The European Union as a Small Power

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Abstract

With the creation of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the EU has entered the realm of power politics. Although the ambition to become a great power has been frequently reiterated, the EU has often failed to deliver stated policy objectives. This article has two broad goals. One is to outline the strategic behavioural patterns of small powers. The lack of scholarly attention to these states – the largest group in the international system – is a major omission from the International Relations canon. The other is to see how EU patterns of behaviour, exemplified in attempts to build up capacities for military intervention, overlap with those of a small power. The article argues that the concept of a small power best captures the reality of the EU as a strategic actor. Consequently, the EU is more comparable to other small powers such as Sweden or Argentina rather than to great powers such as China or Russia.

Introduction

The age of the superpowers appears to be at an end. With the shift towards a multipolar international system, the United States is shedding its role as unique superpower. Candidates for places at the high table of great powers include China, India, Japan and Russia. But what about the European Union (EU)? In this context the importance of the common security and defence policy (CSDP) goes beyond its actual and potential real-world impact; it is the vanguard of the EU's international presence. No other EU initiative more

clearly symbolizes its ambition to act as a Union. It is in its ability to coerce, and to resist coercive attempts in return, that the EU departs from the ranks of international organizations and becomes more than just a sum of its national parts. Since 1999, the EU has gradually and purposefully developed a capacity to act: diplomatically, economically and militarily. For this reason, the CSDP stands as the best indicator of whether a new power is indeed rising in Europe.

This article asks a simple question: what sort of power is the EU? Students of the European Union have been wary of studying the Union as a power. Many have preferred to think of the EU as a 'global actor'. Others have been critical of treating the EU as a power for normative reasons, preferring to adopt the qualifying adjectives of 'civilian' or 'normative' power (Sjursen, 2006, p. 170). In most European languages, states that matter are referred to as 'powers' (German *Macht*, French *puissance*, Russian *derzhava*, Spanish *poder*). In contrast to academic works that have preferred the less laden term of 'actorness' (for example, Vogler and Bretherton, 2002), this article argues that the behavioural pattern of the EU coincides with that of a *small power*.

The argument is presented in three sections. The first elucidates the concepts of great and small powers, laying out the framework for the analysis. The second section outlines the EU's military dimension in the CSDP, with an emphasis on the capability generation process and the imperfect transmission belt between political objectives and material capabilities. The concluding section revisits some of the characteristics of the EU as a power and examines how they overlap with those of small powers. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the purpose of European power in contemporary international affairs. Without pretending to be an exhaustive account of the EU as a small power, the article suggests ways in which this new vantage point can help to explain the workings and nature of CSDP. It also does so in a way that sheds light both on the nature of EU policies and on the nature of the EU 'beast' (Risse, 1996). The small power concept is compelling because it takes into account the EU's need – irrespective of its possible *sui generis* characteristics – to operate in a world order dominated by Westphalian states. There is today still no separate league for 'civilian powers' or 'global actors'.

I. Powers Great and Small

In his seminal study of great and small powers in international law, Karol Wolfke (1961, p. 5) noted that 'the existence of great and small powers side by side has always been a source of particular difficulties and international

conflicts'. According to Robert Rothstein (1968, p. 12), the formalization of the division between small and great powers came about with the signing of the Treaty of Chaumont in 1817. Before that, the assumption had been that all independent states were formally equal, regardless of differences in material capacity. As László Réczei (1971, p. 76) asserted, this distinction is one of the many signs that domestic and international politics differ. In his words,

> If the notion of war were unknown in international relations, the definition of 'small power' would have no significance; just as in the domestic life of a nation it has no significance whether a man is less tall or has a weaker physique than his fellow citizen.

