as 'broadly speaking positive', questions can be raised regarding the functioning of these newly added bodies. It is often highlighted that the practical implications of EXCO are not groundbreaking. One official notes, 'I'm not sure if it enhances or makes changes for my work, because simply we're going directly to the relevant people in the External Action Service' (EU Official 1, 2023). Based on the data, it also seems that when EXCO convenes, there is no in-depth strategic discussion but rather an operational, almost bureaucratic exchange of speaking points from each party present. 'EXCO is all external relations people co-chaired by the EEAS and the Commission section. There, we go through all the files, but this is not at a very high strategic level. It is very operational exchanges' (EU Official 4, 2023). This assessment is further echoed by another official: 'So EXCO is very much …. There's a meeting next week. This is what we're going to say. It is really quite operational' (EU Official 1, 2023).

Therefore, whilst inter-institutional layering with the EEAS has taken place under the von der Leyen Commission, this does not always lead to improved co-ordination. A more extreme example of this is the Commissioners' 'Group on a Stronger Europe in the World', which stopped convening soon after its inception because of political tensions (EU Official 7, 2023). One official particularly explains how tensions between the Trade Commissioner and the HR/VP prevented the body's proper functioning: 'Mr. Dombrovskis said at a certain stage, I'm not going to come because I am a Vice-President. And as a Vice-President, I'm not going to be coordinated by another Vice-President. […] I don't think that this helps the coordination of external policy' (EU Official 7, 2023).

Compared with both largely ineffective initiatives, less overt instances of inter-institutional layering did contribute to significant improvements in co-operation between DG Trade and the EEAS. In fact, since their creation, the geoeconomic F-units have started to build informal connections with the EEAS to request input or co-ordinate work. Furthermore, it is apparent that within these F-units, co-operation with the EEAS is often framed in a more positive sense than generally in DG Trade (EU Officials 1, 2 and 5, 2023). As an EU official states, 'We have a lot of cooperation with the EEAS, which is very constructive and brings in an interesting dimension, for example, the country assessments of the EU delegations are very valuable' (EU Official 5, 2023). Whilst co-operation between all F-units and the EEAS is generally perceived positively, EU officials particularly emphasize the excellent co-operation existing between the F4 unit and the EEAS (EU Officials 2 and 5, 2023). More specifically, when it comes to co-operation on FDI screening and export controls, the F4 unit is noted to have extensive discussions with the EEAS on a daily basis (EU Official 2, 2023). Additionally, EU officials even note that co-operation between the F4 unit and the EEAS is often more fruitful than co-operation with other units inside DG Trade because of their shared vision: 'So we work on a daily basis with the EEAS. We have an extremely good collaborative relationship with them. […] Probably even better than with the other units in DG Trade. But that's because we have a shared purpose. We have a very good understanding of how we are supposed to work together' (EU Official 2, 2023). As opposed to formal arrangements that were largely ineffective, an informal 'geoeconomic entente' between DG Trade's geoeconomic F-units and the EEAS has contributed to more effective co-operation.

At first sight, the results regarding EXCO and the Group on a Stronger Europe in the World coincide with the predominant views in the literature about silo thinking and tensions between DG Trade and the EEAS. Yet, at the same time, the more informal positive engagements we observe between the F-units and the EEAS show that, beneath the surface, important changes are taking place, putting into question these long-time views. Furthermore, despite the fact that EXCO and the Group on a Stronger Europe in the World did not contribute in an equal measure to improvements in co-operation with the EEAS as the F-units, the creation of both bodies is still significant. Both initiatives clearly indicate the increasing efforts by the highest levels of the European Commission towards more co-operation on external policies.

IV. Conversion: Change in Progress

To a lesser extent than layering, we also observe cases of conversion.

Instrumental Conversion

The first instance is instrumental conversion. In particular, already existing trade instruments such as free trade agreements or association agreements that were previously used with liberal intentions, such as fostering the opening of markets, have increasingly been used for new geoeconomic purposes. As one official notes, 'Traditionally it was about the opening of markets, but recently there are new considerations that play a more important role' (EU Official 11, 2023). Often repeated examples of these new considerations are the need to obtain a diversification of supply, access to energy or critical raw materials such as lithium or the need to set technology standards (EU Officials 1, 5, 8 and 10, 2023). It is apparent that EU officials particularly acknowledge that these geoeconomic considerations play an ever greater role in EU trade agreements (EU Officials 10 and 11, 2023). The EU's failed efforts to obtain a free trade agreement with Australia and the update of the EU–Chile Association Agreement in 2022, both aimed at obtaining better access to critical raw materials, are cases in point (Aarup and Moens, 2022; Allenbach-Ammann, 2023). Furthermore, the new considerations that have come into play are often motivated by the changed geoeconomic context of economic confrontation with China and the United States (EU Officials 10 and 11, 2023).

