

Is the European Union a Superpower?

Written by Andrew Clarke

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ANDREW CLARKE, SEP 16 2012

Is Europe a Superpower

“2011 may come to be seen as a turning point for the European Union” (Vaisse & Kundnani, 2012). Given the Eurozone crisis and its global implications, it is perhaps easy to denounce Europe’s successes in the field of foreign policy. Some would argue that the European Union (EU) is no longer in a position to promote its system of governance to emerging powers now that action on the Eurozone is taking precedence in European politics. Coupled with impending defence and development aid budget cuts, Europe’s prestige in international affairs may not recover for some time. However, it is important to not dismiss the European Union as an international actor simply because of the Eurozone crisis. The continent was widely praised for leading the military action in Libya and its action on climate change at the Durban conference. The Union’s main barrier to being seen as a superpower is its difficulty in being able to pursue a grand strategy (Whitman, 2010:24). Given the wide room for disagreement stemming from the differing ideological and national interests of member states, it is increasingly difficult for the European Union to act collectively. Again, the financial crisis has again only exacerbated this tension as member states disagree on fiscal and monetary reforms (Grant, 2012). The purpose of this essay is to provide an analysis of the European Union’s effectiveness abroad whilst providing a critical perspective of the perceived lack of collective action. Through assessing the changing global actors, i.e. the rise of the BRICs and the decline of Britain in Europe, I shall argue that due to the Eurozone crisis – whilst Europe is an effective actor abroad, it has lost much of its credibility, which will take considerable time to recover.

External policy consistency can be difficult for the EU, mainly because of the great spread of the EU’s external relations interests and activities (Nugent, 2010:398). We can still see a divide between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe in terms of ideology – those member states reluctant to match leading countries in terms of military and defence capabilities. This, some would argue, deprives Europe of an ability to respond to crises with ‘organised violence’ (Hill, 2004). Nugent points to several policies in recent years that have fallen victim to this lack of consistency and coherence, including the “inability to give a decisive reaction to Kosovo’s declaration of independence from Serbia in mid-2008” (2010: 397).

This lack of coherence has been most recently exemplified by the increasing gap between Britain and many of the other EU member states as a result of the Eurozone crisis (Grant, 2012). The growing euro scepticism in Britain has been fuelled by claims that the Euro has failed as a currency, that immigration is too high, and that budget cuts mean contributions cannot be made to Europe. This situation, however, has been only worsened by politicians, who are reluctant to promote the benefits of Europe (Grant, 2012). The rising powers, i.e. Brazil, India and China are increasingly reluctant to accept ‘lectures’ from Europe, given public disagreement between member states, and its overall waning influence.

A wider issue with European foreign policy though, is what has been termed its ‘renationalisation’ (Vaisee & Kundnani, 2012). This argues that the bigger member states, i.e. Britain, Germany and France, have worked more to individual aims rather than the most effective policies for the EU as a whole. This was exemplified in the UK’s campaign to block the EEAS, the French diplomatic offensive against Turkey and Germany’s blocking of a larger use of EIB funds in the Middle East (Vaisee & Kundnani, 2012). Even in what was seen as Europe’s big success – the response to the Libya uprising – there was disagreement from Germany, who abstained on the UN Resolution vote.

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Also, many would also argue that although Europe led the invasion, there was a big reliance on US military equipment and assets.

It would be unfair though, to claim that the EU has been completely ineffective due to a lack of collective action. Member States even acknowledge that this is a growing problem and have worked to create institutions and processes for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This shows that efforts are being made in the area and that it is high on the agenda. Conversely though, it could be argued that these efforts have been nothing more than decisions on how to respond to crises, rather than creating strategic partnerships with nations outside of Europe (Whitman, 2010: 25). Whitman argues that an aggregation of the military and economic and diplomatic abilities of the member states is possible, but criticises the lack of a concrete structure for creating such policies (2010: 26). We have seen military co-operation agreement authored between the UK and France (Croft, 2010). However, with the different abilities of the 'old Europe' countries to act militarily, it is perhaps understandable that there have been shortcomings in this field.