In the scholarly literature, the group of states referred to here as 'small powers' have variously been referred to as 'lesser', 'middle', 'secondary' and 'regional' powers. Such conceptual neglect belies the numerical significance of this group. A large caucus of the 192 members of the United Nations can reasonably be labelled 'small powers'. In his study on world government, David Mitrany (1933, p. 9) took the view that the international community was comprised of two categories of powers: great and small. A problem with bundling all small actors together is that the members of the group are themselves internally very heterogeneous. For this reason, Robert Keohane (1969) preferred a fourfold taxonomy *in lieu* of the binary of great and small: *system-determining* powers play a critical role in shaping the international system; *system-influencing* powers cannot expect individually to dominate the international system but may be able to influence it; *system-affecting* states cannot affect the international system alone but with some concerted effort can have an impact on the way the system works; and *system-ineffectual* states can do little to influence the system-wide forces that affect them, except in groups so large that each state has minimal influence.

Keohane's categorization owes much to an older taxonomical framework developed by Rudolf Kjellén, the father of the term 'geopolitics'. In his essay 'Contemporary States', Kjellén (1914a, p. 34) identified 'global great powers', 'regional great powers', 'small powers' and 'small states'. He separates what he calls the 'middle class' of powers (regional and small) by the regional powers having greater military strength and a proven capacity to use it for strategic purposes. On a separate occasion, Kjellén (1914b, p. 244) notes that power potential does not determine power status. He places a greater emphasis on what he calls 'a will to greater power' ('*vilja till mera makt*'). Paul Kennedy (1987, pp. 275–310) uses a similar yardstick to define middle powers. In the contemporary context the United States, China and, possibly, India and Russia can reasonably be labelled great powers. The regional power category is less obvious but would likely include former great powers such as

Britain, France and Turkey. Bélanger and Mace (1997, pp. 166–7) have explained that since small powers (they use the term 'middle powers') are difficult to delineate, 'we are forced to deduce that states accorded the diplomatic and scientific status of [such a] power are those demonstrating the will and capacity to conform to the behavioural model associated with this category'.

Analytically, we can say that there are two main approaches to classification, one quantifiable and one relational. Neo-realists tend to classify powers through quantification: Carsten Holbraad (1984) uses population and gross national product as demarcation criteria. Quantification, however, is not without problems. A definition based solely on tangible criteria carries the danger – through an 'A is stronger than B but is weaker than C' logic – of projecting a hierarchy onto the international system that does not exist. As Stefano Guzzini (2000, p. 55) puts it, neo-realists tend to use a 'lump concept of power which assumes that all elements of power can be combined into one general indicator'.

An alternative, relational approach is adopted by Rothstein (1968, pp. 23–4). In his view, small powers 'develop behavioural patterns which decisively separate them from non-group members'. A small power is as a small power does and at issue is how small powers behave *in relation to each other* and *in relation to other kinds of powers*. The relational approach disaggregates power into a number of component parts in order to demonstrate how it is exercised in specific issue areas. For Guzzini (1993, p. 453), a relational approach to power typically includes:

> Its scope (the objectives of an attempt to gain influence; influence over which issue), its domain (the target of the influence attempt), its weight (the quantity of resources), and its costs (opportunity costs of forgoing a relation).

This article couples this approach with Keohane's (1969, p. 296) focus on the impact different kinds of power have on the international system. We can conclude that 'small power' is a term used in the field of international relations to describe the space that lies between small states and great powers. Small powers command influence and international recognition and whilst they may not be giants, they are nevertheless what Stephen Walt (1987, p. 18) calls 'states that matter'.

If identifying small power status means focusing on relations manifested in a set of behavioural attributes, then these need to be outlined. Rothstein (1968, p. 17) sees small power behaviour as unique 'because it rests on a perspective which is itself unique'. Small powers carve out a niche by displaying a narrow and specific range of foreign policy behavioural patterns. Small powers are actors that mobilize their military, diplomatic and economic

resources in the service of their security, autonomy, wealth and prestige. They attempt to maximize these goals without openly doing so at the expense of their neighbours. These attempts arise as a result of questions about how to avoid, mitigate or postpone conflict and how to resist superior force once conflict has developed.

