

Of Regional Complexes and Global Powers: The Power Capacity of the EU

Written by Paul Pryce

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PAUL PRYCE, SEP 27 2011

In recent years, there has been much debate as to whether the European Union constitutes a global power. For the most part, the elusiveness of a coherent and cogent Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has cast much doubt as to whether the EU can be considered a credible actor in international affairs, let alone one which is capable of projecting its power and influence on a global level. These criticisms of EU foreign policy, or the lack thereof, have extended across a plethora of fronts. On one level, these criticisms have centred on pragmatic concerns, such as the personal attributes of relevant policymakers, as reflected in the questions raised about Catherine Ashton's lack of diplomatic experience prior to her appointment as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.[1] On another level, however, the criticisms of the EU's foreign policy capacity have been existential in nature, with the discussion centering on whether the EU even possesses the legitimacy to wield power and influence on the international stage on behalf of the 27 Member States.

Speaking to an audience in Copenhagen in 2002, then High Representative for the CFSP Javier Solana stated that "...a Union of our size, with our interests, history and values, has an obligation to assume its share of responsibilities... The question, therefore, is not *whether* we play a global role, but *how* we play that role." [2] This expression of political will, while forming a speech act intended to reinforce a socially constructed belief among epistemic communities and the wider populace of the Member States that an active EU on a foreign policy level is essential, also sets out a kind of deontological imperative. This imperative responds in some respects to the existential criticisms being levelled against the role of the EU as a global power. However, a deeper consideration of these philosophical disputes would be extraneous to traditional international relations research and so here we will discuss only the pragmatic concerns with regard to EU foreign policy.

To examine this pragmatic aspect to its fullest extent, the potential power capacity of the EU should form the basis for the initial consideration. It has been noted that the EU has a tremendous degree of power in the socioeconomic sphere, with an annual Gross Domestic Product of considerable levels. "Europe can thus focus on its specific strength as a civil power in order to promote a 'stability transfer' as a preventive security policy." [3] What is integral to this outlook on international security is that this civil power, this philosophical imperative to facilitate stability transfers to seemingly unstable states, is that "...it represents the idea of a comprehensive multi-policy concept, an idea based on the premise that stability can be projected..." [4] From this, one could determine that the EU displays at least the rudiments of a foreign policy, albeit one which takes a different approach than what might be utilized by other actors in the international system widely regarded as global powers, such as the United States of America, seeking to employ civil power rather than military power to foster stability. This civil power has, in addition, manifested itself in unorthodox aspects but to neglect these simply on the basis that this influence is exerted through non-traditional means would be to neglect a significant domain of international politics at this early stage of the 21st century.

One such example of this non-traditional exertion of what is in turn a non-traditional form of political power would be the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. The Sakharov Prize, named after Soviet physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov, is "...awarded by the European Parliament every year since 1988 to individuals or organizations who have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy." [5] While it is clearly intended that the Sakharov Prize be awarded to an individual or organization exemplifying merit in the area of human rights advocacy

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and combating intolerance and extremism, it is also entirely likely, if not probable, that political considerations also factor into the nominations and the final vote applied by the Members of the European Parliament to determine each year's recipient. Among these political considerations could be concerns relating to the EU's foreign policy priorities, even if these priorities are not necessarily defined formally.

In this light, the impact the Sakharov Prize can have with regard to the broader relationship between the EU and other international actors should not be under-estimated. In 2006, the Parliament voted to award that year's Prize to Alexander Milinkevich, an opposition leader and dissident in Belarus.[6] This established a strong position on the part of the Parliament with regard to the political situation in Belarus. The same year, the European Commission reports, the Member States approved a proposal that trade preferences for Belarus under the Generalized System of Preferences be withdrawn, explaining that "...the EU has suspended moves towards closer economic partnership with Belarus until its government is able to show a greater commitment to democracy and political and civil rights." [7]

Thus, in this respect, the European Parliament has established for itself a means of exerting civil power that is both wrapped up in, and separate from, the authority of the 27 EU Member States. As the final vote to select the recipient of each Sakharov Prize is carried out exclusively by the elected Members of the European Parliament, this expression of civil power by the EU falls completely outside the domain of the Member State governments and their own conceptions of state interest. But, at the same time, the reaction to the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus – an election which, according to international observers, "...raised doubts regarding the authorities' willingness to tolerate political competition..." [8] – demonstrated the potential for coordination between the EU institutions on issues of foreign policy without a formal set of declared foreign policy objectives. Indeed, it was the European Parliament that took the step of placing the spotlight on the human rights situation in Belarus, and particularly the abuses committed in connection with the 2006 presidential election, by awarding the Sakharov Prize to Alexander Milinkevich. But it was the Commission and the Council that cooperated on exacting further, more tangible punitive measures by withdrawing economic measures that had been extended to Belarus.

Nonetheless, while the potential power of the EU as a global power has been demonstrated through these and numerous other examples, practice must meet this potential. To place this problem more precisely, "if the potential of its significant presence is to be realized, the economic power of the Union must be articulated to a stronger sense of collective political purpose." [9] To illustrate the validity of this point, one need look no further than the events surrounding the awarding of the 2009 Sakharov Prize to Memorial, a Russia-based NGO and association of human rights defenders, by the European Parliament and contrast these conditions with those witnessed in 2006.

