



EU Superpower Temptations and the Beauty of Complexity

Thomas Diez, University of Tübingen, Germany

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Dear colleagues and friends, dear Mr Eliassen, dear Professor Jopp

Whenever I take up a new position, I am asked whether I am really an International Relations (IR) person or a Europeanist. I have become accustomed to this question, but still find it slightly bizarre. Leaving aside the desirability of interdisciplinarity, European integration, for me, has always been first and foremost a project in the name of peace and the transformation of international politics – so that the “international” is no longer inter-national. So it seemed only logical to me to work at the intersection of European Integration Studies and IR. Having said that, I would not have called myself an “expert in European foreign policy”. But life is full of surprises, and when an email arrived in July 2009 from Göran Blomqvist that he was writing to me “in a pleasant matter”, I was close to deleting it as spam when I spotted the words “Anna Lindh” and “award”. Funnily enough, Nathalie Tocci had told me a few months earlier over dinner that she had received this award last year and I had asked her, jokingly, why she had got it and not I – never thinking that there was even the remotest possibility for me to be chosen for this award, nor that I would be the right person to even be considered.

So it is with considerable embarrassment that I stand in front of you, all of whom I take to be people from whom I could learn a lot about European foreign and security policy, to be honoured in this way and indeed to give you some thoughts on this topic. Indeed, I was still sitting on the plane, thinking and what if this all has been a mistake? I suppose if I have made a contribution to the debate at all, it stems exactly from my perhaps rather awkward position in between at least two fields of research, and somewhat at the sidelines of what one may call the mainstream. And I take it as a positive and encouraging sign that at least some of you have engaged with my work, despite it being less than straightforward perhaps at times, so that you now find it even worthy of receiving the Anna Lindh award. I am very grateful for this, and would like to express my deepest thanks to the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, the Compagnia di San Paolo and the Volkswagenstiftung.

The award winner is expected to share his or her views on European foreign policy with you, and this puts me of course back to my rather awkward position of bringing owls to Athens. But let me perhaps then try to sketch out a perspective that I think is a somewhat fresh one and that questions some of the standard arguments made about European foreign policy. I have titled my presentation “EU Superpower Temptations and the Beauty of Complexity”, and I really want to make four, in my view related arguments:

First, I would like to reinsert the question of legitimacy into the debate about European foreign policy. This, it seems to me, is an important dimension often forgotten, although it has also been the explicit concern of two previous Anna Lindh Prize winners, Karen Smith and Helene Sjørnsen, and it is a theme running through Nathalie Tocci’s work as well. It is also a dimension that is implied in the present debate about Normative Power Europe (about which I have written and shall refer to perhaps rather too often in what is to follow). It is implied in this debate, but at the same time not directly addressed.

Second, I would like to reinsert a focus on political decisions and debate over substance rather than form. It seems to me that those accusing EU foreign policy of failure often do so assuming that if the EU had acted as one, it would have taken the course of action preferred by the critic – a rather problematic assumption, to say the least. So in the debate about the Iraq war, we had both those who thought the EU should form a counterweight to the US and those

who thought the EU ought to stand by the side of the US accusing the EU of not getting their act together!

Third, I will argue that considering the contestation of some high-profile issues, from a legitimacy perspective the complexity of the foreign policy decision-making process is not merely a weakness but at least also a strength. Consider for instance that the US may well have not gone to war in Iraq if foreign policy was not the sole competence of the federal level. Consider also the old saying that the presence of so many member states with veto rights prevents the EU from the worst mistakes in foreign policy. This is not to say that doing nothing cannot also be a mistake, but still, I will argue that there is something in the beauty of complexity. Also, I would like us to bear in mind that the big disputes are by no means standard in EU external relations, and that we should not be tempted to take them as the norm.

Fourth, the legitimacy perspective also warrants a reconsideration of the relationship between the EU's own behaviour both internally and externally and its demands of others within the explicit framework of foreign policy. From this point of view, one of the best foreign policies is to show exemplary behaviour both inside and outside. This is a core aspect of what in previous work I have called a greater degree of reflectivity. Such reflectivity would indeed make the EU different from traditional great or superpowers, and would steer it away from the temptations of superpower and back towards the project of transforming the meaning of inter-national politics.

A Superpower in the Making?

There is no doubt that such a superpower temptation exists. Here are just three quotes from the Commission's website: "A strong Europe should act as one on the world stage." The EU should "play an international political and security role more in line with its economic status." And the EU ought to be "a global actor".