Scholars have adopted different approaches and have produced a range of conclusions when analysing the behaviour of small powers (Kassimeris, 2008, p. 101). One means of defining a set of observed and imputable behavioural norms is through a descriptive summary of security policy patterns (Luttwak, 2009, p. 416). Though a single definition has proved elusive due to the number of potential variables and their particular interpretation under given conditions, in the surveyed literature some recurrent traits have been discerned in the behavioural patterns of small powers on the international stage.

1. The strategic behaviour of small powers is characterized by *dependence*. A small power recognizes that it cannot obtain security by relying solely on its own capabilities (Rothstein, 1968, p. 29). They cannot affect the international system alone but with some concerted effort they can have an impact on the way the system works (Keohane, 1969). A small power plays a dispensable and non-decisive part in a great power's array of political and military resources. Small powers therefore tend towards a policy of either strict neutrality or alliance (Reiter, 1996, p. 71). Those 'located in geopolitical regions critical to maintaining a great power's position in the international system [tend] to opt for alliance' (Mares, 1988, p. 456). In an alliance, small powers tend to follow the alliance leader closely, lend it what support they can and avoid antagonizing it (Posen, 2004, p.7). Under regional hegemony with a low probability of punishment, small powers tend to adopt neutrality (Walt, 1985, p 18).

2. Small powers display *variable geometry*. In terms of military capabilities there is no ability to project power on a global scale. They are forced by their limited resources, their location and by the international system itself to establish clear priorities (Wivel, 2005, p. 396). To this end, they identify a hierarchy of risks and attempt to internationalize those considered to be most serious (Hoffman, 1965, p. 138). Small power policies, argues David Vital (1967, p. 134), are aimed at altering the external environment by 'reducing an unfavourable discrepancy in strength, broadening the field of manoeuvre and choice, and increasing the total resources on which the state can count in times of stress'. Small powers are therefore status quo oriented. They work within the established order rather than attempting to revise the order itself (for more details on this, see Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2009).

3. Small powers are the primary beneficiaries of international institutions and are, by necessity, 'lovers of the law' (Kaeckenbeeck, 1945, p. 307). A small power will often seek to minimize the costs of conducting foreign policy and will increase the weight behind its policies by engaging in concerted efforts with other actors. Generally, this leads to a high degree of participation in and support for international organizations, which leads to a tendency to adopt 'moral' or 'normative' policy positions (Russett and Oneal, 2001, p. 278). Formal rules are actively encouraged in order to curb the great powers and strengthen their own position. Cooper *et al.* (1993, pp. 19–20) identify small powers by '[t]heir tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and their tendency to embrace notions of "good international citizenship" to guide their diplomacy'.

4. Small powers are *defensive by nature*. They see more dangers than opportunities in international politics, which leads them both to shun system-upholding tasks and to display a penchant for token participation in such endeavours. Due to the risks of extermination when challenging more powerful states, their ambitions are generally 'defensive' (Aron, 1966, p. 83). They have a narrow range of interests and little freedom of activity. Annette Fox (1959, p. 3, fn. 8.) sees small powers as being geographically bound in the sense that their demands are restricted to their own and immediately adjacent areas, while great powers exert their influence on a global scale. Subsequently, small power strategic behaviour is characterized by a general reluctance to coerce and a tendency to promote multilateral, non-military solutions to security challenges (Wivel, 2005, p. 395; see also Hoffman, 1965).