When analysing whether Europe can be viewed as a superpower, it is useful to compare to other, existing superpowers. Scholars such as Joseph Nye believe that America is the only superpower. If this is true, then arguably the most important international relationship is that of Europe and the United States of America (US). As the largest trading bloc in the world, Europe is clearly still a significant global actor. Yet, it is important to note that the Eurozone crisis has had an important impact on the Europe-US relationship. Whilst the US is keen to maintain its ties with Europe, it is also reluctant to become too embroiled in the Eurozone situation, due to fears of it destabilising the US recovery, which it already has to a degree, according to some critics (Grant, 2012).

It was less than a decade ago that the relationship between the US and the EU took a significant blow during the Iraq crisis. Arguably one of Europe's greatest assets – having two nations as permanent members of the UN Security Council – was jeopardised after disagreement between Britain and France over responses to Saddam Hussein and the Bush invasion (Hill, 2010:144). But, Obama is seen to hold a more diplomatic view towards Europe, trying to promote collective action between the Member States. Whilst the US and Europe may disagree on national interests and some policies, they are both highly significant actors in global governance with parts to play in each other's policymaking processes (McGuire and Smith, 2008:260). Although the US is anxious about the Eurozone crisis, it is inconceivable at the moment to think that the European Union and America could close off all ties. Both have become interdependent on each other economically and in terms of security (McGuire and Smith, 2008:281).

It is, however, possible to witness a rebalancing of the strategic partnerships, given the rise of new powers – Brazil, Russia, India and China. Particularly the latter, China, is seen to be challenging Europe's multilateral vision in the world (Krastev and Leonard, 2011). With the euro currently in crisis, and the rising powers benefitting from globalisation, Europe is struggling to promote itself as a legitimate role within the global order. This is not to say though, that Europe is being left behind. In fact, it is working to create bilateral ties with the rising powers. This is perhaps not out of choice though. For example, whilst the Eurozone crisis has brought austerity to many European countries, it has become an opportunity for China to purchase assets (Vaisse and Kundnani, 2012). The relationship is not simply an economic one. Together with the US, the EU is working with China in stopping nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea. This approach has largely been collective, which would suggest that there is still room for convergence in European security policy. The fact that the efforts are being led by France, the UK and Germany would suggest again though, that some policies are becoming somewhat nationalised – with Germany abstaining on the UN Resolution regarding Libya but becoming involved in other security matters, it appears to have become a situation in which Member States simply opt-in (Vaisse and Kundnani, 2012).

The EU's relationship with Russia remains to be strong given the economic interdependence. Whilst there has been room for widespread disagreement, for example during the conflict with Georgia, both the EU and Russia acknowledge the need for mutual co-operation. Perhaps the most notable success is Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation which has paved the way for further EU-Russia trade liberalisation. However, there is a perceived concern of a more forceful military policy from Russia after widespread protests in Moscow (Vaisse and Kundnani, 2012).

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Aside from bilateral relationships, the EU is effective as a multilateral actor, having member states in several institutions, including the UN, NATO and the World Trade Organisation. The EU forms a fairly successful bloc in the UN and unites on issues such as trade (Whitman, 2010:27). However, there is again a lack of a clear process and structure for the EU multilaterally. This is shown with the European Commission representing member states at the World Trade Organisation and the lack of collective representation on the United Nations Security Council.

It has been demonstrated that the European Union is a successful international actor, and perhaps this would indicate that it can be considered a superpower. Despite the Eurozone crisis, it is still a significant financial actor as the biggest trade bloc in the world. Given the nature of globalisation, nations are becoming interdependent with the EU. This again would demonstrate that it could be viewed as a superpower. The main problem that the EU faces, however, is a lack of collective action and policy cohesion. This has been demonstrated throughout the evolution of security and military policies which are ineffective for an actor of such sheer size. The Eurozone crisis has only served to exacerbate the tensions between countries, as member states with differing ideologies respond and reform using different methods. Because of this, as well as the rise of other powers, EU influence is perhaps waning (Grant, 2012). However, the EU is still a significant actor in international affairs, as demonstrated by the collective action on Libya. It would perhaps be an overstatement, though, to say that it is a superpower, due to its lack of strategic partnerships with the upcoming BRICs. Perhaps after the European economy has recovered, the attention of policymakers can be recalibrated to look towards a future role of Europe as a superpower.

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Date written: May 2012