

WORM OR GIANT? WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE EU AS AN INTERNATIONAL ACTOR IN 2022

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ABSTRACT

In 1991, the former Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens described the EU as “an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm”. Much to the chagrin of EU institutional actors, this remark has stuck. Since then, considerable developments have made the EU a far more formidable actor on the global stage, but what type of actor and where its strengths and weaknesses lie is still a subject of debate. This paper will review the EU’s status as a global actor by looking at the metrics of power suggested by Eyskens in his remark, namely the extent of the EU’s military, economic/civilian, and normative power. The paper will analyse the subject by using different theoretical frames of international relations, making use of historical examples of each power component and relating these to contemporary examples. From this, it will be argued that the EU’s power is civilian-normative, due to being constrained by not possessing a formal military, and this will remain the case in the future. As an actor, therefore, we can expect the EU to continue its active role in exerting its influence in matters of global diplomacy and economics, with minor developments as an actor in terms of security.

Keywords: EU, Security, Power, Ukraine, Normative Power, Civilian Power

the international stage. However, with more recent developments, the Union now faces substantial challenges to what kind of international actor it can be. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has revived decades-old questions regarding the EU’s capacities as a security provider and more generally as an actor in the global arena. It conjures serious doubts as to whether the EU will be able to make any serious impact on the events on its doorstep and demands an analysis of what type of actor the EU is today. It is the purpose of this paper to determine whether the EU will continue its role as a normative-civilian power on the world stage. To meet this aim, the capabilities the EU possesses will be defined by discussing different theoretical frameworks which describe the nature of the EU. Realist interpretations of the EU will be covered, followed by alternative theoretical perspectives. These sections will focus specifically on whether the EU is an influential actor as a military power, a civilian power, or a normative power. Following this, the specific areas of impact that the EU has will be discussed, analysing historical trends alongside modern aims. These sections will focus on the EU’s capabilities in security and defence, international diplomacy and trade, and value projection. This will be followed up with a concluding statement, summarising the argument that establishes why the EU pursues continuity as a normative-civilian international actor. To better understand what the EU as an organisation is actually capable of, this paper will focus on the EU’s institutions (the Commission, Council, and Parliament), the legislation they pass, and the foreign policy they have collectively engaged in.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU), through its various incarnations, has dramatically changed its global impact over time. As the organisation has grown in size and membership, so too has its scope to act on

THE REALIST PERSPECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS AN ACTOR

In order to understand what kind of international actor the EU continues to be, it is necessary to determine if the EU can be classified as an actor at all. There has been significant scholarly discussion over whether the EU truly acts as an autonomous actor or whether it is exclusively an agent of the member states (Hill, 1993: 308). Realist scholars contest that the EU cannot be considered an actor as this role is exclusively held by states (Bull, 1982: 151). The power granted to states is derived from their possession of militaries, or physical military capabilities such as weapon systems and armoured vehicles. This grants them powers to defend their territories from attack, the monopoly of the use of force within that territory, and to enforce legislation on the population of that territory. Since the EU does not possess this military capacity, it cannot fulfil any of these functions effectively without the support of member states and thus has no real power. Furthermore, the examples of the EU having the appearances of an actor are said to be exaggerated. In these cases, the EU only presses the interests of states that have strong militaries. For example, in matters of international security, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) acts as a key pillar of the EU in foreign affairs. Though, by its design, it gives no real power to the EU to ensure security, as decision-making powers are firmly placed with member states themselves (Wright, 2011: 25). Therefore, the accomplishments of the CFSP can mainly be attributed to intergovernmental inputs from member states.

