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EU's New Commission Leadership: What It Means For Asia

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

After a controversial package deal, the European Council finally settled on a new leadership for the bloc's top jobs. How will the new leadership affect the EU's outreach to Asia?

COMMENTARY

IN A remarkable turnaround, the European Council – the collective institution of all the European Union's national leaders – settled for German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen as President of the EU Commission. She has now been duly confirmed by the EU Parliament. This is part of a leadership package deal that also includes: Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel as Council President; IMF Director Christine Lagarde for European Central Bank (ECB) President; and Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell as High Representative for Foreign Affairs.

Previously, national leaders had been unable to reach unanimity on any candidate, including the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidate), for the EU's most powerful job. They effectively rejected all parliamentary groups' lead candidates, settling for an EU outsider. [The Spitzenkandidat idea](#) links parliamentary and presidential elections by encouraging each parliamentary group in the EU Parliament to nominate a pre-election candidate for Commission president. This is supposed to personalise the election campaign and add an element of participatory democracy to the selection of Brussels' top figures.

Undemocratic Backroom Deals?

The pejorative diagnosis is surprisingly universal across the political spectrum in Brussels and EU capitals: like many other parts of the world, the EU had just fallen

into democratic recession. Many parliamentarians and observers fear that legislative integrity has been damaged and accuse EU leaders of ignoring democracy by facilitating a backroom stitch-up for the package deal.

In the eyes of these critics, the democratic *Spitzenkandidaten* principle has been jettisoned in favour of a murky backroom deal among national leaders, more to do with personal favours and national interests than with honouring the outcome of the EU elections in May.

Critics argue that von der Leyen's appointment was to the detriment of democracy in Europe. It allegedly undermined elections and dealt a blow to the EU Parliament, which has put a lot of hope and effort in the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle, which empowers the EU legislature as the repository of European executive power.

In reality, however, the executive selection of a full leadership package is in perfect harmony with all EU treaties, and is in fact specifically designed to forestall an overwhelmingly supranational Union with too much power resting in Brussels.

Good Choice for Europe

Von der Leyen is a highly suitable candidate, despite her chequered record. Her detractors argue that her indeed unfortunate performance at the defence ministry should not qualify her for a promotion to the Commission.

However, defence is Germany's most difficult portfolio; it is almost impossible to earn political credits at this underfinanced ministry. Von der Leyen is not alone to blame for the abysmal state of the German *Bundeswehr*. Rather, decades of neglect by successive governments cosily free-riding on American defence guarantees is at fault.

On the other hand, she is well acquainted with Brussels, where she spent most of her childhood and von der Leyen maintains an extensive network in EU politics. She is a committed European, knows the intricacies of Brussels' politics, and speaks French and English fluently. Moreover, with more than a decade of ministerial experience, she possesses that passion and experience that the "winning lead candidate", Manfred Weber, was lacking.

With von der Leyen now confirmed, and with the likely confirmation of Lagarde as ECB President later this year, EU leaders contribute to equality with women occupying two of the four most important European positions.

Like EU, Like ASEAN

As noted in an earlier [RSIS Commentary](#), it was unlikely that the *Spitzenkandidaten* were ever going to be selected by the Council. The principle is highly contested in many European capitals. And quite correctly, the Lisbon Treaty only asks EU leaders to 'take the election outcome into account' when nominating the president to Parliament, which then votes on the one proposed candidate.

Hence, the alleged “backroom stich-up” is de facto in perfect harmony with both EU law and spirit. Unlike what most MEPs and observers suggest, elections do simply not determine the most powerful EU jobs.

On the contrary, it is not the EU leaders who have done damage to the EU’s democratic credentials, but parliament itself, encouraging the *Spitzenkandidaten* to campaign across Europe prior to the elections, pretending otherwise. These candidates were dishonest in their implicit suggestion that somehow voters had a say in the leadership selection.

With this executive appointment, Europe did not suffer a democratic setback, but is practising honesty. It is almost a truism that the EU is the supranational counterpart to ASEAN, more integrated and essentially supranational in its functioning. However, this example demonstrates, just like ASEAN, that the EU essentially remains an international organisation of independent nation states, all with their own distinct history, culture, political system and democratically legitimised national leaders.

Neither is the EU Commission a truly legitimate and sovereign *government*, nor is the EU Parliament a truly legitimate and sovereign parliament. The EU is not entirely supranational and just like in the case of ASEAN, intergovernmental elements remain. The EU thrives on the bargaining process among 28 different views, domestic interests and perspectives, at the end of which emerges a grand European compromise.

This is the EU as it is and this is the EU that should be maintained.

Lesser EU Role in Asia?

However, for the foreseeable future, von der Leyen will have to invest much effort in healing the institutional relationship between Parliament and the Commission and Council. This internal preoccupation will come at the expense of enhancing the EU’s role internationally which has been increasing incrementally during the past administration.

European leaders are aware of the pressing need to have a comprehensive Asia strategy, including a greater engagement with Asia. The EU will be too preoccupied internally as to address the real challenge: What role should and can the EU play internationally?

The process of a greater EU role in Asia will slow down significantly, since much effort will have to be invested into internal institutional healing among parliament, council and commission. This is the tragedy of the new Commission President.

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