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## **A CRITICAL APPROACH TO A POSSIBLE EU HEGEMONY: RE-CONCEPTUALIZING THE ‘POWER’ OF THE UNION IN THE LIGHT OF THE CURRENT CRISIS**

**A theoretical approach to the issue  
of ‘power’ in the international system**

From the 17th-Century Peace of Westphalia through the collapse of the communist regimes in the early 1990s till present, the international system has evolved within different frameworks. Before trying to understand the character of the international system, a central question would be *how to recognise actors*. Firstly, there is a need to understand to what extent the EU is a consistent actor in a multi-actor system. Secondly, we need to shed light on the dynamics and the shape of the international system, a question that necessarily involves a debate of International Relations. According to Bretherton & Vogler, regarding the issue of actorness, “the classical or realist approach is state-centric, leading to a focus of inter-state political system. Other kind of actors can be admitted but their functions are seen as essentially subordinate to those of states. A more pluralist approach which specifies a range of non

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state actors which are not necessarily always subordinated to states gives rise to a mixed actor system” (Bretherton & Vogler, 1999, p. 34). The analysis according to the pluralist (Liberal and Neo-liberal) approach tries to accommodate the interests and activities of a set of actors -from individual citizens to social movements, from governmental to non-governmental or intergovernmental actors, and, from national to supranational actors. Their role is equally important for the world politics. This is essentially how the position of the EU can be understood due also to the fact that the second half of the last century has brought a shift from a state-centred worldview. This shift has challenged the classical understanding and it acknowledges the role of non-state entities, which contribute to shape the world order.

At the same time, the character of the international system raises significant questions. Liberals in the field of International Relations argue that “the world’s major powers enjoy cooperative relations, democracy is taking root in many countries that have long suffered under authoritarian rule and the world economy is becoming increasingly liberalized and integrated” (Kupchan, 1998, p. 40). Scholars and diplomats also argue that a set of factors such as economic interdependence, technological innovation and social aversion to the horrors of the war lead to more diplomatic ways of problem solving. We can deduce that the more cooperative the international system is, the lower the necessity for unilateral action would be. Consequently, the need for a *global watchdog* - which is the role that the hegemon acquires – would be lower. In part, these are some of the features of power in the international system.

To understand if we can expect the European Union to be the new hegemon of the world we need to start by explaining the nature of a hegemon. In most mainstream literature of International Relations the concept of hegemony has conventionally been used to signify a condition of asymmetry of power in which one state or entity becomes so powerful that can exercise leadership in or dominance over the international system (Antoniedas, 2008, p.2). Therefore, this state or entity, referred to as a hegemon, hegemonic power or imperial power, has the capacity to exercise fundamental control on subordinate states that conform to role expectations. The hegemon is also charged with different role expectations, which provide it authority, but on the other side these expectations empower the hegemon in more than authoritative terms. The more conformist the subordinated states are the stronger the hegemony becomes.

The US has been the superpower of the world for a long time, but there are circumstantial signs of decline. After WWII, the United States developed a unipolar hegemony toward Europe through the implementa-

tion of a number of US- led initiatives: Bretton Woods, the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the European Recovery Plan, and the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (Kellar, 2001, p. 13). In regards to the end of the ‘age’ of bipolarity, contrary to the predictions of the realist school of thought that argued about the return to a Hobbesian world, this process has not been accompanied by the fragmentation of the international structure into rivalry atomistic units. In the post-Cold War era the USA was the only superpower able to play significant international roles. However, since then, things have evolved substantially.

The ‘actorness’ of the European Union as a supranational competitor to US hegemony cannot be invalidated when discussing the power of the EU despite the escalating financial crisis. In the polymorphic world of today, other sources of power are also rising that challenge the existing order. As a result of the general decline of the US prestige in the international arena there is not a sole rival to the US complex stature.

The influence and the role of the so-called BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) is inevitable. The combination of a large population, rapid economic growth and investments in military hardware in these states, poses serious challenges to any possible aim for hegemonic dominance. This is ‘a promise’ for an era of multipolarity. Of course, the European Union plays an important role in international relations but it is quite far from being a real hegemonic force. The EU has too many internal problems including division in political opinion, weakness and low energy resulting from the enlargement process, which are additional problems on top of financial turmoil.

There are many approaches regarding the nature of a hegemony and they prioritize different factors while trying to explain different respective features but actually no single set of factors can work alone There are at least four basic dimensions to the concept of hegemony:

### **1.Political\Institutional**

The hegemon, working with its allies, makes most of the rules that govern global political and economic relations. The hegemon, along with its allies, usually controls most of the international institutions.

### **2.Ideological\Normative**

The hegemon largely determines the terms of discourse in global relations. Today, the predominant ideas about globalization are the ideas of the hegemon.

### **3.Military**

The hegemon has the strongest military in the world, significantly stronger than any of its rivals. Its military alliance system is significantly stronger than any rival military blocs.