In previous decades, the exact role and impact of the EU as an international actor has been contested. For example, Christopher Hill has argued that for the economic and diplomatic strength of the EU, it has not accurately matched international expectations of what it can do with commensurate outputs; famously, this was coined as the capabilities-expectations gap (Hill, 1993; Hill, 1997). The expectations Hill refers to are for Europe to effectively provide for its own security, evidenced in calls by European ministers and NATO officials for Europe to address security crises in the 1990s,

either through member state cooperation or through the European Commission (EC)/EU. In 1991, Luxembourgish Foreign Minister, Jacques Poos, stated that “this is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans,” to demonstrate its capabilities as a security actor in dealing with the Balkan conflicts in the post-Cold war environment. (Drozdiak, 1999). His Belgian counterpart, Minister for Foreign Affairs Mark Eyskens, criticised the EU’s capacity to respond to crises, referring to Europe as an “economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm” (Whitney, 1991). This is significant as it underpins the argument that the EU is inherently flawed in the sense that it will never be able to bridge this gap as it lacks the effective military-security apparatus that is necessary. He points to the failings of specific cases where the EU has been unsuccessful in meeting the expectations that were imposed on it. The former Yugoslavia in the 1990s stands out as an example of this, where the EU failed to come up with constructive solutions to address various conflicts precipitated by the country’s collapse, frustrated their allies in the US, and ultimately had to rely on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and other actors to deal with an issue that was on the EU’s doorstep (Hill, 1997: 17). Naturally, by using this example and looking at the issue from a realist perspective, one supposes that the then European Community could have addressed the conflict in the Balkans if there was an effective military wing of the organisation.

The need to solve this issue was apparent, at least to government officials in London and Paris, where delegations from both met at the French port town of St. Malo to discuss various matters of European security, but crucially to negotiate the viability of making the EU an effective security provider. The meeting concluded with the desire to fulfil certain “headline goals” of having 60,000 military personnel ready to deploy at 60 days’ notice for a year-long deployment (Jones Parry, 2008). The success of these battlegroups as they were named has been mixed. Despite achieving the headline goals and these battlegroups having full operational capacity

by 2007, they have never been deployed for serious engagements and only used in capacity-building or training in Africa (Ricketts, 2017: 36). In instances since then, such as for interventions in Libya in 2011, another conflict on the EU's doorstep, the UK and France led operations with the EU's battlegroups scarcely considered. The EU's lack of success in fielding an effective military arm of the Union and thus being an effective security actor is apparent in 2022 as well, with Finland and Sweden abandoning neutrality and making preparations to join NATO in the face of potential Russian aggression. If the current members of the EU were satisfied with the security provisions provided by the Union, they would not need to join NATO. Thus, this demonstrates that the EU remains a poor actor in this area.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR

Despite revealing serious shortcomings of the EU's capacities as a global actor, the realist fixation on 'actorness' being defined by the power it is granted by a military misses the point of how the EU can exert its influence, specifically in matters relevant to trade, diplomacy, and ethical matters such as human rights (Ginsberg, 1999: 437). Two alternative explanations exist to describe how the EU exhibits capacities as an international actor: as a civilian power and as a normative power. The EU as a 'civilian power' has its genesis in the writings of Francois Duchene and is defined by being able to address its problems in foreign relations through diplomatic and economic means (Wright, 2011: 9). Crucially, civilian power applies in the absence of military power and can be exhibited through participation in international organisations, negotiating trade deals, and performing diplomacy.

Civilian power grants the EU a unique position in the international arena as it has demonstrably made effective use of diplomatic negotiations to dramatically increase its size and power through enlargement. The attractiveness of the single market

as a means to promote economic growth has repeatedly pulled new applicants into the accession process over time, growing from six members to 27. What is significant about this is that the EU is granted significant powers as an international actor without the need for a robust military component. It has secured political authority over new countries to legislate over various matters of economics and trade, almost entirely through diplomatic and economic means. Notably, it can be argued that it lacks traditional sovereignty over newly acquired members and thus it is doubtful whether this constitutes genuine acquisitions of power in realist terms. However, in a world that has been less reliant on military means for territorial expansion, expansions through civilian power methods are a viable alternative that the EU exploits to great success, making it quite difficult to ignore how significant the EU is as an actor.