Whilst instrumental conversion is thus increasingly noticeable, it does not mean that liberal trade instruments did not have any strategic dimension in the past. Yet, with the rise of geoeconomic thinking in the EU, strategic objectives have become much more pronounced. Compared with the high days of liberal trade, EU officials now openly admit that, at this juncture, strategic considerations constitute a driving force behind EU trade policy. As an official confirms, 'The geopolitical case for free trade agreements has always existed. […] There is always an element of foreign policy in the trade policies that we conduct. […] There's a logic of efficiency, but also a logic of economic security that is coming in the mix. Now, much more. There's a more complicated balance. And that's what geoeconomics is about' (EU Official 3, 2023). Furthermore, the present expansion of instrumental conversion is also explained by the increasing strategic importance of particular regions, such as the Indo-Pacific. As an official says, 'it's not so black and white, previously FTA's already had a strategic agenda, for example, in our engagement with ACP countries, but this is possibly stronger now, for example, looking at our engagement in the Indo Pacific' (EU Official 5, 2023). The signing of a free trade agreement with New Zealand in 2022 and the EU's recent efforts at advancing negotiations with Australia and India to secure supply of raw materials support this statement (Reuters, 2022).

Bureaucratic Conversion

The data also confirm some instances of bureaucratic conversion. As more emphasis is put on geoeconomics, officials and certain units within DG Trade are increasingly tasked with trade–security functions compared with their long-time liberalization focus.

We observe, for instance, that EU officials with decades of experience in the field of multilateral trade liberalization and WTO law are tasked with instrumentalizing their expertise to assist with the creation of new geoeconomic trade instruments (EU Official 1, 2023). This is important, as some of these instruments are particularly controversial from a WTO law perspective. The Anti-Coercion Instrument, for example, has already attracted significant criticism regarding its compatibility with WTO law (e.g., Ruys and

Silvestre Rodriguez, 2022). Hence, by repurposing the WTO law expertise of these EU officials, the Commission aims to strike a balance between creating effective geoeconomic instruments and, in the process, bolstering the legal defence of these instruments against external contestation.

Furthermore, the same officials are increasingly tasked with repurposing their legal expertise in order to protect the Commission's autonomy over its proposed trade–security initiatives (EU Officials 1 and 7, 2023). As the Anti-Coercion Instrument, for example, touches upon the realm of foreign policy, some member states in the Council, because of liberal trade considerations, actively sought to weaken the instrument and increase their influence over its implementation (Allenbach-Ammann, 2022). Consequently, the mentioned officials carefully navigated the legal discussions with the Council to protect the Commission's say over the Anti-Coercion Instrument: 'we had a struggle with them [...] we were very allergic to any implication that it was a foreign policy instrument' (EU Official 1, 2023).

Lastly, on a unit level, you also see geographical units increasingly focusing on geoeconomic issues. Several of them, for example, working on Latin America, were generally focused on liberalization issues, but now they take into account geoeconomic trade considerations. As an official notes, 'There's much more focus on, well, actually, we need to be friends with country X, because they have natural resources that we need access to in order to make batteries or whatever it might be' (EU Official 1, 2023). Another EU official echoes these new considerations within geographical units: 'When I speak with my geographical counterparts and I talk about the importance of a particular country, they're making the same point' (EU Official 1, 2023).

Whilst these observations do not prove that liberalization objectives have disappeared, we do see geoeconomic considerations becoming increasingly important across DG Trade.

