NEW ROLES FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS? FRAMEWORKS FOR ANALYSIS AND UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

This paper sets out to introduce the key themes of the Uppsala workshop and to link them with the broader literature of international political analysis. It begins by providing a brief overview of the debates surrounding the EU as an international actor. It then proceeds to identify a number of themes in the literature of international political analysis, which are seen as providing links or cues for the papers to be presented in the workshop. The paper then moves to a consideration of key variables in the analysis of the EU's actions and impacts within the international political arena: how are roles and identities generated, how are they played out and what is their impact, both in particular contexts and on the broader international context? The paper then considers in a more substantive way the implications of these variables for specific areas of EU international activity, and concludes by reassessing the general themes and questions raised.

INTRODUCTION: THE EU AS AN INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

There has been during the past twenty years an almost continuous debate about the nature of the EU as an international actor (Allen and Smith 1990,1998; Bretherton and Vogler, 1999; Hill 1993, 1998; Peterson and Sjursen 1998; H. Smith 2002; K. Smith 2003; White 2001; Whitman 1998; and many more). At one end of the spectrum are those who see the EU as a potential state, or at least the performer of essential state functions in the international political arena. At the other end are those who see the EU as at best a patchy and fragmented international participant, and as little more than a system of regular diplomatic coordination between the Member States. In between, there is a host of more or less exotic approaches dealing with notions such as 'presence', with the links and the tensions between institutionalisation and the generation of more or less collective identities and understandings, and with the specific characteristics of EU actions and impacts in particular issue areas. One
conclusion to be drawn from this analytical heterogeneity is that (to paraphrase Jacques Delors) the EU remains largely an 'unidentified international object' with a rather mercurial existence and impact. Another conclusion to be drawn might be that the EU exists within some of the 'gaps' within the literature of international political analysis, and that this opens the way for some new forms of analysis and understanding. The collection of papers in this workshop is generally based on this latter belief: that there is likely profit and analytical purchase in pursuing new ways of analysing the EU's roles and impact, and that the international impact of the EU itself changes the nature of the international political arena.

This paper is designed to act as a springboard for consideration of the papers within the workshop, by raising a number of analytical and substantive questions about the EU's roles within the international political arena and by posing a number of issues that might inform discussion throughout the workshop. It has to encompass a wide range of analytical and empirical concerns reflected in the papers to follow, and thus it is very unlikely that it will instantly mesh with or complement all of their concerns. But it is hoped that it will provide a stimulus to debate in terms of the focus and the potential cross-fertilisations that might emerge from the week's discussions.

THE CONTEXT IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ANALYSIS

We have deliberately chosen the term 'international political analysis' to frame the discussion in the paper, since we would argue that this is the key concern of the workshop. The term is of course very broadly drawn, but we see it as reflecting our concern with the key question of international politics: 'who whom?' in the international arena. Another way of framing this question is the classic 'who gets what when and how?' at the international political level. These questions imply a subject
and an object of international political activity; they equally imply a political process by which values are distributed and resources allocated or re-allocated. But it would be wrong to draw the conclusion from this that we see these processes as relentlessly materialistic. What we are trying to get at is the long-standing commitment of international political analysis to deal with questions of action and interaction, both at the level of material resources and at the level of ideas. This is of course the subject of much recent debate (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Wendt 1999; others), but it is also one of the key enduring questions in the political analysis book, enabling us to penetrate some major issues in the literature of international political analysis.