The EU also exists as a normative power. Normative power was distinguished by Edward H. Carr as being defined by the realms of ideas and norms in international affairs (Manners, 2002: 238-239). Concepts like identity, ideology and the ability to shape norms are all components of what make up normative power (Manners, 2002: 238-239). The EU was originally founded as the European Coal and Steel Community with the idealistic notion of preserving peace by integrating trade and regulating infrastructures between France and Germany over two resources key to waging war: coal and steel. In part, it signified a departure from the imperial attitudes that governed foreign relations in the first half of the 20th century to instead encourage a spirit of cooperation and peace. Through its actions over time, its foreign policy, and through enlargement, the EU has been shaped by this concept as it has changed the way outsiders view the organisation and indeed how it views itself and its role in the world.

As mentioned before, some states prioritised economic prosperity as the motivation for their bid for accession. However, accession has been key in

terms of shaping the identity of the EU and providing the impetus to be an example and transmitter of democratic practices to the rest of the world. In the case of Greece, accession was symbolically important as an attempt to rid itself of its authoritarian past, consolidate the political elite in favour of liberal democracy, and identify with an institution that promoted liberal values (De Angelis and Karamouzi, 2016: 451-452). This exhibits how the EU's normative power of setting an example of democratic standards pulls potential new member states into the accession process. Before further enlargements in Eastern Europe, the European Union set criteria for membership enshrined in the Copenhagen criteria. This required that new members had to have minimum standards of democracy, respect for the rule of law, and respect for human rights (Manners, 2002: 243). Here we can see normative power being exhibited as a means for the EU to project its power outwardly, by demanding compliance with its standards of political orthodoxy on acceding states.

Admittedly, the success of this endeavour has been tested in recent years. Over the last decade, there has been strong evidence of 'backsliding' in the commitment of new members to democratic values; Hungary and Poland, once champions of democratisation in Eastern Europe, are now gradually transforming into electoral autocracies with political power concentrating in the hands of single parties and institutions of democracy (i.e. free press, independent judiciary etc.) are being repeatedly undermined (Bernhard, 2019: 587). Ukraine, too, provides an interesting branch in this discussion as it is a state with membership ambitions that has received substantial monetary and advisory support from the EU to build democratic practices. EU officials engaging with political elites in Ukraine and providing policy advice has aided reforms in corruption and improving the Ukrainian civil service, but runs aground in instances where the interests of the country's elite are at stake (Kralikova, 2022). Promoting democratic values domestically and abroad is a cornerstone of the EU's

normative power, yet these examples may serve to discredit the EU's reputation for facilitating this. It should be noted, however, that the EU has regularly issued fines against the Hungarian and Polish governments, among others, in response to backsliding, and in April, voted to implement more stringent measures against Hungary by denying access to EU funding (France 24, 2022). The example Ukraine poses is less clear now: despite moderate, gradual improvements in democratic practices that have had EU support, the years-long conflict in the Donbas and now a full-scale invasion by Russia have made it very difficult to fully realise the impact that this support may have had and arguably the success of democracy promotion is unclear as long as the country is at war (Minakov and Rojansky, 2018: 11). Therefore, time will determine the effectiveness of the EU's carrot-and-stick approach to stewarding democracy in backsliding states, and the resolution to the conflict in Ukraine will bring salience to the effectiveness of its policies of promoting democracy in third countries.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In terms of what sort of international actor the EU is to become, there is an increasing list of concerns relating to security and defence, with the EU having a demonstrably limited scope of what it can do. Despite current US President Joe Biden's reassurance to NATO states that the US will honour the NATO agreement, the rhetoric employed by former US President Donald Trump regarding his commitments to NATO membership undoubtedly encouraged considerable scepticism over the collective security provided by article 5 of the NATO constitution (Aggestam and Hyde-Pryce, 2019: 115). Coupled with Russian military adventurism in recent years and the invasion of Ukraine, this has required that the EU and its member states reevaluate the Union's role in security. Historically, the EU has fared relatively poorly in regard to setting up stronger military capacities. Its shortcomings have meant that the EU bears the brunt of the fallout from conflicts occurring in the near abroad, particularly in the Balkans and the Middle East, and now Ukraine (Hill,

