

From Mere Presence to “Actorness” in International Affairs: Upgrading the EU’s Role to Global

IAPSS Think Tank

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Introduction

The European Union (EU), with its 504 million citizens, forms one of the largest markets worldwide accounting for approximately 25% of the world economy. Its (global) role, to a large extent, has been based on its ability to act as a standard-setter through the promotion of its normative foundations, such as democracy and human rights, liberal-market economies, and multilateral governance, making it one of the major development assistance donors.⁴ The actual performance of the EU presents an ambiguous assessment of the EU’s “actorness.”⁵

The complex cross-pillar structure of EU’s external action is one of the main reasons for the EU’s lack of overall effectiveness, and thus, the restructuring of the institutional system has emerged as the key provision for upgrading the EU’s global performance. The current economic crisis has created an unfavourable environment for upgrading the EU’s performance to that of global by prompting a widespread austerity approach linked to the reduction of the EU’s budget and diversion of the EU’s attention from external events to an internal

agenda (dominated by economic and financial policy).

This policy paper aims to review the EU’s current performance with reference to the main areas of European foreign policy and external governance, and to comment on the potential to upgrade the EU’s role one of global “actorness.” The simple scale of issues related to EU policy makes the EU, at least, *prima facie* present on the international stage; however, its “actorness” depends on a capacity to perform coherently, consistently, and effectively.

⁴ In the academic literature the EU has been referred to as a normative/civil/ethical power. See, for example Manners, I. (2002). *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2): pp. 235-58; Larsen, H. (2002). *The EU: A Global Military Actor?*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 37(3): pp. 283-302; Aggestam, L. (2008). Introduction: Ethical Power Europe?, *International Affairs*, 84(1): pp. 1-11.

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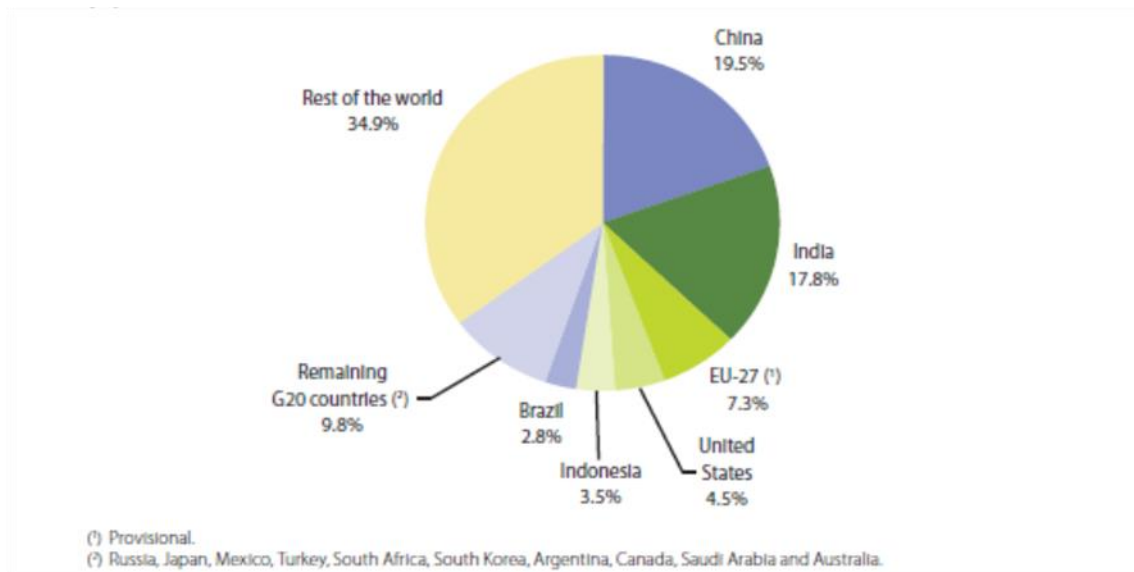


Figure 1: EU population in comparison with rest of the world (%). Source: Eurostat (2013). “The EU in the World 2013: A Statistical Portrait,” Belgium 2012.