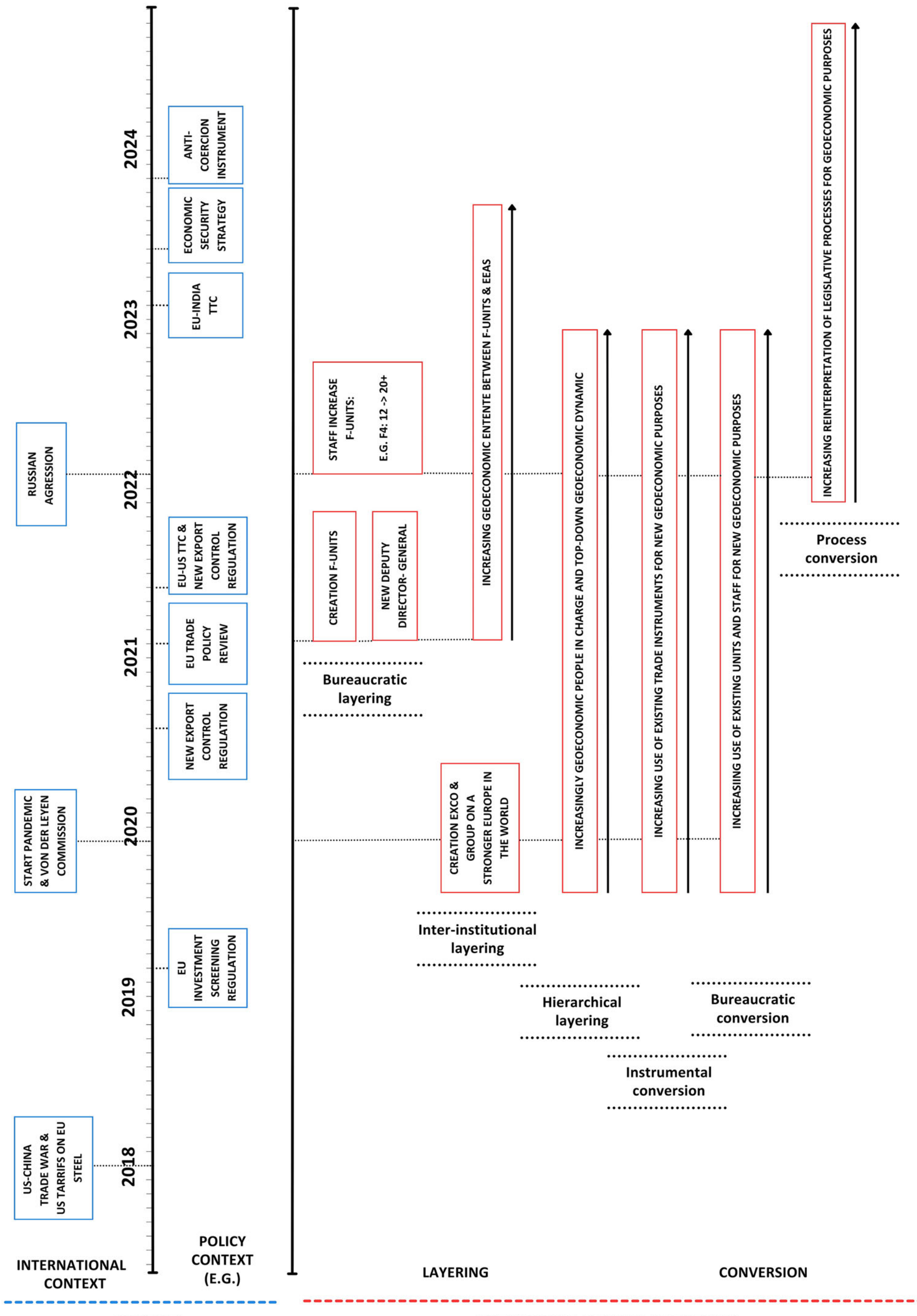
Process Conversion

Lastly, we also find limited instances of process conversion in which DG Trade reinterpreted its role in the policy processes of existing trade–security instruments in order to ensure a geoeconomic policy outcome. This occurred in the context of growing geoeconomic thinking since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

A first instance relates to the policy process of export controls. Whilst member states are officially in the lead to initiate export controls, the data confirm that since Russia's aggression against Ukraine, DG Trade officials have increasingly acted in a proactive way, proposing certain new export controls. This indicates that, in an increasingly geoeconomic context, DG trade officials have reinterpreted their role in the policy process to obtain a preferred policy outcome. Officials note that whilst previously, the Commission acted only upon a request of a member state, 'the Commission now puts forward proposals and has more influence, although member states remain in charge, this is a big change in the process' (EU Official 8, 2023).

A similar situation of process conversion concerns trade-related sanctions. Whilst member states officially initiate the process of trade-related sanctions, DG Trade has claimed a more active role in proposing sanctions since Russia's aggression in 2022. This again shows that, in the context of rising geoeconomic thinking, DG Trade has

Figure 1: DG Trade Institutional Changes. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Source: Author's own creation based on the results.

reinterpreted its role in an existing policy process to foster a geoeconomic policy outcome. As one official notes, 'sanctions were suddenly proposed in a top-down manner to the member states, this is unprecedented' (EU Official 5, 2023).

Whilst these observations do not necessarily demonstrate that EU member states would have proposed less ambitious geoeconomic actions than the Commission after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the data show that the Commission has become much more assertive and proactive in ensuring that the geoeconomic policies that materialize are swift and effective.