1997: 19; Aggestam and Hyde-Pryce, 2019: 119). However, with the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) through the EU's Global Strategy (EUGS), there seems to be a positive move in the direction of addressing the Union's defence and security issues. PESCO signifies the EU's attempts at facilitating regionwide cooperation in military matters in Europe. Its aim is to promote the integration of defence capabilities across the member states through a binding commitment to the programme (Barbe and Morillas, 2019: 764-765). Additionally, the EDF can enable states to increase defence spending and can ensure that European states maintain military effectiveness that would otherwise be prohibited by a lack of funds (Barbe and Morillas, 2019: 764-765). This last function addresses a longstanding criticism made by successive US administrations that Europe will not pay for its own security, with NATO members not committing to minimum defence spending. This policy approach in recent years shows that the EU as an actor can show considerable influence as a supporter of member states and a facilitator for increased cooperation, much as it has done in other areas like trade. The EU's response to the invasion of Ukraine corroborates this and has provided an opportunity to extend its remit by not only providing monetary aid to bolster states' defence budgets but also aid in the form of military equipment. In February and for the first time, the EU began sending \$500 million worth of military aid to support the Ukrainian armed forces' efforts against the invasion (De La Baume and Barigazzi, 2022). This does not necessarily address the realist criticisms of it as a security actor, however, it does take a practical approach to deal with security and defence issues, insofar as its status as a normative-civilian actor will allow it. By occupying the role as an enabler of security for its members and neighbours it seeks to support, it is not at odds with the status of NATO either. A consistent critique of policymakers' attempts to create something resembling a European army is that it stands in competition with NATO, which already effectively provides for security.

The approach the EU takes towards security then plays to its strengths: it uses its economic capacities to ensure states otherwise incapable of securing themselves can now do so whilst being sensitive to their desires to trust first in NATO.

The EU aiming to continue its path as a civilian actor can be seen through its abilities as a diplomatic mediator and facilitator of trade. The establishment of modern international trade relations through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was profoundly influenced by EC/EU input. The size and depth of its internal market granted it significant weight in terms of negotiating power in the Uruguay Round; allowing it to push for and concede compromises on agriculture and service trade; advocate China's application to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO); liberalise global trade, but also to establish robust regulation and oversight to international trade in general (Coppolaro, 2019: 336-349). Through the Lome Conventions, the EU granted preferential trading and aid to former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) (Montana, 2003: 67). However, the admission of new members to the EU and the prioritisation of trade with Eastern Europe have left substantial gaps in exchanges coming from the Middle East and North Africa, and the wider ACP, contributing to regional instability (Trentin, 2015: 100; Montana, 2003: 67). In recent years, the EU has aimed to re-establish its presence in Africa through the EU-African Union Partnership. The Partnership has led to increased dialogues and funding allocated on a continent-wide basis from the EU to the African Union, with particular support being given on security matters (Pape, 2013: 738). This places the EU strongly amongst competitive investors such as China and the USA, who have both shown increased interest in the region. This indicates that the EU aims to maintain its stance as a powerful actor in relation to trade and diplomacy and thus reaffirm itself as a civilian power.

The EU has historically made use of its unique position of being European but trying to remove