### **4.Economic**

The hegemon has the largest and most technologically advanced economy in the world. It is a major trading partner of most of the nations of the world, including most of the major powers. (Hegemony, Counter-hegemony, and Stability, n.d).

### **The Political /Institutional Dimension**

Europe has evolved into a supranational system engaging in a complex interdependence and opting to bargain national sovereignty of individual states in exchange for collective political and economic security and prosperity. Being an important global actor poses a range of ambitious roles for the European Union: “The Union must increase the influence in world affairs, promote values such as peace and security, democracy and human rights, provide aid for the least developed countries, defend its social model and establish its presence in the world markets...prevent major damage to the environment and ensure sustainable growth with an optimum use of world resources. Collective action by the European Union is an ever increasing necessity...” (taken from Bretherton and Vogler, 1999, p.15).

So the European Union aspires to be a unique and coherent actor in the international arena. In a polymorphic structure, internal cohesion in political terms is very important for actorness but the EU suffers a range of problems in this regard. The ability of the European Union to operate in an increasingly complex economic and political international environment depends on the scale of facility of decision-making. As the number of member states increases, the variety of their viewpoints increases and the difficulty in reaching consensual decisions grows (Piening, 1997, p.202).

As in any complex decision-making system, divergent interests generate tensions over the ability to formulate, prioritize and pursue goals. It slows down or even impedes policy formulation and accurate action. To make it more concrete, according to Bretherton and Vogler the main logic behind the real action that permits to be a serious actor is:

1. Share of commitment to a set of overarching values and principles
2. The ability to identify policy priorities and to formulate coherent

policies

3. The ability to negotiate with other actors in the international system
4. The ability of, and capacity to utilize policy instruments
5. Domestic legitimation of decision processes and priorities related to external policy”

(Bretherton and Vogler, 1999, p. 38).

Some of the above points represent weak points of the European Union political and institutional functioning. Furthermore, the basis of political actorness of the EU has been also undermined by an extensive lack of legal personality which has a number of consequences. This has been a disadvantaging factor but not insuperable. However, in behavioural terms “weak states may have full legal status but are insignificant as actors while bodies such as the European Union can fulfil important functions without possessing legal personality” (Bretherton & Vogler, 1999, p.18)

### **The Ideological\Normative Dimension**

Over the years the EU has been described as a civilian power, a soft power and more recently as a normative power. Under this function the EU has been quite active in promoting different values as an aspect of its external policy, trying to play an important and constructive role. As it is argued by constructivist scholars, the presence of role concepts in the minds of policy-makers may affect and constrain their definition of interests and thus shape their policy choices. In fact, roles are produced by specific ideas or ideologies. Analysing and interpreting the construction of the roles of the EU in international relations is quite interesting because in a certain way they reflect political preferences and power relations. Duchene introduced the term civilian power to characterise (Western) Europe’s position in the world: “Europe would be the first major area of the Old World where the age-old process of war and indirect violence could be translated into something more in tune with the 20-th century citizen’s notion of civilised politics. In such a context, Western Europe could in a sense be the first of the world’s civilian centres of power... -Europe may be placed to play stabilising role on the world scene. Lacking military power is no longer the handicap it was once, due to the fact that the world is experiencing a change in the sources of powers” (taken from Orbie, 2008, p. 5).

Yet, a very important question raised by many scholars is: ‘Can the EU continue to widely expose values and principles while calling on others to defend them’? Actually, the EU can be a civilian power in a large extent thanks to the military protection of the US. The EU suffers from

military weaknesses and deficiencies while this is an important factor that can explain or rationalise why the Union holds a Kantian vision on international politics.

Normative aims such as conflict prevention, sustainable development, humanitarian aid and international initiatives in the environmental and social areas need complex resources to be tackled. They need multi-dimensional action. Hence, a mere normative orientation of the EU wouldn't help to fully achieve those goals and make it the new hegemon. An effective combination of all factors is needed in this regard.

### **The Military Dimension**

The basis of the EU's common foreign and security policy remains 'soft power'. It means that the use of diplomacy, mixed with trade relations and other non-military policies try to push for international understanding. These kind of foreign policy features, in relation to the superpower role, find an explanation by Hill's definition in stating that: "...emphasizing diplomatic rather than coercive instruments, the centrality of mediation in conflict resolution, the importance of long-term economic solutions to political problems, and the need for indigenous people to determine their own fate — all of these are in contradistinction to the norms of superpower politics" (taken from Brückner, 2004 p. 46).

The idea that the European Union should speak with one voice in world affairs is as old as the European integration process itself but the Union has made less progress in forging a common foreign and security policy over the years than in creating a single market and a single currency (Europa n.d). The culture of diversity that is predominant in the EU is not the best precondition for any attempt to develop a common European voice in foreign affairs. Many cases demonstrate the absence of a coherent EU position within the international arena. In fact, as opposed to having a cohesive foreign policy the EU represents a collection of the positions of various national governments.

