

## The European Union's Global Role

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### Introduction

The end of the Twentieth Century witnessed yet another turning point in the development of the European Union's global role. The long-standing gulf between Atlantic and European-centred models of security was finally, if tentatively, bridged in the winter of 1998. The United Kingdom – as the pre-eminent Atlanticist power in Europe, had long insisted that European and transatlantic security was a seamless whole and one which would be weakened by any self-conscious effort to define European security outside the context of the NATO alliance. French policy makers, by contrast, insisted that while the Alliance was crucial, Europe had to provide for its own security and then to establish a true Atlantic partnership with the United States – a partnership predicated upon equality.

The December 1998 Anglo-French summit at St Malo did not, perhaps, provide for a full reconciliation of these positions but it did converge upon at least one common point; that the Union needed to develop a military capacity to sustain a coherent, effective and credible European foreign and security policy (Howarth, 2000; Smith M. 2001).

This consensus led directly toward a series of EU summit agreements first outlining and then giving substance to the creation of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) including the operational mandate, institutional expression, and decision making capacity of the European Rapid Reaction Force. Through the Cologne, Helsinki and finally Nice European Council summits, ESDP – as a subset to the Union's existing Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) – took shape.

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In a parallel but equally significant process, the relationship between the CFSP and the broader external activities of the European Union came under increasingly critical scrutiny. The Chinese wall that had traditionally separated the Union's external relations (trade, aid and development cooperation) from the system of foreign policy coordination constructed between the Member States, had worn thin. Their contrasting legal base, differing decision making models, varied policy making structures, and distinct policy tools were increasingly seen as impeding the creation of an effective, coherent and credible foreign policy for the Union and its Member States as a whole.

Moreover, in crisis after crisis, throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the EU's foreign policy post-mortems were harsh. Policy failures – in whole or in part – were recorded in the former Yugoslavia, in Kosovo, in Rwanda, in the Congo, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Even more dangerously, such crises often cruelly illuminated and in some cases exacerbated serious transatlantic and intra European policy fissures (Lieven 2002; Kagan 2003; Smith, M 2003). Clearly, the simple sum of Member State and Union capacities was poorly directed and too often worked at cross-purposes. Thus, through the Amsterdam and Nice Treaties and into the subsequent agenda for the European Convention's constitutional deliberations, the Union's 'foreign policy' came under ongoing and critical scrutiny.

One key theme throughout these discussions – and one which was carried forward into the 2004 Intergovernmental Conference – was the elimination to the greatest extent possible of the divisions and fissures that separated the Union's External Relations from the CFSP and ESDP. Thus, it became possible in the first decade of the Twenty First century to begin to talk seriously about the creation and operation of the European Union's 'foreign policy' (White, 2001) even as doubts were raised about a dangerous gap between the political rhetoric sustaining that idea and the development of foreign and security capacity on the ground. (Smith, M 2003)

### **What are we looking at?**

While practitioners wrestled with institutional and constitutional devices to bridge their political differences, academic analysts had their own struggle to come to terms with what was developing before their very eyes.

For many years analysts considered it highly unlikely that the Member States of the European Communities – and later the European Union – would ever consent or conspire to the creation of a truly common foreign policy. Efforts seemingly made in that direction were either criticised as representing an empty declaratory policy or – where more substantial – the culmination of converging national interests, especially among the more powerful European states (Allen 1998). Certainly, early European integration theory found it difficult to encompass the stubborn reality that foreign policy continued to challenge neofunctionalist orthodoxies.

For neofunctionalists, the development of a truly collective foreign policy would have represented an orthodox expression of how the Union worked; with the pursuit of shared interests being assigned ultimately to a supranational authority which, over time, would further extend its policy reach (Deutsch, 1954; Deutsch et al., 1957; Haas 1958). A spillover from low politics into high politics would thus ultimately take the Union from a Common Commercial Policy into a Common Foreign and Security Policy.