itself from the colonial past of some of its constituent member states, in order to promote its own brand of values: human rights, equality, and liberal democratic values. The EU has consistently been an organisation that provides aid for countries affected by conflict and sets “preconditions for association accords” which prioritise the protection of human rights (Ginsberg, 1999: 439). Arguably, this has now granted the EU a “capital of credibility” as an example to follow and a source of reward for countries that comply with the standards it imposes (Ferrari, 2016: 221). At the same time, the EU has regularly employed its provision of aid and status as a promoter of human rights as a means to punish states that have poor human rights records. The first time this was seen was when the European Community (EC) removed its offices in Chile and diverted its aid transfers to local NGOs, like churches, rather than to the government (Ferrari, 2016: 219-220). In Africa in the 1970s, the EC cut direct aid to the Ugandan government, oversaw the UN-sanctioned weapons embargo to South Africa, and cut or prevented cultural and commercial contacts with the Apartheid government there (Ferrari, 2016). Over the last decade, the EU has faced a refugee crisis that has put a strain on its abilities to maintain its status as a champion of human rights, as member states increasingly shirk responsibility for refugees. The EU currently upholds the Dublin Regulation, which allows states to relocate refugees within the EU and associate states (International Commission of Jurists, 2011: 1). This has led to criticism by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as it has led to the negative effect of concentrating refugees in Greece, which takes financial remittances for intaking refugees but does not adequately uphold living standards (International Commission of Jurists, 2011: 4-5). This indicates a change in priorities in relation to its stance on human rights. Previously, significant effort was made to combat global injustices relating to human rights. However, the policy has shifted to accommodate member states in their desire to take on fewer refugees and at the same time endangering said refugees. This stance has been consistent since the

beginning of the crisis, with little sign of abatement. Therefore, the EU appears to be aiming to redistribute the burden of human rights on other states in response to the crisis, shifting from its formerly combative normative stance. This ‘compromise approach’ closely aligns with the EUGS in that it aligns refugee and immigration policy with concerns posed by member states, prioritising Europe first over normative values (Ceccorulli & Lucarelli, 2017: 97).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper has sought to determine what type of global actor we can expect the EU to be in the future. To do this, different theoretical interpretations of the EU’s status as a global actor have been discussed. Findings determine that the various interpretations provide rich detail as to which areas the EU is strong in, whilst highlighting key weaknesses as a global actor. The capabilities-expectations gap, as highlighted by Hill remains salient today as it was at the time of his writing; the EU still has a great deal of work in building a functioning military-security apparatus to bridge this gap and be an effective actor in matters of security. However, this is not to say that the EU is entirely limited as an actor. Alternative interpretations, namely that the EU is normative-civilian in character, shed light on the ways that the EU fulfils its role as a global actor. These interpretations point to the strength of its internal market and normative values as methods of projecting itself and pursuing interests. The economic incentive has encouraged member states into accession whilst membership criteria have pushed acceding states into compliance with normative standards of the EU, furthering the Union’s influence in both dimensions.

Among several challenges posed to the EU’s ability to pursue its interests in the world, Ukraine has posed the most critical. It has reopened questions about how we should view the EU as a security provider in Europe, a policy area it is already weak in, whilst challenging its capacities to promote democratic standards, an area in which it has considerably greater strength. However, the EU has made great

strides in addressing security concerns by using its status as a normative-civilian power to provide practical solutions to these concerns. The EUGS has enabled member states with under-resourced militaries to have the necessary funds to provide for their own security, through aid. Furthermore, the EU has taken a historic first step in its path as an enabler of state security by issuing lethal aid to the government in Kyiv. This example suggests that progress has been made in this area, even if limited. Overall, the future is bright for the EU as a global actor. Despite calls to institute an EU defence capability, it has shown that it can still operate influentially in the world without the need for a military. Using its diplomatic and economic clout, it continues to exert influence on global trade, aid, international relations, and matters of security. With its response to Ukraine, we can expect to see that the EU will continue to be a distinctively normative-civilian power in international affairs.

Further research on this topic would be best directed at understanding the interaction between the EU institutions and the member states or how member states' pursuit of idiosyncratic foreign policies affects the EU. This paper has predominantly focused on the foreign policy of the EU's institutions alone. However, constituent member states have at times advanced or stymied the progress of the EU and its abilities as a global actor, a phenomenon not covered in this paper which deserves closer examination. Additionally, the Russo-Ukrainian War continues to yield new challenges to the EU and its abilities to act internationally. It is not yet clear what further threats the war will pose and how this might push the EU to act. Further research may best be conducted to determine how the EU might act in relation to specific threats which may be posed by the conflict.

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