II. The Common Security and Defence Policy

Political integration in the EU has always contained within it some ambition regarding the expansion of the EU's role in world politics. Romano Prodi, former European Commission President, put the issue most forcefully in 2001: 'Are we all clear that we want to build something that can aspire to be a world power? In other words, not just a trading bloc but a political force, a power' (Prodi, 2001). A year later, in his opening address as president of Europe's Constitutional Convention in 2002, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a former president of France, proclaimed:

> If we succeed, in 25 or 50 years Europe's role in the world will have changed. It will be respected and listened to, not only as the economic

> power it already is, but as a political power which will talk on equal terms
> to the greatest powers on our planet. (Giscard d'Estaing, 2002)

If the EU were to become a great power it would need a capacity to act. The
single biggest attempt to develop such a capacity has been the formation of
the CSDP. The currency of hard power has changed little over time. The
ability to conduct foreign policy and maintain independent relations with
other powers depends, in the end, on an ability to raise and command armies
(Taylor, 1971, p. xxiv). The EU's desire to have a capacity to project power
is captured in a string of initiatives to muster an armed force to match the
political ambitions agreed by the members. These were summarized in the
European security strategy, which called on the Union to 'develop a *strategic
culture* that fosters early, rapid and when necessary, robust intervention'
(Solana, 2003, p 13, emphasis in original). The story of attempts to develop
such a capacity is instructive, not least because the process – the results of
which differed considerably from the initial ambitions (on this point, see
also Menon's article in this issue) – provides an important insight into the
defensive and status quo nature of the EU as a small power.

From the beginning, EU leaders were adamant that the CSDP should be
concerned with more than just the issue of lofty, grandiloquent declarations.
The goal that the EU should have a military force was translated into a
detailed 'shopping list' of military capabilities in the 1999 Helsinki Headline
Goal. This identified the goal of a fully deployable 60,000-strong Rapid
Reaction Force (RRF). The number was not coincidental – 60,000 men in the
field would give the European Union an actual war-fighting capacity. The
RRF would place the EU among a handful of actors in the international
system that can project such force. The Headline Goal was followed by
annual conferences on the allocation of resources, including the November
2001 Capabilities Improvement Conference, which itself led to the creation of
the European Capabilities Action Plan, meant to counter the already signifi-
cant shortfalls in meeting the Helsinki targets. This failed to deliver results
and in December 2003 Member States created the Capability Development
Mechanism, an initiative designed to bring about greater coherence in the
generation of capabilities.

The initial Headline Goals were succeeded by a new 2010 Headline Goal,
which was to be supported by the European Defence Agency (EDA). The
EDA had been an important player in drafting the 2006 'Long-Term Vision'
(LTV) that was intended to ensure that Member States were keeping their
promises regarding capabilities. The broad endorsement of the LTV by the
defence ministers of EU Member States in October 2006 provided a solid
foundation for CSDP capability development activities. It set the baseline for

a unique enterprise: to create a comprehensive and auditable overview of military capability trends and requirements, from today to 2025 and beyond, across all envisaged CSDP missions. Yet a gap soon opened up between the frantic rate of activity in declarations and in institution-building, on the one hand, and the mustering of actual capabilities, on the other. In response to these difficulties, the level of ambition was scaled down. The Battle Groups introduced in the 2010 Headline Goal were intended as a smaller, cheaper and more realistic alternative to the Rapid Reaction Force of the Helsinki Headline Goal. However, doubts are being raised even about these reduced ambitions. According to the 2010 Military Balance (IISS, 2010, pp. 34–6), the operational capacity of the Battle Groups remains limited and the very fact that no Battle Group has ever been deployed raises questions as to whether such 'coalitions' are in fact viable.

The problem of military capabilities is the result of three factors. First, most European states are simply not spending enough on defence. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2006, p. 164) reported that in 2005 Europe was the only region in the world where military spending fell – by some 1.7 per cent. Military expenditure in Europe totalled US$413 billion in 2008, an increase of 1.4 per cent in real terms since 2007. In the same period, eastern Europe, notably Russia, saw an 11 per cent increase. Taking a longer perspective, over the period 1999–2009, Russia increased its military spending by some 174 per cent, and central and eastern Europe by 4.5 per cent (SIPRI, 2009, pp. 190–1). This shortfall is all the more damning since Tony Blair, at the outset of the CSDP, had emphatically stressed that the new initiatives would be about new capabilities, not new institutional fixtures (Toje, 2008, p. 34).