A Different Kind of Power?

Not only politicians have been grabbed by this EU superpower temptation. Academics, too, either see the EU playing a greater role in world politics, or think that it ought to play a bigger role – where the "is" and the "ought to" often blends into one. A prominent strand in this literature, as you know, is

that the EU's role is seen as being different – better! – than that of traditional great or superpowers. Already in the 1970s, Francois Duchêne coined the term “civilian power” for this new role; a power that would be based on non-military means but would also pursue the civilisation of international politics. This latter dimension of course is central to Ian Manners' notion of “Normative Power Europe”, in which the EU shapes conceptions of what is “normal”, binds itself to international norms, and pursues these norms even against its own material, i.e. mostly economic, interests. The list of similar characterisations is long - among many others there is most recently Karin Aggestam's concept of an “ethical power”, a power that would see itself bound by ethical standards that are traditionally seen as standing outside of foreign policy considerations.

“Failures”

Against this stands a rather long list of high-profile cases where EU foreign policy is accused of failure, although it should be noted that Anna Lindh rather stands for foreign policy successes during the Swedish EU presidency in 2001, when she was Swedish foreign minister. The following is merely a rather impressionistic enumeration of some of the “failure” cases: In ex-Yugoslavia, the EU is accused of having failed to prevent war, in part by not having backed up its civilian with military means. In the case of Croatia and Slovenia, Germany's early recognition of these states is seen as breaking the unity among member states, who then felt pressured to give up what they considered to be their more prudent line. In Russia's disputes in Chechnya and with Georgia, the EU stands accused of not having responded strongly enough. In Darfur, the EU is in good company in being seen as failing to save the lives of thousands. Kosovo is another recognition case, but this time it is the lack of a common line that draws criticism, with some member states still refusing to recognise Kosovo. And then of course there is Iraq, which saw the divide between “old” and “new” Europe emerge.

Capabilities and Efficiency

This discrepancy between the expectations of the EU as a new powerful actor and the accusations of failure on cases “where the going gets tough” has of course been noted for some time. Most prominent is Chris Hill's notion of the “capabilities-expectations gap”, which he saw as a consequence of not being able to agree on core foreign policy measures, of a lack of appropriate

resources and a lack of appropriate instruments. Some of the resources have since been pooled and instruments devised so that the EU is now actively engaged as EU in a number of conflicts in Europe, Africa and elsewhere. Yet these missions, while no doubt a great step and of considerable importance, are mostly relatively small and clearly have not addressed the first issue that Hill identified, the inability to agree. Arle Toje has therefore recently rephrased Hill's old concept as the "consensus-expectations gap". The emphasis has thus always been, and increasingly seems to be on the procedural aspect of EU foreign policy decision-making. This is also where the Lisbon Treaty is trying to make a difference in the insertion of a High Representative, the European External Action Service and the European Defence Agency, among others. These changes are no doubt laudable, especially the External Action Service, but they do not really solve the basic problem and their functioning will itself depend on the willingness of member states to work together and agree common lines. In that sense, these measures do a good deal to address the identity of the EU in international relations in that they will, if all goes well, answer the old question of Henry Kissinger of who to call when one wants to speak to Europe. Yet I understand that there was a joke circulating in diplomatic quarters during the Bush presidency that one wished there were several phone lines rather than one. It is exactly here that I think the legitimacy question becomes important.

Foreign Policy and Legitimacy

In raising the question of the legitimacy of foreign policy, I assume that foreign policy, just like any other policy, has to claim at least a certain degree of legitimacy. I do not understand legitimacy to be absolute in the sense that it is derived from universally valid norms. Rather, following earlier work with Markus Jachtenfuchs and Sabine Jung, I am employing a Weberian notion of legitimacy as the degree of acceptance of a policy, or the extent to which a policy is considered "rightful" in public discourse. In foreign policy, as Smith and Sjusen have noted, there is an internal and an external dimension to legitimacy. I will get to the question of legitimacy from without towards the end of my talk. Let us focus first on internal legitimacy, where the ascription of rightfulness can be based on three different kinds of criteria: input, output and identity-related criteria. The efficiency discussion in relation to European foreign policy belongs to the output dimension of legitimacy. Here, a policy is