One of the key questions that arises is ‘who?’: international political analysis has been continuously concerned with the issues of participation, of legitimacy and of interests or preferences. Traditionally, as we all know, these were explored by reference to only one type of participant: the (nation) state, which was seen as embodying the association between territory, legitimacy and control both of its population and of other assets. More recently, the tendency has been to explore questions of participation with fewer preconceptions: the notion of pluralistic international political arenas and processes, framing the actions of a variety of qualitatively different types of actors, has become a de facto norm for international political analysis. Once the assumption of homogeneity in terms of actor participation and legitimacy is relaxed, questions about rights, rules, responsibilities, interests, identities and norms become markedly more interesting and more complicated to investigate, and thus there is a methodological as well as an empirical challenge implicit in the attempt to explain or to understand participation and impact within a mixed actor universe (Hocking and Smith 1995; Webber and Smith 2002; Young 1972).
This move to pluralism in terms of participation has been paralleled at least in substantial part by the move to pluralism in terms of functional scope. In international political analysis, the move can be summarised as the move from a preoccupation with 'hard power' and 'hard security' to a preoccupation with the 'soft' end of the spectrum: with social and economic activities, with questions of civil society and with the realm of ideas as well as with the realm of hardware and high politics. This has meant that just as there can be no automatic assumptions about the precedence of one type of actor, there can be no automatic assumptions about the centrality of particular forms of the political process. Institutional politics, regulatory politics, the politics of gender and ethnicity, the politics of identity and normative construction generally defined: all of these and more have become the seed-corn of international political analysis (Baylis and Smith 2003; Scholte 1999; others). By shifting the focus not only in terms of participation but in terms of process, the agenda of international political analysis has opened or sometimes re-opened some fundamental issues of a broader societal nature.

Finally, international political analysis has had to wrestle with pluralism of impact. Whereas traditional approaches to the area could at least imply that the impacts that mattered were those between states in a variety of sectors, this has ceased to be the starting point of much international political analysis. Identifying 'winners' and 'losers' is much more difficult in a world where one actor's externalisation is another actor's internalisation, where linkage and leverage are strongly associated and where the impact of social learning and the power of shared understandings are to be given as much prominence as the purposeful strategies of independent states. As a result, there is a strong awareness that new forms of 'result' should be identified in international political analysis, that these have impacts at many different levels and as
much through the shaping of identities and expectations as through the distribution or the redistribution of tangible goods.

These three areas of pluralism, of course, cannot be seen as discrete and independent of each other. A pervasive theme thus runs through all of the areas outlined above: that of interconnectedness, between participants, between functional domains and between types of impact. Within each of the domains identified, the issue of interconnectedness is well-explored and understood, for example in terms of interdependence, of multi-level governance, of institution-building and of social learning; but it is necessary also to focus on the interconnectedness between the domains themselves, and to explore the ways in which participation, functional scope and impact interact to produce international political outcomes (understood not merely as tangible 'results' but also as shifts in understandings and expectations).

What do these new (by now well-established) pluralisms within and across domains of political activity suggest about key themes to be pursued when it comes to investigating roles and impacts in the international political arena? We suggest that the following could shape discussion (although we would not pretend that our list is exhaustive, still less uncontestable).

First, there are questions of resources, capacity and assets. These are of course quite 'traditional' in the broad sense, but they need to be redefined in a pluralistic world. What constitute resources, capacities and assets in the contemporary international political arena? How are they 'discovered' and deployed? What are the costs and the potential payoffs from their deployment?

Second, there are questions about opportunities. A great deal of the writing about contemporary international politics implies that recognition and exploitation of opportunities created by 'gaps' or linkages in the political arena is a key building-
block of roles and impact. But how are the opportunities recognised, how do they link with resources and capacities, how do they relate to the self-understandings of politically significant actors?

Third, we can identify issues of learning, identity, solidarity and legitimacy. This is a cluster of themes that has become much more prominent in the literature of international political analysis since the end of the Cold War, but it does not just apply to the politics of security, however broadly defined. It also appears to apply in large measure to the politics of welfare at the international level and to the international politics of social stability or instability.

Fourth, there is a focus on institutions. One of the key implications of the pluralistic turn in international political analysis is an acute awareness of the importance of institutions. By this is actually meant (it seems to us) a cluster of issues to do with legalisation, with regulation and rule-making and with institutionalisation in the sense of institutional design. Often this process is implicit rather than explicit, but there can be no doubt of its power to affect international political behaviour.