In fact, no such functional spill over occurred. When pressure was felt to address the political issues arising from trade, aid and economic relations, the Member States sought to cut out supranational institutions and instead to develop their own intergovernmental policy structure outside the body of the European Communities. Moreover, even in the area of trade and economics where the orthodox rules applied, Member States proved themselves surprisingly resistant to efforts to extend Community competence to associated issues that had not explicitly been assigned to Community competence. Moreover, the intergovernmental areas of cooperation – in the realm of ‘high politics’ – did not prove themselves amenable to a process of communitarianisation (Hoffman 1966). They continued to develop and, to a degree, prosper outside the Community realm.

Ironically, the frustrations of neofunctionalist theorists were later to be matched by those of an intergovernmental orientation. Witnessing the apparent stagnation of the European project in the 1970s and into the 1980s, some analysts saw the stubborn strength of intergovernmental interests – best exemplified in EPC - as simply an illustration of the reality that state interests are the true driving force behind the integrative project which is itself the product of a ‘convergence of national interests’ (Moravcsik, 1991). The institutional superstructure of the Union could then be seen as the matrix within which an especially complex system of

interstate bargaining would take place and through which the cooperative benefits of such inter state bargaining would be distributed (Moravscik 1994). Analysts could also point to empirical case studies where the dominance of state interests in the construction of a 'common' European position could be seen (Ifestos 1987; Pijpers 1991; Hoffman 2000).

EPC and CFSP, however, did not do all that they might have to help to prove the case (Wessels 1982). As EPC was replaced by CFSP and as subsequent reforms took root within CFSP, it became increasingly evident that CFSP did not itself play by an intergovernmental rulebook. Member State interests within CFSP did not appear to be the immutable object of state ambition that they should have been. Policy making within CFSP did not precisely follow the intergovernmental script. Instead CFSP witnessed the assignment of an increasingly prominent role to the Commission, the involvement of the European Parliament, the introduction of qualified majority voting, the application of Community measures in support of CFSP and the Member States' clear ambition for the Union to act internationally in its own right as opposed to it being the vehicle of larger state interests (Cameron 2002)

Interestingly, however, if European integration theorists found themselves struggling to understand and explain the international persona of the European Union, international relations' theorists were positively dumbfounded.

### **The European Union in the World of International Relations**

For many years, the Union simply did not appear on the horizons of IR theorists – and for very good reason. The Union, as an international actor, simply could not be accommodated within a large section of orthodox theorising about the interstate system. The European Community and later the European Union challenged deeply instantiated and widely held assumptions. As a result, it could be argued that Union was 'somehow beyond international relations' (Long 1997: 187). For its part, the international system was one largely seen to be composed of states whose inter-relations defined the system of which they were a part. The Union was not an actor in this drama and, at best, could only be accommodated as a vehicle of the post-imperial interests of the larger powers. Even with the arrival of liberal approaches, the Union had to be sandwiched together with other 'new' actors such as multinational corporations and trans-national interest groups and could only be pointed to as an institutional

illustration – alongside the UN, OECD, GATT etc – of cooperative problem solving among enlightened state agents and actors.

For both realists and liberals then, the Union posed one fundamental paradox – it was not a state yet was ‘state-like’ in so much of its relations with states and the interstate system. Foreign policy could only be understood as a subset of state activity directed towards the outside world. If the theoretical drawbridge was lowered to accommodate the ‘foreign policy’ of the European Union would the same not also have to hold true for the UN, for the OECD, for ASEAN – perhaps even for the Coca Cola company? And yet, if the theoretical rules were applied with rigour, how credible would it be to assess the impact and capacity of the foreign policies of more than 200 states in the international system and yet to ignore the international impact of a political community that accounted for about one quarter of world trade and global wealth creation?

If we divide IR theory into three competing castes; the rationalist paradigm (inclusive of its realist and liberal variants), constructivism and a set of reflective (post-modern/post-positivist) approaches, we can see that the realist/liberal debate is in fact a sub-field – almost a family squabble – within a single, internally coherent worldview that shares almost identical views of the social world. Neo-liberals and neo-realists are agreed that states are the main international actors; that anarchy is the defining character of the international system and that anarchy is the primary force that defines and shapes state behaviour. They are also agreed on the most appropriate methods by which we should study the international system and the social phenomena within it, sharing, as they do, a commitment to a theory of knowledge that is positivist in orientation and which leads to an understanding of politics that is based in power (Morgenthau 1946).