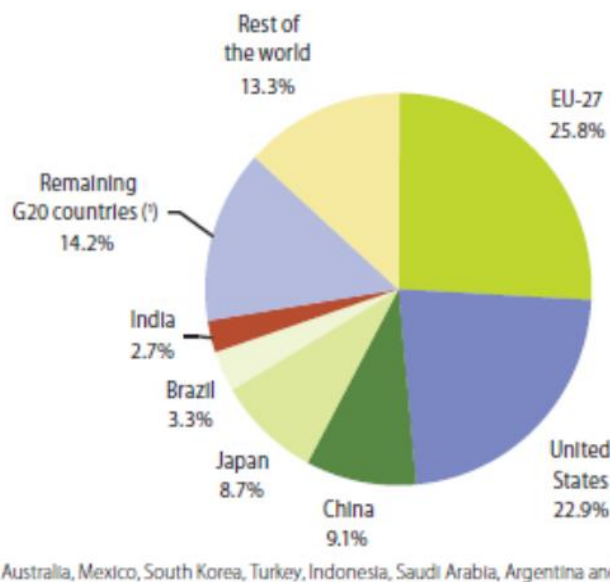


Figure 2: EU’s GDP share in comparison with the rest of the world (%). Source: Eurostat (2013) “The EU in the World 2013: A Statistical Portrait”, Belgium 2012.

Policy-Making System

Upgrading of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was seen as a solution for bridging divisions at the institutional level as well as various policy areas within the realm of external action. The new actor (the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) was tasked with performing functions of the former-High Representative, the Commissioner for External Affairs, and the rotating Council

presidency. This tripartite position enabled the establishment of a position from which overseeing and coordinating the EU’s external relations across various institutional levels and policy areas could be possible. However, with no explicit system of deputation this became a near impossible task.

The newly established European External Action Service (EEAS) along with upgraded EU Delegations abroad, provided an additional institutional base for ensuring coherence and consistency within EU

external action. The post of the President of the European Council (EC) is to contribute by providing strategic guidance at the highest political level. Maintaining distinctive decision-making procedures even though the pillar-structure was formally abolished undermined the latter provision. Therefore, while the policy areas concerning trade and development are pursued within a Community-framework and correspond method, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is maintained within the intergovernmental framework⁶. Nevertheless, with the introduction of a legal “personality” of the EU, negotiating and reaching international agreements is now subject to a single legal procedure and so ensures a legal basis for the EU’s global performance.

With only general provisions and no clear division of labour, the new set-up was determined to a large extent by the subsequent informal adaptation. The Arab Spring (including the military operation in Libya), the Palestinian bid for its statehood at the United Nations (UN) level, and the war in Syria, provided a challenging context for testing the new European foreign policy and security apparatus while proving that the impact of the supranational leadership when it came to ensuring a coherent response among the member states (MS) remained limited. The unclear division of labour triggered turf wars among the various actors, which brought about further confusion as regards the EU’s external representation.⁷

Exporting Values: The EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

Since 2004, the ENP has been employed by the EU as an instrument of coherence as

part of its external policy. This change of strategy in the external action is a consequence of the weakness of the Declaration of Barcelona in 1995. The ENP strategy in 2004 and 2007 focus its goals and give specific weight to potential MS. In this sense, places like the South Caucasus and Belarus obtained more importance⁸ in the external action arena.

During the last nine years, the ENP has been understood as an instrument to export EU rules and values to its neighbours⁹. While there is no clear definition of “shared European values,” the inquiry here looks at those values commonly associated with the Copenhagen political criteria developed by the EU in the context of the 2004 eastward enlargement¹⁰. So-called “European values” distribution has been one of the most conflictive points during recent years and one of the main reasons for difficulties in ENP implementation. The gap between the ENP as a program and the political, economic, and, social reality of the third partners reached its climax when the uprisings known collectively as the “Arab Springs” occurred in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

During the March 2013 ENP revision, the EU changed its imposing democratic and human rights values so that it could assume the role of observing-actor while simultaneously allowing the internal politics of the states in ENP to assume their own course. Notwithstanding this change, the EU continues to employ the ENP with democracy promotion as one of its main goals, yet the EU has demonstrated an understanding that objectives are achieved

⁶ The original plan to establish a single legal framework for the “Union’s External Action” as expressed in the Constitutional Treaty was not maintained in the Lisbon Treaty.