considered rightful if it produces the goods that people want to enjoy. This dimension of legitimacy is no doubt important. Foreign policy may have the best aims but may not be seen as legitimate if it constantly fails. It may also well be that simply because European foreign policy is efficient and therefore effective, it acquires legitimacy for instance by “putting the EU on the map”. In most cases, however, it seems to me that fundamental disputes over foreign policy aims exist and undermine legitimacy. These aims are tied to specific norms and interests as reflections of specific identities, captured by the identity dimension of legitimacy. And because of the contested nature of these aims, participation in foreign policy decision-making becomes an issue. On the latter point, it is again Helene Sjurzen who has made significant contributions. Following her colleague’s work, she has outlined three different models of how the input dimension of legitimacy could work in the context of foreign policy: an “audit democracy”, in which member states transfer competences to the EU level without direct participatory rights on the member state or sub-state level; a “federal multinational democracy”, in which the member states remain an important source of legitimacy alongside direct participatory elements, and a “cosmopolitan democracy”, where Europe would become a “regional-democratic order” as part of a bigger cosmopolitan system. As will become clear in a moment, my sympathies lie with the second of these models, to a large extent because I am not sure there exists sufficient agreement on fundamental norms and values to establish a meaningful cosmopolitan order.

The Problems of Efficiency

Let us for a moment return to the role and problems of efficiency from a legitimacy perspective. As I have indicated, efficiency presupposed that there is agreement on the aims and means of foreign policy. No institutional set-up short of moving competences to the EU level will provide such agreement. To the contrary, speeding up the decision making process without a discursive process of clarifying the core targets of foreign policy leads in itself to legitimacy problems. In that sense, foreign policy issues are no different from the general legitimacy debate, in which there is often a tension between input and output. This is an argument captured long ago by Fritz Scharpf in the “joint decision-making trap”. First developed for the German political system and then applied to the EU, it raises the concern that complex federal systems may often be seen as highly legitimate from a participatory and identity angle, but

are slow-moving and often fail to reach decisions so that they lack legitimacy on the output dimension. To remind us of this basic problem also helps us to put the capabilities/consensus-expectations-gap into perspective: This is not a unique failure of the EU, it is a problem of the organisation of federal systems. It is only because such systems tend to deal with foreign policy on the central level that it strikes us as unique in the EU context. And of course foreign policy is different from other policies as it includes matters of life and death and those that immediately affect others. Yet it seems to me that this makes the problem of legitimacy rather more acute. True, in such circumstances failure to act has significant consequences, but so does acting wrongly.

One therefore cannot avoid addressing the question of which aims a European foreign policy ought to have, and which means it can employ. Decisions on these matters are essentially political decisions. They need to be embedded in a wider public debate, but they also need to be taken on and be defended by politicians. To criticise EU foreign policy for its lack of efficiency while assuming that there is only one right policy, and to impose substantive decisions on the back of procedural measures, strikes me as hypocritical.

Failures?

Let us on this basis re-visit the so-called failures of European foreign policy cited earlier. In Yugoslavia, it is by no means generally accepted that a greater military back-up would have avoided bloodshed. In Croatia and Slovenia, Germany should have waited with recognition, but one can muse about whether its push for recognition and the subsequent change of policy of the other member states was more or less problematic than the continuing variance in policies vis-a-vis Kosovo. In Chechnya and Georgia, there is fundamental disagreement over what an appropriate policy would look like. Ignoring economic issues for the moment, there also seem to be at least two norms at play that create a tension between engaging Russia and taking a hard line on human rights. In Darfur, there may be broader agreement about the desirability to do “something”, but less so about the means. In Iraq, last but not least, it isn't at all clear whether the failure to agree was really a bad thing.

Appeasement?

An obvious counter-argument to my argument so far is that it leads to relying on the lowest common denominator and a tendency to favour appeasement over a tougher line. Yet again, I would argue that this is a simplistic view. For one, we ought to bear in mind that there is a great number of foreign and external policies of the EU that are not contested and perhaps therefore do not reach the limelight of the media. In those cases that are contested, imposing a common position would mean to disregard fundamental objections of a significant part of the EU, which may well identify weaknesses of a proposed policy that should not simply be ignored. Besides, I cannot see a problem of member states acting differently in such situations. Other than satisfying superpower temptations and the urge to create an international identity, it seems to me that imposing EU action if there is no shared common ground to base this action on is problematic, to say the least.