It can fairly readily be seen that these themes have a great deal to do with the generation, the playing and the impact of roles; they provide the incentives, the resources, the opportunities and the structures within which roles can have meaning, and within which identities can be shaped or re-shaped. They relate to the goals, means and structures that are key to an understanding of the generation and performance of roles and the shaping and expression of identities. We would argue also that they lead in the contemporary international political arena to a series of forms of action and patterns of behaviour, which have the effect of magnifying and reinforcing the roles of specific actors. These forms of action and patterns of behaviour can be summarised as follows.
In the first place, there is what can generally be termed collective action: the tendency in international politics to base action on the aggregation of groups (which may reflect a variety of types of actors), with the aim of maximising access and 'voice', resources, leverage and benefits. This is often accompanied by and associated with negotiation: the tendency to pursue aims in international politics through negotiation (often within networks involving a plurality of actor types), which may take the form of institutionalised bargaining but which can take the form of much more fluid processes of problem solving. Third, there are issues around cooperation and multilateralism: the tendency to establish rules and norms of cooperation and multilateralism and for those rules and norms to shape expectations and behaviours, within formal institutional contexts and less formal networks. This in turn can be closely associated with a fourth tendency: the growth of multilevel and linkage politics, which brings with it the tendency to incorporate assumptions about multilevel action and impact into the pursuit of international political objectives, entailing consideration of existential or designed linkages between arenas and preferences. Finally, we can point to norm activity: the tendency to incorporate normative positions into international political activity and to use these not simply as the basis for action but as an evaluative framework in respect of institutional design and other outcomes.

These forms or components of action are not offered here as an exhaustive list, but we would argue that they constitute central elements of contemporary international politics and that they thus demand consideration in relation to the issues of roles and impact that lie at the heart of our concerns in the workshop. They help to define a 'new international politics' which has of course been much debated. Just as importantly for our purposes, they help to frame consideration of the ways in which
the EU can function in the changing international political arena: that is to say, they help us to consider how the EU is different and how it is the same as other international actors in a pluralistic international political context. In order to pursue this exploration of the EU, we focus specifically on the problem of roles and identities, and on the ways in which a consideration of roles and identities might help us to pin down the ways in which the EU is a 'different' type of international actor.

THE EU: ROLES AND IDENTITIES

It is not uncommon to find the concept of ‘role’ in the EU foreign policy literature. It is most often used as a synonym for influence (‘the important role of the EU in international politics’), but sometimes also as an umbrella concept for general patterns of EU policy behaviour. There is seldom, however, a specification of what roles the EU is actually engaged in, and never any reference to role theory (Holsti 1970; Walker 1987, 1992; Le Prestre 1997). Those scholars that do utilise the role concept in a more systematic way (Hill 1990; Bretherton and Vogler 1999) tend to refer, in their categorisations, to a power dimension: to traditional great power roles, linked to position and status (balancer, intervenor, supervisor, patron, global or regional leader), but also to roles that have previously been mostly associated with small states (mentor, model, bridge-builder, mediator, norm entrepreneur). Once again, the distinction between the EU as a military or civil power comes to mind.

In this paper, we argue for explicitly linking role and identity theories to the analysis of EU external action, in the context of the 'new international politics' outlined in earlier parts of the paper. Roles, in our opinion, refer to patterns of expected or appropriate behaviour. Roles are determined by both an actor’s own conceptions about appropriate behaviour and by the expectations, or role prescriptions, of other actors (cf. Holsti 1970: 238-9). Looking at roles in this way, a
direct connection can be made to neo-institutional theory and its emphasis on a ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen 1988). According to this logic, actors behave in the way they believe is expected from them in a particular situation or context. Actors cannot independently decide what roles to play, as roles are also influenced by the expectations of other actors, often linked to positions in social structures. The ‘role-taking side of the equation’ is necessarily combined with a ‘structural, role-constituting’ side (Wendt 1999: 227-8).