European integration has never fitted easily within such a rationalist dominated international theory. Neo-realists and neo-liberals have tried to explain the European Union from the perspective of inter-state co-operation. From that angle, a key issue to emerge is a debate about the relative gains - absolute gains relationship. Realists would insist that cooperation would be limited as states would be preoccupied with maximising their absolute gains from any system of cooperation while liberals argued that a web of interstate cooperation might indeed develop based upon an acceptance of relative gains. A second point of contention is the extent to which institutions can ameliorate anarchy – with realists emphasising the

fundamental role of anarchy in defining the international system and liberals insisting that institutions offer the possibility of governance transcending anarchy.

In sum, however, neo-realists and neo-liberals share much more analytical territory than they dispute. One key here is the extent to which they both argue that power rests at the core of politics and that such power derives from the pursuit of individual material interest. Another is that the range of questions open to analysts is precise – and centre upon how interests are bargained and processes of strategic decision-making that lay behind public policy choices. The comparative power of the rationalist approach – and a partial explanation of its dominance - is that it offers to the holders of power a precise and sparse account of their reality without opening uncomfortable doors into realms which draw their own positions into question. It also seems to relate more directly to ‘the facts’ of international politics and- because of the way in which it defines the world and inter-relationships within it, often looks just like common sense (Wagner 2003).

By contrast, reflective and constructivist accounts of European integration have many and perhaps more interesting things to say about deeper questions associated with issues of governance, identity, norms and belief structures than have either of the two rationalist approaches. They are open too to a wider and perhaps more significant set of questions when looking at the international persona of the Union such as that of the creation of a transnational European identity, the impact of Europeanisation on national foreign policies and the export of European values and norms through EU foreign policy. Such questions are of immediate relevance to an understanding and explanation of Europe’s global role but would be effectively outside the pale of analysis available within narrower rationalist worldviews.

### **Rethinking the Union’s Global Role**

The European Union’s emerging foreign policy has not – as we have seen – lent itself to easy categorisation and has successfully resisted being boxed into our existing understanding of European integration or international relations. It might even be argued that the Union is best viewed as a transitional entity – one that that generates international relations but which also remains itself a subsystem of those international relations (Filtenborg et al 2002). In recent years too, the development of the Union’s international capacity has made even more challenging the effort to understand it.

This is rooted in the transformatory capacity of EU foreign policy upon the construction, content and expression of national foreign policies of the EU member states. As regards the construction of foreign policies, it is clear that institutionalised policy co-ordination – involving common EU-wide work practices and structures, a shared information base, the establishment of a common substantive agenda and of a unique policy making structure has established a truly collective context through which a large proportion of ‘national’ foreign policy is now formulated and pursued. Whether characterised as ‘Brusselsization’ (Allen 1998) or ‘Brussels-based intergovernmentalism’ (Howarth 2000) it amounts to a fundamental shift in the way in which national foreign policies are being constructed. This does not eliminate the role of national perspectives or even of declared ‘interests’. It does, however, underline the degree to which national foreign policies are translated and formulated through a European context even before it hits the avowedly intergovernmental negotiating table (Tonra 2001).

As regards the content of national foreign policies, here too there are fundamental processes of change in evidence. These are illustrated by “a consequent internalisation of norms and expectations arising from a complex, collective policymaking system.” (Tonra 2001). Hill and Wallace (1996) define this process as one in which rationality is seen differently as result of an intensive exchange between officials while Nuttall earlier (1992) had identified this as being a ‘consultation reflex’ in which officials sought out the views of colleagues before constructing their own analyses of the situation and possible policy responses. The impact of this internalisation of beliefs and norms is that the content of national foreign policies has been gradually seen to shift over time. While it is difficult to apply the *ceteris paribus* principle, analysts have defined such shifts for a range of states and over a range of issues (Pijpers 1996; Aggestam 2000; Sjurksen 2000; Torreblanca 2001 and Tonra 2001).