On the occasion in 2009 when it was announced that Memorial would receive the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, the President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, declared that the Prize was being delivered to this particular organization in the "...hope to contribute to ending the circle of fear and violence surrounding human rights defenders in the Russian Federation..." [10] This statement of intent attached to the recognition of Memorial's work established the apparent foreign policy objective that the Parliament hoped to pursue – applying the civil power of the EU to the Russian Federation in much the same manner as was done with Belarus in 2006. However, unlike in the Belarusian example, it would seem that a coordinated action between the EU institutions did not materialize. In fact, as if to declare the Russian authorities' rejection of the entreaties by the EU to adjust its attitude and internal policies towards human rights defenders, Russian law enforcement officials detained Lyudmila Alexeyeva, one of the leaders of Memorial and one of the three delegates sent by that organization to personally receive the Sakharov Prize in Strasbourg in 2009. This detainment came roughly two weeks following the ceremony at the European Parliament. [11]

What would seem to be the principal difference between the attempts to exert influence on these two states in 2006 and in 2009 would be the degree to which the EU institutions were coordinated and, in turn, to what degree the political will existed on the part of the Member States to pursue concerted action. In the case of Russia in 2009, the political will proved to be minimal. This could have been due to the ongoing division in the EU over what role Russia could possibly play in Europe, exacerbated by the proposal made by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev for some form of "new European security architecture", which was initially issued and promoted through the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

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Speaking shortly after the initial proposal and during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, French President Nicolas Sarkozy had expressed a desire to hold discussions on the future applicability of the Russian proposal and made a formal "...suggestion to hold these discussions at an OSCE Summit..."[12] Despite the enthusiastic reception of this Russian proposal by French officials, then Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb responded to the proposal by stating that "...European security has been very well managed by three organizations over the past 60 years – the OSCE, the European Union and NATO..."[13] Meanwhile, the Greek Chairmanship of the OSCE, which followed the Finnish Chairmanship that ran through 2008, established a so-called 'Corfu Process' designed to facilitate "...an open, sustained, wide-ranging and inclusive dialogue on security...", possibly offering an opening for Russian diplomatic officials to persuade the European states to support the proposal for a new European security architecture or else to disarm and defuse the proposal entirely.[14]

By proposing an adjustment to the legal and institutional framework of European security, Russian policymakers had sown confusion amongst the Member States. It could be said that, in the reactions of the French, Finnish and Greek political leaders, one could perceive three different 'camps', for lack of a better term, forming on the proposal. On the one hand, the reaction of President Nicolas Sarkozy reflected a camp that saw the Russian entreaty as a means to further develop and expand European security institutions while also, as it were, resetting relations with Russia after the 2008 war in Georgia. A second camp could be seen as forming behind the remarks by the Finnish Foreign Minister, with these Member States seeing the Russian proposal as altogether unconstructive and regarding it with suspicion. Finally, the third camp that was most discernibly represented by the Greek Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2009 saw the Russian proposal not necessarily as something to welcome with something as significant as an OSCE Summit but also did not immediately dismiss the idea, perhaps wanting to utilize something along the lines of the Corfu Process to examine to what degree Russian policymakers are committed to deeper engagement with the EU.

As the Member States were divided and left in disarray, the punitive measures that followed the failure of Belarusian authorities to facilitate reasonably free and fair presidential elections in 2006 did not follow the European Parliament's condemnation of the lack of protection for human rights defenders in Russia. This could cast doubt on the notion of the EU as a global power or even its potential to achieve such a role in the international community. However, the differences seen in the scenarios of 2006 and 2009 could be explained within the context of Regional Security Complex Theory.

According to this theory, Regional Security Complexes "...[take] the form of subglobal, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence..."[15] Given the vast expanse of Russian territory, it would be difficult to place that state fully within the same Regional Security Complex as the EU and its Member States. Meanwhile, Belarus encompasses a markedly smaller territory and can be said to find itself located within this same 'subglobal pattern of security interdependence' referred to by Buzan and Waever. Furthermore, "simple physical adjacency tends to generate more security interaction among neighbours than among states located in areas..."[16] As Russian territory extends into regions like Central Asia and even the Asia Pacific, where Russian territory is immediately adjacent to Chinese territory, Russian policymakers must incorporate into their decision-making processes not just concerns related to the foreign policy objectives and interests of the EU but also of a multitude of other actors in the international system.

This special nature of the Russian Federation, bestowed by its sheer geographic immensity, not only places the state in a unique situation that limits the influence the EU can exert but could also be said to place the relationship in an unequal context. This inequality may very well have been harnessed by President Dmitri Medvedev in his proposal for a new European security architecture, framing the relationship in such a way as to leave European policymakers with the impression, with some exceptions as evidenced by Alexander Stubb's remarks, that the EU needs Russia more than Russia needs the EU, given that the Russian Federation could serve as a 'conductor' of European influence into multiple Regional Security Complexes.

If Regional Security Complex Theory holds true, then the notion of a global power is one which has limited applicability beyond the realm of political rhetoric. In essence, global powers might simply be those states or state-like actors which have achieved hegemony within their Regional Security Complexes rather than truly powers exerting global dominion over the entire international system. Further to this, "some would argue that China's

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relationship with [North Korea] is driven, to a large extent, by a desire to enhance China's regional and international standing.”[17]

Thus, as the EU grapples with security challenges in the Balkans and to its east, with states like Belarus and Ukraine, China engages in its own regional security struggles, attempting to stabilize the Korean peninsula. Regional Security Complex Theory therefore reveals that the question of whether the EU has the potential to attain the status of a global power is moot, since the EU already has established itself as the hegemon within its own geographic region, but also demonstrates that institutional coordination between the Parliament, Commission and Council is not the principal hurdle to bypass. Rather, the main challenge for the EU will be to stabilize regimes in the European neighbourhood much more successfully and much more rapidly than competitors, like China and India, can manage within their own regions.

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[15] Buzan, Barry & Waever, Ole. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.45

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Date written: May 2011