⁷ The 2010 EU-summit in May of 2010 was allegedly cancelled by US President Barack Obama due to turf wars at the European level about who should represent the EU – the Spanish PM who was then chair of the Council Presidency or Herman von Rompuy who was President of the EC.

⁸ COM (2004). 373 Relative to the ENP.

⁹ Del Sarto, R. A. (July 14, 2013). “Normative Empire Europe: The EU and its Borderlands,” Conference at the ENP PhD Summer School, College of Europe, July 14, 2013.

¹⁰ G. Bosse (2007). “Values in the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy: Political Rhetoric or Reflection of a Coherent Policy?,” *European Political Economy Review*, 7: pp. 38-62.

when governments and civil society are both ready and willing to act accordingly¹¹.

Despite its efforts to change and adapt the ENP to new and emerging geopolitical realities, the EU should step-up and streamline its responses to some of the existing conflicts that are currently taking place within its neighbourhood. The EU lost a lot of time while deciding its position at the beginning of the Syrian “conflict.” Its lack of agility in reaching a quick and common response was observed during previous weeks with respect to the refugee shipwrecks that have taken place off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy. No solution has been reached even after the October 24, 2013 EC summit.

The EU can still strengthen its common responses regarding an extensive range of issues. The upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit provides a solid venue for the EU to present itself as a strong actor with specific and readily applicable expertise. The ENP will face major challenges as part of EU external policy and governance, however, it presents the EU with major opportunity to come forward as a actor able to resolve conflict and crises quickly while the international community looks on.

ESDP/CSDP: EU Military Capabilities

“The Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible forces, the means to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond.”¹² This sentiment was expressed by France’s former-President Jacques Chirac and former-Prime Minister (PM) Tony Blair at St. Malo in 1998 where and when issues of the Petersburg tasks, Amsterdam Treaty, and progression of both CFSP and ESDP were addressed. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) evolved from the European Security and Defence Policy

(ESDP), both of which constituted a major part of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The ambitions embedded within the CSDP are part of the EU’s strategic vision to act strongly and coherently in the face of regional, inter-regional, and international conflict and crises.

Approval of the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003 stands as a momentous occasion in the development of the EU and its “actorness” for signalling the first instance in which the EU drafted and implemented a joint security strategy akin to the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the US. Several successful missions characterize the CSDP as a praiseworthy instrument of EU state-building and legitimizing condition of the Union as a major player at home and abroad. Recent intervention missions of the EU include “EUFOR Concordia” (Republic of Macedonia) (together with NATO military assets), “Operation Artemis” (Democratic Republic of Congo) (together with the UN), and further missions in Georgia, Indonesia (Aceh), Sudan, Palestine, Ukraine-Moldova, and Iraq. The EU Operations Centre, sited in Brussels, commands a still-limited military force. Five national operations headquarters (HQs) also comprise the general structure and content of this particular domain of EU policy.¹³

Criticism regarding the EU’s current state of military strength, partially prompted by sharp budget reductions made across the European continent, has made comparable the EU of today with its former-state in 1991, when Belgium’s foreign affairs minister described Europe as a “military worm.” While national constituents of the EU have shown discordant commitments and contributions to the Union’s overall military strength, they have (more importantly) made deep cuts to their respective defence budgets resulting extensive military discharges and military limitations in numerous dimensions. With its

¹¹ JOIN (2013). 4 Final. European Neighbourhood Policy: Working Towards a Stronger Partnership.

¹² Franco-British Summit Joint Declaration on European Defence, St. Malo, December 4, 1990. <www.atlanticcommunity.org/Saint-Malo%20Declaration%20Text.html>.

¹³ EU Operations Centre. <www.consilium.europa.eu>.

reliance on military assets from NATO, the US, and lack of capacity to project its existing military capabilities far abroad and in ample force, the EU's CSDP arguably brandishes a spear with no head.