In particular, two different cases demonstrate the weakness of the EU - weakness that prevents it from being a real military superpower and furthermore a real hegemon.

The war in ex-Yugoslavia has been revealing of the EU's strengths and weakness in international diplomacy. The EU economic power, political influence and geographic proximity made it a natural mediator for the warring Yugoslavs to run to (Buchan.1993, p 68). Germany fatally undermined the EU coherence by pushing its EU partners into recognising

Croatia's and later, Bosnia's independence. This act was very meaningful and it had significant consequences in this conflict. "If you Europeans split over Yugoslavia with Germany siding openly with Croatia, France with Serbia and so on, you will pull my country apart even faster than it is coming apart already" said in autumn 1991 ambassador Mihailo Crnobrnja, who was the Yugoslav ambassador to the European Union (1989-92) (Buchan.1993, p 80). While the community's biggest diplomatic weapon could be its unity, it has yet to be developed to its full potential..

In relation to the war in Iraq in early 2003, different EU member states such as Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Portugal proclaimed their support for the US. What followed was a significant split inside the EU. Other member states and a strong Franco-German axis stood up against the war.

In this vein, with this kind of precedents of cooperation, we cannot expect to see the EU becoming a military superpower or a hegemony. Inside EU there are a variety of ideas about the Common Foreign and Security Policy, there are competing national interests among members and there is also a belief of Europeans in the supremacy of other methods such as negotiations and multilateralism. Moreover, the European taxpayers are unwilling to spend comparable amounts of money on defence as the US does. All this helps to make the hegemonic role of EU very unconvincing.

### **The Economic Dimension**

In economic terms more than in other dimensions (thus, in relative terms), the EU has still a higher influence and a stronger voice in the international system. The EU economy consists of a single market and it is today a full member in its own right of the GATT (successor the World Trade Organization) in addition to, not instead of the member states (Piening, 1997, p.14)

The EU is a large and powerful trading bloc. The Single European Act turned the EC into a frontier free unified economic area equivalent in trade terms to a single country. So, the internal trade among the member states is stimulated by the removal of barriers to trade and it is additionally stimulated by the Euro as a common currency. However, the EU's present financial crisis is shaping a lower trajectory for the EU and the future of the common currency is questionable.

Over the past 50 years, the EU has developed relations with the rest of the world through a common policy on trade and cooperation agreements. It has become a key actor working closely with third countries and

international organisations. Through trade diplomacy, the EU has acquired a key role in the evolution of the international economic system. Trade and economic relations, as crucial points for the EU strategies, lie at the root of almost all foreign policy. However there are also weak points in this regard. Sometimes third countries may find themselves dealing with EU on certain issues and with individual Member States of the EU on others. They negotiate with the Commission on trade agreements but find themselves hosting trade delegations from individual member states seeking to conclude contracts or deals on bilateral basis (Piening, 1997, p.195). Individual member states may attempt to play unilateral role when it might turn more profitable. This demonstrates that the Member States do not automatically channel their foreign policy through the EU machinery. This process may be used strategically by third countries and it may damage the EU as a united body. It is obvious that this damages any EU attempt for hegemonic leadership.

### **Concluding remarks**

Europe is widely perceived as internally diverse facing a fragile “unity in diversity” idea. This ‘culture’ of diversity is not the best prerequisite for any attempt to develop a common European voice in foreign affairs. Furthermore, the current financial crisis raises strong doubts for the future of the Union. Thus, there are domestic problems and failures which might be transposed into the foreign dimension. The EU might still be a strong actor in the international system but rather than being the new hegemon of the world, it has to overcome current problems and reconceptualise its position in a multipolar system.

### Abstract

In the light of new developments related to the financial crisis in the EU, this essay is an attempt to critically evaluate any possible hegemonic role of the European Union in the international system. This paper investigates if it is still possible for the EU to rise as a new hegemony or rather the prospect of a stable multipolar system is more plausible. The main aim is to argue that the European Union is following a low trajectory in four different dimensions; political/institutional, ideological/normative, military and economic. In the first section the problem will be characterized theoretically. The next section discusses the many faces of a possible hegemony and it is followed by a more specific analysis of the four dimensions in the case of the European Union.

### Резиме

Во поглед на неодамнешната финансиската криза во Европската Унија, овој есеј е обид да се направи критички осврт на можната хегемонистичка улога на Европската Унија во меѓународниот систем. Овој труд истражува дали е и натаму можно ЕУ да се издигне како нова хегемонија или наместо тоа да биде пореална е опцијата да претставува стабилен мултиполарен систем. Главната цел е да се аргументира во насока на тоа дека Европската Унија оди по надолна траекторија во однос на четири различни димензии; политичка/институционална, идеолошка/нормативна, воена и економска. Во првиот дел проблемот се разгледува теоретски. Понатаму, трудот ги разгледува многуте различни аспекти на можната хегемонија, по што следува конкретна анализа на четирите димензии во случајот на ЕУ.

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