Figure 1 presents an overview of all observed institutional changes inside DG Trade.

Conclusions

This article analyses how DG Trade has adapted to the geoeconomic turn in international trade policy since President von der Leyen took office. By adopting an innovative historical institutionalist framework, we observe gradual institutional changes inside DG Trade through various types of institutional layering and conversion.

Concretely, we find an increase in DG Trade's geoeconomic capacities through bureaucratic layering. New geoeconomic F-units were added to the organization chart, in particular the F4 unit, to focus primarily on trade–security issues. In addition, the creation of a new Deputy Director-General, responsible for the co-ordination of all geoeconomically relevant units under one roof, allowed for the prioritization and presence of the geoeconomic perspective at the highest levels inside DG Trade. Throughout President von der Leyen's tenure, bureaucratic layering further accelerated, with the newly created geoeconomic F-units gaining substantially in staff after Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The von der Leyen Commission also introduced hierarchical layering, so that EU officials with a close affinity for the geoeconomic perspective increasingly became in charge of files. Additionally, we observe that the growing influence of geoeconomics inside DG Trade has been stimulated by a top-down political dynamic directly driven by the President of the European Commission and the Director-General of DG Trade. Inter-institutional layering is also observed in the creation of new formal and informal co-operation frameworks to improve co-operation between DG Trade and the EEAS. Although the formal co-operation frameworks that were created, EXCO and the Group on a Stronger Europe in the World, had limited consequences on DG Trade's co-operation with the EEAS, the increasingly positive co-operation between DG Trade's new geoeconomic F-units and the EEAS contradicts long-term ideas about silo thinking concerning trade and foreign policy (e.g., Bossuyt et al., 2020; Xavier-Bender, 2016).

We also find cases of instrumental conversion, whereby DG Trade's 'liberal' policy tools, such as trade agreements, are increasingly repurposed for geoeconomic objectives, such as obtaining critical raw materials. We further find instances of bureaucratic conversion, where DG Trade tended to repurpose particular staff members to achieve new geoeconomic objectives. For example, EU officials with strong expertise in WTO law now need to assist in the creation of controversial new trade–security instruments to bolster the EU's defence against external legal contestation. Furthermore, geographic units that were previously focused on trade liberalization are now increasingly considering the EU's geoeconomic interests in their engagements with other regions. Whilst this does not mean that liberalization objectives have disappeared, we see geoeconomic considerations becoming more important across DG Trade. Lastly, we find instances of process conversion, where DG Trade actively reinterpreted its role within a policy process to gain influence over EU member states and ensure an effective and swift geoeconomic policy outcome. Particularly after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, DG Trade has taken a more proactive role in the process of adopting trade-related sanctions or export controls against Russia.

By answering how the EU's geoeconomic turn in trade policy has manifested itself on an institutional level, we contribute a new perspective to the recent literature on the EU's geoeconomic turn in trade (e.g., Adriaensen and Postnikov, 2022). Whilst it has been recognized that the EU needs institutional change in order to obtain a strong position in a world of geoeconomics (e.g., Babić et al., 2022), our research shows that the EU has already taken significant steps towards this end in recent times. Indeed, whilst DG Trade was long seen as institutionally 'ill-equipped' to deal with the fusion of economic and security issues (e.g., Roberts and Lamp, 2021), the opposite is increasingly becoming true. Linked to this assessment, our findings add to the broader literature on the adaptation to a post-liberal order (e.g., Debre and Dijkstra, 2021) and evaluations of President von der Leyen's geopolitical Commission (e.g., Håkansson, 2023; Lorenzani and Szapiro, 2022) by showing the EU's trade administration's significant adaptation under this Commission.

Whilst we also offer a useful overview for policy-makers involved with the geoeconomic turn in international trade policy, the institutional strengthening of the geoeconomic perspective in DG Trade can be perceived differently. Whilst some would say that the EU is institutionally equipping itself to defend itself against the geoeconomic actions of others, others would note that the EU is offensively preparing for a geoeconomic approach to trade. However, when considering that geoeconomics can have both a defensive and offensive character (e.g., Couvreur et al., 2022; Gehrke, 2020; Matthijs and Meunier, 2023), both perspectives imply that the EU's trade machinery is adapting to a world of geoeconomics by becoming more geoeconomic itself. The geoeconomic perspective on EU trade policy does not seem to go away anytime soon. Further research will be needed to evaluate DG Trade's new trajectory and the policy implications in the years to come.

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Data Availability Statement

The organisational charts of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Trade of 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 can be made available upon request.

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