Beyond Europe: The EU Worldwide

Regional cooperation between the EU and Africa started in the 1980s as a way of achieving change in trade policies², not only in Africa but also in lesser-developed countries (LDCs). Europe-Africa cooperation gradually evolved since the 1980s, culminating in the EU-Africa summit in Cairo (2000). The Lisbon Treaty (2007) saw a politicisation of cooperation, and the Joint Africa-EU Strategy was approved. From 2008-2010, the EU and Africa developed an Action Plan (AP), which was updated in 2011. This "Second Action Plan" emphasizes the most recent "priorities," including policy dialogue and coordination, as well as strengthening capacities of African Union (AU) bodies. The main issue regarding EU-Africa relations consists of hidden neo-colonialism nestled within various development policies.

The EU represents a model for Latin American countries in addition to the EEAS (MERCOSUR) being a primary success story of the application of the European model in the region. American presence in the region can potentially temper the effects of such a model. Despite the applicability of the EU model to Latin America, relations between the two remain conditioned by variable global governance dynamics. The behaviour of the United States (US) after 9/11 has shifted the position of the EU to a closer relationship with Latin American countries. However, trade-related issues, which the crisis has made more problematic, still pose an obstacle to the promotion of values in the region, which are vital to assess the success of the European model on a global level.

With their large populations and economic growth record and potential, Asian countries play a central role in Europe's foreign policy

strategy. The EU exports a wide range of products and commodities to Asia including normative aspects of security and human rights. Since the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), the EU has been adopting a "comprehensive" approach toward Asia based on the so-called "Three Ds:" Defence, Diplomacy, and Development. In 1996, a platform of dialogue was established through the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), foreseeing summits every two years with the next one scheduled to take place in Brussels in 2014. In 2001, the EU adopted the "Europe and Asia" Strategy with a strong commitment toward mutual security objectives being injected into the 2003 ESS that was also reflected in the subsequent strategy adopted for the period 2014-2020.

Conclusions

The EU's ability to act globally has been influenced by its complex structure of external action formulated through distinctive decision-making processes and various actors at both European and national levels. Even though the Lisbon Treaty formally abolished the three-pillar architecture, it has been maintained informally as an inter-governmental method of the CFSP. Such a complex structure requires extensive coordination and proactive leadership in fostering common positions between various European and national actors, and across various policy areas. While stronger and more determined coordination and clear division between the EEAS and the Commission should be ensured, the political will of the MS is key to ensuring that the new institutional architecture leads to the upgrading of the EU's external role and its performance. Greater involvement of foreign ministers through their particular thematic or/and geographical specialisations could contribute to a greater sense of ownership at the national level toward the EU's external action.

The EU also needs to clarify its interests and projected values in order to ensure an element of strategic guidance. The availability of the diverse toolbox at the disposal of the EU makes it a potentially strong actor in the complex thematic and geographical issues of the contemporary international environment, which requires a comprehensive approach toward such issues as climate change, energy security, sustainable development, and migration, among others. The recent exercise of the European Global Strategy (EGS) undertaken by think tanks in Sweden, Spain, Poland, and Italy has offered a unique platform for discussing items of the EU's future strategic agenda. Both the breadth and depth of EU policy externally clearly makes the EU present on the global scale. Nevertheless, with recent events shifting international attention away from Europe, budget cuts, prolonged downturn, inconsistent policy, this will not be enough to ensure much less maintain its global role. Effective leadership and clear strategic priorities are required in order to successfully exercise EU influence externally, but most of all, the EU needs to take decisive steps regarding its image in order to restore its attractiveness as an actor capable of being truly global.¹⁴

¹⁴ [Africa Continues to Grow Strongly but Poverty and Inequality Remain Persistently High, World Bank 2013](#)

ii [The rising power of social media in African politics.](#)

iii [2013 Latin America Digital Future in Focus](#)

iv [2013 Digital Future in Focus](#)

v [Population Reference Bureau, 2012 World Population Data Sheet, 2012.](#)