Second, funds are often spent in a manner opposed to the overall European security strategy (ESS). Although the 27 Member States have almost 1.86 million active service personnel in 2010, only around a third of these forces can actually be deployed outside European territory because of legal restrictions or inadequate training.

Third, the fragmentation of the European defence market creates further inefficiencies. The existence of several small national defence industries producing similar hardware leads to duplication and waste. Again, there has been no shortage of both declaratory and practical initiatives aimed at rectifying this situation, but the European defence market remains unconsolidated.

It is therefore difficult to disagree with the conclusion drawn by researchers at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2008, p. 56) that the initiatives undertaken so far have failed to deliver the previously announced capacity. The fact of the matter is that EU states have not only failed to meet their own targets, they have repeatedly down-scaled these

targets and have then failed to meet those as well. One prime example of this is with armoured cars, which have been in short supply for all EU missions to date (Lindström, 2007). Even in the field, EU mission forces have experienced a lack of capabilities of crucial importance to the missions, which, on several occasions, has undermined the very purpose of the mission. The number of troops deployed today in CSDP operations, at around 6,000, constitutes only 0.3 per cent of European military manpower. The failure to reform outdated militaries means that much of the annual €200 billion that EU governments spend on defence is of little relevance to their collective endeavours (Witney, 2008). The reasons for this are plentiful and the over-institutionalized organizational environment with its uncertain division of labour surely plays a part here (see Hoffman, in this special issue).

More progress has been made in auxillary fields. The case can be made that the EU has been successful in the development of less tangible capabilities. One example is the attitude to force-projection. In his contribution to this issue, Anand Menon argues that the CSDP has played a part in shifting the position of some Member States towards participation in military operations. Another such improvement is that although the EU initially relied heavily on Nato assistance, it has become more independent over time. One indicator is that the missions have (as discussed in the introduction to this issue) grown more numerous and longer in duration.

When the list of EU missions is examined in detail, however, it is apparent that the EU favours small-scale, low-intensity pre- and post-crisis management operations – all of which are relatively low on the international agenda. According to their own evaluations, most of the EU operations have achieved the goals they have set themselves – although it should be noted that the bar has invariably been set low (for more details, see the introduction to this special issue). The EU did not play a role in the great power politics of the past decade – whether it be in relation to Kosovo, Iraq, Nato's eastern enlargement, Darfur or Afghanistan (Toje, 2008, 2010). Gülnur Aybet (2007, p. 9) poses a timely question as to whether the missions engaged in actually reflect the security interests of the Member States.

Without capabilities and frameworks in place, the lack of agreement on foreign policy goals becomes more evident. Ambiguity persists as to how exactly the stated security policy objectives are to be achieved. Of course, this will not come as a surprise to anyone who has monitored European attempts to pursue collective foreign policies since the end of the cold war. Many expected that the process of political integration would be more arduous than that of economic integration. So far, the militarization of the EU has not translated into a 'grand bargain' over foreign policy integration of the kind seen with monetary union. Although the mustering of military capabilities is

the most high-profile example of the EU failing to deliver on its own great power ambitions, it is by no means the only such instance. The EU's strategies are unfocused and the high rate of operations disguises the fact that most of the missions lack the ambition to change facts on the ground. The arguably single most important lesson from the first decade of the CSDP is that EU members do not share sufficient foreign policy interests, traditions, goals and outlooks to automatically generate substantive common policies. The tepid response among Member States to the attempts at mustering of capabilities within the CSDP is indicative of a general distaste towards military intervention that is at odds with the notion of a great power in the making.

III. The Purpose of European Power

If the EU in core areas falls short of what we would expect from a great power, then what is it? Despite a stated ambition to become a 'global actor' ready to 'share responsibility for global security' (Solana, 2003, p. 1), the Union persistently fails to display the type of behaviour usually associated with the most powerful players in the international system. The varying agendas, traditions and capabilities of the Member States offer few common denominators for a shared approach to the management of hard power.