Role ‘performance’ refers to how, in what ways, a role is played. Also role performance, the actual behaviour of actors, is influenced by external perceptions of how a certain role should be, has been, and is enacted. Once a role is defined and has become institutionalised, it will act as a constraint, but also as a instrument of empowerment, for the role player. Enacting a role is not something you do mechanically. Roles ordinarily allow for a certain freedom of manoeuvre and interpretation, albeit within limits (Wendt 1999: 227).

Roles are in several ways closely intertwined with identities. In our view, the role conception of an actor constitutes a behaviourally related element of an actor’s identity, linked to its relations with other actors. Roles are thus related to the social identity of an actor (‘sets of meaning that actors attribute to themselves while taking the perspective of others’; Larsen 2003), in contrast to the actor’s intrinsic identity (Jepperson et al. 1998: 59; Kowert and Legro 1998: 475-7; cf. Wendt 1999: 226-7). Role conceptions are sometimes defined in contrast to roles played by certain other actors, or to the ways in which other actors perform a role, thereby reflecting the basic ‘we-and-them’ character of social identities.

Roles are often associated with certain positions (‘great power roles’, ‘presidency roles’) (cf. Holsti 1970: 239-40). ‘The sharing of expectations on which
role identities depend is facilitated by the fact that many roles are institutionalised in social structures that pre-date particular interactions’ (Wendt 1999: 227). Roles may also, however, be connected to the behaviour of an actor in a specified issue-area or in a certain organisational forum. Roles are thus, at least to a certain degree, contextually determined - as are identities. We can therefore expect the EU to perform different roles under different circumstances and in different issue-based contexts (and this would also be suggested by our more general analysis of the 'new international politics'). A major challenge for the workshop is to try to further our understanding of the extent to which context determines roles, and in what ways. Traditionally, the study of how different contexts contribute to the enactment of roles has been the task of organisation theory, while investigation into the initial formation of role conceptions has been the realm of social constructivists (Trondal 2001: 3). In this workshop, we wish to explore how far it is possible to combine these two endeavours.

In order to explain such variety, we need to refer to both internal and external factors (or, in other words, to the supply of and demand for certain roles). Preliminarily, it might be suggested that characteristics of the EU itself, in terms of its actorness (Bretherton and Vogler 1999: 38) are one important explanatory factor. Roles are hypothesised to vary with different combinations of policy coherence, divisions of competencies, access to policy instruments and the clarity of EU goals. Variation may, however, also be linked to external policy context, for example in terms of the negotiation situation at hand or the challenges and opportunities presented by international crisis and change. To take the first case - that of negotiation - EU roles may be different depending on, for example, the power distribution between the negotiators (Elgström and Strømvik 2004) or on the orientation to change of the EU (cf. Meunier 2000). Obviously, EU behaviour may also depend on whether
a certain role, that is perceived to fulfill a necessary function (leadership, mediation, crisis management), is enacted by another actor or not. A role vacuum may encourage an attempt to fill the gap. If two or more actors engage in the same type of activity, role competition may ensue.

The roles of primary interest for studies of EU in the international arena seem to reflect two major dimensions. One is similar to the power-based dimension alluded to above, and essentially mirrors a traditional great power role and a normatively inclined civilian power role, respectively. Under what circumstances, and with what effects, does the EU enact the behavioural patterns often associated with great powers (‘pursuing security and welfare-related goals with coercive policy instruments’)? When, and with what effects, does it play the role of a civil power or norm exporter (‘pushing for value-related goals with soft policy instruments’)? The other relevant dimension is more closely linked to concrete international negotiation or institutionalisation processes, and refers to functions that are commonly carried out in multilateral fora: leadership, mediation, defence of national interests, etcetera. In what contexts, and with what results, can we expect the EU to act as a leader or a mediator, or to primarily act as a defender of material interests? Finally, an analysis of EU role performance should also include observations on how roles are enacted. For example, what type of a leader is the Union in a certain context? How proactive is it (in terms of, for example, taking initiatives within multilateral fora)? Does it engage in negotiations as a problem-solving partner or as a distributive bargainer?