Of Power and Means

In addressing what the EU can do in its foreign policy and which actions would be viewed as legitimate, we also need to get away from the focus on power through direct and intentional force. I am not the first, even in relation to the EU, to point out that there are both direct, or actor-centred, and indirect, or more “structural” forms of power. In a previous project, Mathias Albert, Stephan Stetter and I have used the work of Michael Barnett and Bob Duvall to distinguish between different forms of power, of which three are of relevance here. The power that the critics of EU foreign policy efficiency have in mind is what we termed compulsory impact. This covers cases in which the EU, through strategies of carrots and sticks, changes the policies of third parties. The other two forms of power though rely first and foremost on the existence of the EU as model, in providing the normative grounds that third party actors can refer to when making their claims – which is what we labelled enabling impact - and in suggesting alternative ways of organising international politics that opens up the possibility of a reconstruction of political identities – the constructive impact.

In Manners’ conceptualisation of normative power, he distinguishes between different means through which normative power operates, and which seem to me to be related to these different impacts that the EU can have. Above all, his

notion of “contagion”, resting largely on the EU leading by example, and “diffusion”, through the EU’s engagement in multilateral organisations, are in my view core elements of normative power that are related to the enabling and constructive impact, yet they are often forgotten or downplayed in the debates about whether the EU is a normative power or not. The core problem in terms of legitimacy “from the outside” for contagion and diffusion however is that there seem to be, in the words of Karen Smith and others, double standards between what the EU demands of others and how it behaves itself. This undermines the credibility of the EU and thus the legitimacy of its engagements with others in the eyes of the others, or what I have called external legitimacy.

Another Vision

It is instructive in this respect that a number of analysts, including Heather Grabbe, have argued that the EU’s most effective foreign policy has been enlargement. Certainly enlargement has made it possible for the EU to have a compulsory impact on the membership candidates. Yet this possibility rested on the attraction of the EU to the applicants, an attraction that has not only been economic but also political. Most interestingly, in enlargement the applicants come to the EU in the first place instead of the EU telling them to join. I take this to be an indication that the strength of the EU is not in traditional compulsory or coercive power, but rather in contagion and diffusion, in leading by example and offering a model for political organisation. I accept that concrete examples of normative power in this sense are few and far between (a point made to me by Tuomas Forsberg), but that does not undermine the basic point, which is that it is through contagion and diffusion and not through coercion that the EU can “shape conceptions of the normal”, and therefore, I take these to be at the core of normative power Europe if this is to be a meaningful term at all. Yet leading by example requires keeping your own house tidy in the first place, and less to tell others to clear up. The EU and its member states still have a lot to work on in this respect. The treatment of minorities and migrants, trade relations with developing countries and energy consumption are but three examples of policies that are not part of CFSP yet clearly have strong implications for the EU’s role in world politics.

Refocusing the debate

To sum up, it seems to me that the current discussion about whether or not the EU is a normative power and the political engagement with European foreign policy are both too focused on what I would call a “superpower temptation”. I have suggested that we ought to put greater emphasis on questions of legitimacy, both from within and without. This implies the recognition of the importance of the political debate about substance rather than procedure. I have argued that failure to reach agreements in foreign policy has its advantages from a legitimacy perspective, at least if it is the result of fundamental concerns rather than a pure spoiling attitude. In that sense, the complexity of the EU foreign policy decision-making system does have its beauty. I would find it problematic if one squandered this simply in the name of a single European voice – and I say this as a strong supporter of the European integration process. Finally, I have also argued that the legitimacy perspective requires a stronger reflectivity which puts into question the borders between the EU’s own behaviour and that of its member states on the one hand, and that of EU actions vis-a-vis other parties on the other, and I would think that Anna Lindh would have supported such a position, as she fought against injustices both at home and abroad, where home for her was certainly not only Sweden but also Europe. It is in this context that I was grateful to have had the chance recently to comment on a paper by Teija Tiilikainen on the changing self-understanding of the EU in the world. In this paper, Tiilikainen notes a change from a focus on being a model to a more self-interested and self-assertive foreign and external policy. In her paper Tiilikainen quotes Jean Monnet: “One impression predominates in my mind over all others. It is this: unity in Europe does not create a new kind of great power; it is a method for introduction change in Europe and consequently in the world.” This, for me, as I have already outlined in my introductory remarks, remains the essence of the integration project, and it remains what EU foreign policy ought to be about.