The CSDP was a leap in the dark. It was constructed under an agreement that the EU should have such a policy, but not what it should be about. Christoph Meyer and Eva Strickmann argue in this issue that the CSDP was not created in a top-down fashion, but that 'changes in the material world cause[d] an adjustment in the political order'. This is probably correct. One lesson to be learned from the first decade of the CSDP is that this sequencing of reality into ideas has not had a similar transmission belt into political action. As seen in the previous section, the EU has repeatedly failed to live up to the objectives it has set itself. Zaki Laïdi (2010) explains this behaviour in terms of risk aversion, labelling the EU a 'risk averse power'. He defines this as 'an international actor that responds to the political stakes of an identified risk in terms of a will to reduce uncertainties and uncontrollable effects'. This captures one distinguishing feature of the CSDP. Both the 2003 European security strategy (ESS) and its follow-up document, the 2008 Report on the Implementation of the ESS (RI-ESS) are for the most part dedicated to defining the threats and challenges facing the Union.

Though useful, Laïdi's concept runs into trouble when it comes to how the EU deals with the risks that it identifies. The ESS/RI-ESS reads like an index of *causes célèbres* of the early 2000s, but it has little to say about how the EU can be expected to respond to all of these threats and challenges. As such, the

EU's strategy is perhaps better understood as a way of *opting out* of defining an EU *raison d'état* rather than as the beginnings of distilling such a 'European interest' from the national interests of the Member States. There is, as Sten Rynning points out in this special issue, a gap between structure and agency. Structure pushes the EU in the direction of becoming a great power and a pole in the emerging multipolar world order. But weak agency results in, at best, a weak policy response and, at worst, policy failure.

Instead of lamenting the EU's failure, as analysts are prone to doing, we can understand the development of its security and defence policy through the concept of small power. Looking at the outline provided above, all the behavioural characteristics of small powers resonate with those of the EU. On the global stage the EU's patterns of behaviour are characterized by dependence. Having been forged through the tensions between Member State sovereignty and participation in and commitment to the transatlantic alliance, the strategic behaviour of the EU is dependent upon American leadership. The timid 'collective defence clause' of the Treaty of Lisbon (EU, 2007, Art. 28a, para. 7), where the EU explicitly subordinates itself to Nato, can only be understood in terms of fear of diluting American security guarantees to Europe. The European security strategy (EU, 2003) shadows the United States National Security Strategy (White House, 2002) just as the annual EU 'state of the union' speech imitates the American equivalent. Much like a small power, the EU follows its *de facto* alliance leader closely, lends what support it can and avoids antagonizing it. This has been echoed in the EU experience over practically every major international issue from the Kosovo war, via the Iraq and Afghan conflicts, to the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, where the EU was ignominiously sidelined. The EU has consciously chosen not to undertake formal strategic co-operation with the United States, preferring instead to cultivate the image of a more independent position in international politics, exemplified in its role as mediator over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The EU displays the *variable geometry* characteristics of a small power. It shares the same predicament as a small power in that the amount of resources available for allocation is relatively small. As a power, the EU is economically strong, militarily weak and politically fragmented. EU members have failed to pool anything resembling the autonomous intervention force originally envisioned. If the test of a great power is the possession of strength for war, then the EU surely is no great power. And it is not perceived as such. President Obama's decision not to attend the annual United States–European Union summit meeting in 2010 sent a clear message: the European Union is not a sufficiently important force that it justifies the attention of the president of the United States (Erlanger, 2010). While speaking in Paris on 'the Future of

European Security' in January 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary
R. Clinton mentioned Russia 29 times while failing to mention the CSDP
once (Clinton, 2010). The limited ability to project hard power both in
terms of hardware and policy-making procedures predisposes the EU to
play a role that places less value on power and military strength and more
on such soft-power tools as 'constructive engagement', foreign aid and
commercial ties.