THE EU: A ‘DIFFERENT’ ACTOR IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS?

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the distinctiveness of EU foreign policy is a hotly debated issue. While some scholars underline fundamental
similarities between EU and nation-state foreign policies, a large number of observers tend to emphasise the uniqueness of the EU as an actor in international politics. The notions of the Union as a civilian or normative power bear witness to the latter argument (e.g. Duchene 1972; Hill 1990; Manners 2002; Orbie 2003; Rosecrance 1998); K. Smith 2002). Explicit or implicit comparisons are often made with a traditional great power role, exemplified in today’s world by the US. The EU, goes the argument, differs in important respects from its Atlantic partner. It is unique - to summarise this literature - in the set-up and character of goals and values; in the configuration of political instruments used; and in its peculiar institutional construction.

In this workshop, we aim to investigate the distinctiveness of EU roles, to compare the ways in which the EU perceives itself and is perceived by other actors with the role expectations directed towards other relevant actors, in particular the US, and to contextualise the peculiarities of EU role conceptions and expectations. We hope to explicitly link these considerations to the key themes - resources, opportunities, legitimacy and institutions - and to the major forms of contemporary international action - negotiation, multilateral institution-building, efforts at social influence and multi-level, collective action - identified above.

**EU goals and values**

The most potent argument for a distinct EU external identity refers to the overall pattern of its foreign policy objectives. Many of the EU’s objectives are, it is argued, ‘milieu goals’, rather than ‘possession goals’ (K. Smith 2002; M Smith 2004; the terms are from Wolfers 1962). While possession goals are linked to national interests, primarily security, milieu goals aim to shape the environment in which the
actor operates. The normative ambitions of the EU, exemplified by the inclusion of normative conditions in most of its international agreements, demonstrate its conscious efforts to shape its environment. They simultaneously distinguish it from the US, which is claimed to be more focussed on threats to its security (Daalder 2001). Manners (2002) explains the EU’s emphasis on universal norms and principles by pointing to a combination of factors relating to its historical context, its legal foundation and its hybrid forms of governance.

This export of values is based on what Manners calls the EU’s normative basis (Manners 2002). He argues that it is possible to identify five ‘core norms’ from the *acquis communautaire* and the *acquis politique*: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights. Similarly, Karen Smith (2002, 2003) analyses why and how the EU specifically pursues the promotion of human rights, the prevention of conflicts and regional cooperation. It is, however, much more difficult to argue that the EU is unique in promoting such individual objectives, as it is eminently clear that the US, and many other states, share and pursue similar goals. So it is rather the vague notion that the EU ‘so far has represented something different from states in the international system in that it has not been an actor that only is guided by its self-interest’ (Sjursen 2002: 15) that possibly makes the EU special. To specify the reasons for, the nature of and the effects of this overall pattern is a key challenge for this workshop.

**EU policy instruments**

The case seems to be stronger for arguing that the EU is unique owing to its peculiar configuration of foreign policy instruments. Whitman (1998: 235) even claims that the international identity of the EU may be conceived in terms of the instruments available to the Union. In the literature on the EU as a civilian power, attention has
primarily been paid to the use of economic and diplomatic instruments (in contrast to the traditional use of military instruments). In more recent literature, the limelight is rather on persuasion and positive incentives (rather than coercion) and on constructive engagement (rather than isolation) (Orbie 2003; K. Smith 2002). Efforts to exert social influence in terms of shaming and opprobrium (cf. Johnston 2001) are other tools frequently used. Indeed, the EU is sometimes said to be unique due to the wide variety of instruments at the EU’s disposal. It can rely on a much wider range of policy instruments than any other actor (cf. Hill 1990; K. Smith 2002), and use this to its advantage, for example in conflict prevention (Björkdahl 2002).