In the case of foreign policy expression, it is also evident that much has changed in recent years. While the cognitive reach of all but the largest and most sophisticated Member State foreign policies has been broadened it is true also that for many Member States, they must involve themselves – if even peripherally – in a much wider range of issues than heretofore. External actors expect the Union to have a response to international events and crises and the Member States of the Union frequently find themselves justifying their own policies by virtue of the collective foreign policy endeavour. While this may, at times, be seen in very instrumental terms (i.e. the Union is used an excuse to mask an uncomfortable national policy

preference) it is more often the case that many Member States have to generate and defend positions that – even 10-15 years ago – they would not be expected to have held (Tonra 2001).

In response to all of these challenges a number of analysts have sought to ‘rethink’ the Union’s foreign policy and to apply alternative approaches to the study of the EU’s global role. Some such approaches have sought to deconstruct our state-centric views of world politics by shifting our analysis away from how state-like the EU’s foreign policy is towards an analysis of its international ‘presence’ (Sjosted 1977) and ‘actorness’ (Allen and Smith 1991). These concepts are then used to link the internal workings of the Union – across functional policy areas – with its overall impact on the external environment. The Union clearly acts internationally and even if it is not a fully-fledged actor (Smith, K 1999) it is nonetheless necessary to consider its impact and the ways by which such action is politically derived within the Union (Smith, H 1995; Ojanen 2000; Smith M 2000). It is also important to try and avoid looking at the Union as if it were ‘an incompetent state’ (Bretherton and Vogler 1999:3) and instead to consider its real world capacity to shape events outside its borders – both by its own volition and in response to third party expectations and demands.

When the focus of analysis moves from what sort of actor the Union is to what are the attributes of the Union as an international actor, a range of analytical issues arise.

One key approach to the study of the European Union as an international actor is the ‘Capabilities-Expectations Gap (CEG) first outlined by Chris Hill (1993). In that article Hill compared and contrasted public expectations of what the Union was supposed to accomplish in the world with the means and capacities that the Member States had actually bestowed upon it. The comparison was unfavourable and identified a ‘gap’ which implied that the Union ‘was not an effective international actor in terms both of its capacity to produce collective decisions and its impact in events’ (Hill 1993). This approach is also especially well-equipped to deal with the Union’s evolution as an international actor - particularly as a collective foreign policy develops – by being able to measure the ways in which ‘actorness’ increases (or decreases?) over time (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999: 1-45). The approach does however suffer somewhat in as much as it is still predicated upon a model of actorness that is similar to that of a state. Thus, if the Union’s international actorness is benchmarked against the capacity of state foreign policy, then two logically consistent but fundamentally opposed

conclusions may derive there from: either that the Union is on the road towards the construction of a state-like foreign policy – which is then a matter of time, of political will and/or of institutional design (Galtung 1973) or that the Union – since it cannot and will never be a state – is condemned to Sisyphus-like existence, with its system of intensive diplomatic coordination measured against a set of criteria it is condemned never to fulfil (Elliassen 1998; M Smith 2003).

Another approach is to move further in our consideration of the Union as a unique system of external relations. Brian White (2001), for example, has applied a model of Foreign Policy Analysis to what he identifies as a European foreign policy system composed of three distinct subsystems: EU external relations, CFSP and national foreign policies. Rejecting both actor-centred and institutionalist approaches, White then argues that an EU foreign policy system can be identified and studied on its own terms. The disadvantage of such an approach is that while providing a well-ordered structure on which to pin considerable empirical material – the model finds it difficult to incorporate theoretical concepts rooted in the primary agency of ideas, norms and beliefs.