The EU is also a firm supporter of international law, frequently invoking
moral and normative policy positions to justify its actions. Rather than a
greater tendency towards unilateralism, as might be expected among greater
powers, the EU consistently seeks to internationalize issues of particular
concern. This pertains to issues ranging from climate change through to
terrorism, nuclear proliferation or the recognition of Kosovo. The multilateral
mantra and pro-UN sentiments of the ESS and RI-ESS sit well with
Keohane's definition of a small power as an actor whose leaders consider that
it can only make a significant impact on the system when acting in a group.
Like small powers, the EU avoids confrontational behaviour, preferring
instead to refer disputes to third-party mediation, a modus operandi likely to
be reinforced by the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty (on the EU's
preference for consensual behaviour, see also Bickerton in this issue). The EU
generally displays a high degree of support for international organizations.
Although the EU has not sought membership of the UN, constant references
to this body in EU foreign policy documents are as familiar to people from
small powers, such as Sweden or the Netherlands, as they will seem alien to
citizens of great powers such as China or Russia. Perhaps the most telling
indicator of a small power perspective is the way that a union of 27 democ-
racies defers authority for when to act militarily to the United Nations (EU,
2003, 2007, Art. 28a, para. 7).

Among the things that set the EU apart as a power is the willingness of
its Member States to work with others through multilateral institutions, as
illustrated in the Doha trade negotiations (Hofmann & Tondl, 2007). I
hasten to add that multilateral inclination is not necessarily indicative of an
absence of power as institutions can mobilize bias to serve EU purposes
and eliminate opposition to EU interests. Emerging powers led by China
often claim that international institutions were designed by western powers
and that they operate and respond accordingly (Snyder, 2009, pp 12–45).
There is a degree of truth to that. Global institutions create an asymmetrical
distribution of benefits, of which the EU has been a primary beneficiary. It
is partly for this reason that Mark Leonard (2005) claims that the nature of
European integration has revolved around global institutions that create the
sort of supranational regulatory 'policy space' where the EU excels. The

EU is allowed to exercise power on behalf of its Member States because they know that this power will be indirect and mediated.

Nevertheless, on the world stage the EU has adopted a *defensive*, risk-averse posture. The EU is inclined towards co-operative, damage-limitation strategies, as illustrated by its eagerness to limit strategic possibilities by self-imposed rules of restraint. This is perhaps best illustrated by the 22 crisis management operations in which EU soldiers have not once, to the author's knowledge, engaged in fighting.[1] This reflects the belief that other actors are equally committed to international norms and rules. EU military operations to date have been small missions in areas of little significance to greater powers, where the chances of uncontrolled escalation are remote – and where uncommitted involvement is permissible. Instead of being simply the 'lowest common denominator', it would be more accurate to say that the EU consciously pursues an approach enforced by its limited resources and oriented towards status quo policies. The fear of setting a dangerous precedent takes curious forms, as reflected in the failure collectively to recognize the 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence, despite the EU being the custodian of the new state.[2]

If we accept that a union of over 500 million inhabitants and vast power potential has developed a pattern of behaviour that resembles that of a small power, it is worth briefly considering why this has happened. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2008) argues that integration can help establish the sort of commitment that significantly reduces the risk of war among unequal powers. In this view, integration is in itself an alternative to war. It prevents the emergence of revisionist powers and the quest for hegemony in the region. The logic of what she calls 'institutional binding' is motivated by a desire to reduce the threat of conflict associated with regional power transitions. This helps explain the tensions between the EU as an international order and its role in contributing as a power to the broader international order. This line of reasoning is consistent with the notion of European integration as a response to the acute security dilemmas that have marred Europe in the past. The EU acts as a small power because it is itself the result not of any 'will to power' but of fears of Westphalian sovereignty and balance of power and of the consequences they had for European stability prior to 1945.