Civilian powers are commonly assumed to focus more on multilateral cooperation than traditional military powers (Orbie 2003). This is indeed also a feature that has been asserted to distinguish the EU from the US. The EU not only encourages regional cooperation in other parts of the world, it also relies on multilateralism to resolve conflicts, rather than on unilateral measures (Orbie 2003; cf. Rosecrance 1998) and to support global and regional institution-building.

The configuration of policy instruments claimed to define EU uniqueness demonstrate close resemblance to the forms of action that we suggest constitute central elements of contemporary international politics (see above). Social influence is intimately linked to negotiation processes. The EU is heavily involved in institution-building and in establishing rules and norms of multilateral cooperation. It is engaged in linkage politics to further its normative ambitions. How these forms of action are connected to roles and impact is a central concern of this workshop.
The EU’s institutional construction

The EU governance system, with its mix of supranational and international elements, is usually seen as a problem for constructing and executing a consistent and coherent foreign policy (see, e.g., Zielonka 1998; H. Smith 2002: 1-7). ‘Euro-paralysis’ (Zielonka 1998) is thus linked to diverging and conflicting national interests among member states, to weak institutions with competing objectives and to an unclear division of competence between different actors. But the peculiar institutional set-up of the Union can also be seen as an advantage and as contributing to EU distinctiveness. Whitman (1998: 235) refers to the ‘distinctive nature’ provided by the EU legal order and by its decision-making structure, and K. Smith (2002, 2003) proposes that the EU has externalised some of the principles and rationales that guide its internal relations, like the rule of law and the domestication of inter-state relations. Manners (2002: 240) underlines the ‘particular new and different form of hybridity’ as one of the factors that makes the EU normatively different. Laffan et al. (2000: 189) suggest that it is the ‘experimental and innovative nature of the EU that enables it to respond to multiple agendas and Europe’s diversity in a flexible manner’.

EU decision makers are used to handling complex multi-level negotiations and processes of policy formation from their internal arena. Being itself a network organisation, the EU is particularly well-equipped to grasp and utilise the potential of multilateral network negotiations (Elgström and Strömvik 2004); being itself an expression of multi-level and interconnected political processes, it is well-equipped to recognise and respond to opportunities for the pursuit of these processes at the international level. As international political processes are increasingly characterised by fluidity, complexity and multi-level games, and as actors cannot always rely on
traditional power assets in these arenas, the EU’s potential as an international actor may well increase.

The EU institutional set-up and its relationship to roles and impact in different contexts are thus a third focus of attention of this workshop. Does the EU institutional construct encourage proactiveness or passivity? Does it encourage problem-solving or bargaining modes of negotiation? How does the EU’s internal complexity relate to the management of international complexity, and to the understanding of the EU's potential impact on processes of international institutional construction? As argued earlier in the paper, such questions are central not only to an understanding of the EU’s international role(s) but also to the furthering of international political analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

In a sense, of course, there are no conclusions to this paper, since it is explicitly designed to raise questions: first, about the changing nature of international political analysis and of ‘the political’ in the global arena; second, about the ways in which the changing nature of the international political context intersects with the evolving nature and behaviour of the European Union. So it might be best to express the conclusions here as a set of questions:

- First, is the treatment of international political analysis advanced in the first part of the paper a valid basis for constructing an analysis of the EU’s roles in international politics? Is there more that should be said, or are there things that should not be said in the way that they currently are?
- Second, does the identification of goals, means and structures and of actions and behaviour patterns in the second part of the paper provide the right sorts of tools
and questions with which to approach the papers in the rest of the workshop? Are there questions that need sharpening, adding, deleting?

- Third, does the treatment of roles and identities in the later parts of the paper provide a sound basis for investigating the EU’s roles in international politics, and does the analysis identify the appropriate elements in the EU’s role development and role performance as context for the exploration of later papers in the workshop?

Beyond this, we will leave it to the workshop itself to provide at least some answers. We hope that this paper provides the stimulation and provocation which will help us to shape discussions and reach some revised conclusions at the end of the week!
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