In somewhat similar vein, Mike Smith (1996, 1998 2001) argues that the Union can successfully be viewed as having a part-formed foreign policy – the bulk of which is provided by its trade and economic capacity (Smith 1998). Crucially also, Smith points to the significance of the interplay between Member States, Union institutions and the external environment in providing an explanation for the shape of EU foreign policy. The negotiated order that results rests upon a rule-governed process of governance that is also highly sensitive to external demands deriving from an increasingly globalised world. In a later development of this thesis, Smith offers a conceptual link between the deterritorializing of the state and ways in which regional and perhaps even global governance might foresee an ‘extra-national’ even ‘post-modern’ foreign policy on the part of the Union (Smith 2003).

The alternative approaches sketched above remain, however, essentially rooted in a rationalist understanding of foreign policy and a positivist approach to social science. Two further alternatives move beyond these essentialist conceptions and posit an understanding of EU foreign policy that is perhaps more centrally rooted in identity, beliefs and/or values.

## **Considering Identity and Ideas**

If the ideational foundations of foreign policy are to be taken seriously – and the analyst is to move beyond seeing ideas either as ‘hooks’ in the hands of individual utility maximisers, or as another set of parsimonious variables – then our conceptual horizons might be significantly broadened. While arguments about the positivist nature of constructivism continue (Steve Smith, 1999; Wendt 1999) another set of writers have set out to argue that the foundations of EU foreign policy can best be excavated from the archaeology of identity rather than that of interests (Tonra 1997, 2001 and 2003; Aggestman 1999; Bretherton and Vogler 1999; Manners 2002; Manners and Whitman 2003).

A constructivist approach, offers a norm-based account of institutions that also overcomes many of the weaknesses of more instrumental rationality-based models of a neo-liberal/neo-realist synthesis. This focus on beliefs, identity and norms, opens new pathways to a discussion of the Union’s international capacity looking at the growth and development of a ‘European’ identity in foreign policy (Joergensen, 1997; Manners and Whitman 2003), an analysis of the role of public opinion and discourse in the creation of such an identity (Larsen, 1997 and H Smith, 1995) and the implications of such a development in creating the Union as a normative actor – driven by identity and values rather than interests (Manners, 2002; and Matlary, 2002)

The point of departure is consideration of actors not as rational utility maximisers but instead as role players. James March and Johan Olsen (1989) offer a conceptual model in which actors work to a "logic of appropriateness". Within this logic state actors (or agents) consider the context and expectations of the decision-making situations in which they find themselves and base their resulting decisions accordingly. That relationship, however, cannot presume any ontological primacy between agent and structure. While the actor’s identity and options for choice are shaped by the institutional structures that she inhabits, these self-same institutional structures exist and evolve as a result of their constitutive actors’ identities and choices.

Thus, the conception of the Union’s foreign policy is not that of a forum within which state/actors’ interests are bargained but an environment from which foreign policy evolves and within which the interest/identity of actors/policy makers transform. The first point of reference for national policy makers becomes “what will the European partners think” rather

than “what is our position on this”. This shift is crucially important. What it suggests is that the policy makers see themselves not as neo-medieval emissaries of pre-defined national positions but as policy arbiters. They are, in effect, seeking to internalise the identity ambitions of colleagues so as thereby to see that their own positions are at least complementary. In recent years this has been augmented institutionally within CFSP by the development of the policy-planning cell – designed to engage in a process that might be seen as one of anticipatory internalisation. In other words, to develop a mode of thought along the lines of: “what would my European partners think if...”

A key recurrent theme in the development of the EC/EU’s international capacity has also been the ambition to construct a coherent and credible European “voice” in world affairs. Crucially, this European voice was designed to have a global rather than a local echo. Despite the limited nature of EPC and the difficulties then being experienced within the broader process of European integration in the early 1970s, the Member States were quick to react when it was suggested that their collective activities might be delimited. Their 1974 *Declaration on European Identity* was a direct riposte to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s effort in 1973 to define Europe’s international ambitions in a regional rather than global context. The Declaration stated forcefully “Europe must unite and increasingly speak with one voice if it wants to make itself heard and play its proper rôle in the world”. This feature of EU foreign policy – its identification with the expression of a single set of ideas/beliefs – is also evident in the establishment of the office of High Representative of CFSP through the Amsterdam Treaty and proposals tabled in 2003 to merge that office with that of External Relations Commissioner so as to create a European Union Foreign Minister.