The EU's status as a small power is underpinned by the actions of its individual members and by the way that EU foreign policy decisions are made. Like other small powers, the EU does not have a seat at the UN Security Council, it does not have a common nuclear deterrent and its military

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[1] A soldier killed in Chad during a CSDP mission was the first official CSDP casualty. This was the result of an attack on EU troops rather an engagement in combat by the troops themselves.
[2] At the time of writing, only 22 of the 27 Member States have recognized Kosovo.

capacity (the Battle Groups) is roughly what might be expected from a small power. The EU's strategic outlook is perhaps less surprising if one is to take into account that the EU is based on equal membership, and the largest grouping of Member States are themselves small powers. The ease with which four neutral states have joined the CFSP/CSDP is testimony to the EU's small power mindset. While the focus in the debate on multipolarity has been on the emerging powers, less attention has been directed to the relegated powers – France and Britain – that will have to find their feet as regional powers, acting in the same policy space as the European Union.

Another important clue to the EU's small power orientation lies with Germany. The only state in Europe that in its own right could claim great power status, Germany has in recent years actively resisted attempts at a more powerful EU. Whether the German position reflects a fear that a strong CSDP could encourage foreign policy activism, concerns that Germany would be made to pay for it, or perhaps unease that the EU might get in the way of its own power ambitions, remains unclear (Schreer and Noetzel, 2008). Considering the high stakes of great power politics, acting as a small power may insulate the EU against costly foreign policy adventures. The law of unintended consequences is often harsh on those who favour hard power, spurring what Rothstein (1968, p. 27) calls 'the temptations of appearing insignificant'.

The implications of the EU's small power behaviour on its policies are significant. While the factors listed certainly restrict the EU, this does not mean the EU is powerless. The eastern enlargements have shown that the EU has few qualms about imposing its values on others and that it can on occasion mobilize its economic power to measurable strategic effect. Notwithstanding its apparent lack of will or power, the EU is continuously furthering its common values, both internally and externally, without the threat or use of force. The EU strategic approach is to mitigate instability on the European periphery by integrating potential adversaries and making them part of a greater whole. Europe absorbs problems and conflicts instead of directly confronting them. Although the EU's ability to coerce remains small, the ability to resist attempts at such directed towards itself may be on the rise. The EU's power is most apparent when dealing bilaterally with inconsequential powers.

Conclusions

The EU is a multi-purpose, multidimensional, semi-supranational, semi-intergovernmental actor. It has come into being because of its compatibility with other strategic identities. Member States such as Germany, France and

Britain will remain as national powers that inhabit the international system alongside the EU. The EU will itself continue its evolution as a small power, existing alongside the national presence of individual Member States.

The small power perspective elaborated in this article helps us escape from the intellectual cul de sac that EU studies has entered with regards to foreign and security policy. Instead of having to choose between those who see in the EU a nascent superpower and those who dismiss entirely its foreign policy efforts, the small power concept is a more suitable and sober yardstick for the EU. The small power perspective thus captures the distinct flair of the EU's CSDP – namely the strong interest in and concern about an international system that it perceives to be full of threats – and the limited ability to actually do anything about these threats.

It would be easy to accuse European leaders of failing to deliver on the EU's great inherent power potential. But that would miss a more interesting point made by Paul Kennedy (2009, p. 55), namely that almost all medium powers are having a problem figuring out who they are, what their priorities should be and how to move on. Pressures certainly exist for the EU to accept its small power status and play the hand it has been dealt as effectively as possible. History has many examples of effective small powers, just as it has many examples of ineffective great powers. The EU does after all have global economic interests that may find themselves increasingly threatened in the future. Embracing the small power identity is, in the present situation, arguably the best path to making peace with the inconsistencies associated with the presence, capabilities and patterns of behaviour that characterize the European Union as a power in a multipolar international system.

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