The original purpose behind the CFSP post was to engender greater identification with a European political voice – to personify the Union’s international identity. In the event this was seen as being only partially successful - since the voice lacked the added credibility of also commanding the external relations of the Union. Proposals emerging from the European Convention in 2003 to merge the two posts into one were presented as explicit means whereby the Union’s ‘voice’ would have greater clarity and credibility (Convention 2003).

Constructivism also offers a framework that explains the centrality of ‘values’ in the development of EU foreign policy. If the ontology employed here “emphasises the dependency of state identities and cognitions on international institutions and relates the formation and

maintenance of particular regimes to these pre-established identities” we should witness a strong emphasis being placed upon the definition of collective values. The first formal delineation of EPC in the 1970 Davignon Report spoke of the member states’ ambition to make an international contribution that was “...commensurate with its traditions...” These were later defined in the same text as including “...the common heritage of respect for the liberty and the rights of men...”.

This normative orientation of EU foreign policy has since become a significant vehicle for theorising about the European Union’s global role. From its earliest inception, writers have been struck by the fact that the European Communities (and later the European Union) were applying a new language to foreign policy and were potentially making a very new contribution to our understanding of international politics. Francois Duchêne (1972) posited that this new European polity was indeed a new construct in the international firmament and that as a political entity with a powerful trade and economic identity but a comparatively weak political/security structure – it might be best to characterise it as a new ‘civilian power’ in international relations. His argument, however, was bigger than that it in as much as it also set out the thesis that this new ‘civilian power’ might supplant traditional military power as the preferred means by which influence might be exercised in the modern world (Duchêne, 1972, 1973). While the thesis was hotly contested and disputed in a now famous reply from Hedley Bull (1982) it has of late been taken up by scholars interested not in fact that the Union has an impact on the international system – but that the Union has a very unique impact and identity.

A number of writers have focused upon the fact that the Union’s international actions have had a very strong normative orientation towards issues of international justice and human rights (Manners, 2002; Aggestam 2000 and Sjørusen 2003). This, they argue, arises from the nature of the Union and the ways in which it acts as a normative exporter of values and beliefs.

Manners and Whitman (2003) for example, move decisively away from an analysis of the Union as an actor to that of the Union having an international identity that now allows the analyst to consider how the Union ‘is constituted, constructed and represented internationally’ (Manners and Whitman 2003:383). They insist that the Union’s international identity can only be successfully read by employing BOTH social and political theories, and conclude that it is necessary to move beyond essentialist, positivist and rationalist predispositions so as to be

able to look at the EU's international identity as an ongoing 'contestation of complex, multiple (and) relational identities' (Manners and Whitman 2003:397). They go on to characterise the Union as being constructed and represented as an open, pacific, principled, consensual, network characterised by an unconventional, contra-Westphalian nature.

By focusing so intently upon the nature of the Union's international identity, the pass is also opened to considerations of how that identity may then impact upon the international system. In other words, if the Union is so different – indeed, according to Manners and Whitman (2003) it is a 'difference engine', then what are the implications of this for the Union's foreign policy?

Sjursen (2003) argues that there is a growing literature that is focused upon the nature of the Union's international impact. Citing Rosencrance (1998), Aggestam (2000), Menéndez (2002) and Manners (2002), she argues that the Union does indeed represent something fundamentally different in the international arena and that this difference is rooted to normative considerations of justice and human rights. Despite entering several important caveats to this hypothesis (Sjursen 2003: 49) she argues that cooperation based upon increasingly intensive communicative processes may offer a better understanding of why the Union has been constituted by, and then acts as such a significant exporter of, certain norms and values.

## **Conclusions?**

The original formation of the European 'project' was predicated upon it delivering 'peace' in Europe by, in part, withdrawing from the hands of nation states the tools of modern war. Vesting control of steel and coal into the supranational High Authority was a vindication – a declaration – that the relationship between two key state actors in Europe, France and Germany, would never be the same again. From these roots, explanations of European integration as pre-eminently a 'peace project' emerged. As, however, Europe prospered these roots seem to have been lost. Increasingly, European integration was seen in materialists' terms – as serving the interests of states and/or those of transnational groups – European political and social elites, the corporate sector, organised labour, sectoral groups of every caste and kind. Constitutional debates thus centred upon 'whose' interests were being served

and how Europe's institutions might be restructured to better serve those or other competing interests.

Meanwhile, visions of Europe's global role shifted. Early debates surrounding the 'peace' mission of the early European Union – the civilian power thesis – were swiftly discarded, as the Union was increasingly defined relative to the existing international power architecture. For their part, classical realists dismiss the European Union as an irrelevance and delight in highlighting the absurd and sometimes dangerous pretensions of an entity that lacks even the basic pre-requisites of a serious international actor. Other, perhaps more sophisticated realists share similar scepticism – but leave open a door to the remote possibility that the Union – over time and in a set of very particular circumstances – might itself adopt appropriate manners and dress so as to join the ancient Westphalian dance of states.

Liberals, are today similarly divided. Perhaps the lesser number look at the European Union internationally and see it as a vehicle through which – just as at domestic level – the Member States can pursue more efficiently and effectively their longstanding interests. Through the collective infrastructure of the European Union, the old mercantilist ambitions of European adventurers are married to those of mobile international capital and so take full and early advantage of an emerging era of liberal globalisation. Europe can then contest with the United States and Japan in a new field of combat, that of economic competitiveness, trade and innovation. Freed of Cold War restraint and the baggage of ideological conflict, the recent and ongoing battles over beef, bananas and Boeing offered a foretaste of this brave new era.

For perhaps a larger number of liberals, the Union is thus far unique, but is more properly seen as being in the vanguard. The Union can offer itself as a template to other global regions as these respond to the increasing pressures of globalisation. The era of nation states is passing and/or being transformed so that if the great global challenges are to be met then humanity needs to organise itself on a different level – through the European Union, the African Union, through NAFTA and ASEAN and ECOWAS and, ultimately, the creation of new systems of global governance. These will serve to tame the international forces unleashed by globalisation and to offer effective collective solutions to shared problems in a smaller and perhaps more delicate global community.

For another set of analysts, however, a rational conception of the European Union as a problem solving, interstate institution of whatever variety is profoundly unsatisfactory. The European project was not been conceived of in a framework of mutual or self interest but was designed, as a means to transcend interests, to establish new yet synergistic identities, to sustain and acculturate new values and beliefs. In a sense such analysts seek to return to the EU's 'peace project' as initially conceived in its raw state- and to take up the challenge of its originator, Jean Monnet, who later and famously commented that if he had to do it all again he would have started with culture – the very realm of identity, values and beliefs – rather than coal and steel.

Europe remains a contested concept abroad as much as at home. Both practitioners and analysts struggle to conceptualise, to explain and to understand both the phenomenon of European integration and its institutional expression in the European Union. At the global level, however, the challenge is all the greater as the international system itself evolves to meet new realities and challenges. In his inaugural lecture as Vice Chancellor at the University of Exeter (2003), Professor Steve Smith argues that “there is no possibility of a neutral observation of the world of international relations; all engagement is partial, all engagement carries with it a set of ethical consequences that rest, in the final analysis, on violence.” In opening pathways to more reflective understandings of the European Union as a global actor – we are also opening the realm of possibility beyond the traditional boxes and traditional approaches – we also release ourselves from those boxes.

There is no inevitability that the European Union will pursue, must pursue, or should pursue, its global role in the same manner as states or indeed as an international organisation. One might indeed argue, that for the Union to replicate itself in the image of a state is to recreate at continental level the precise conditions of conflict that the Union was designed to overcome. The Union's relations with the Islamic World are a case in point. The European Union has tremendous potential as a global actor. The responsibility of all students of Europe is to open ourselves to debates which broaden rather than narrow the range of possible, which question – rather than reify – the subjectivities and identities that underpin this Union and which admit that there many routes to an understanding of the European Union that expand rather than delimit its future.

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