

Where Europe Leads, the World Follows: Positioning the European Union as a Global Superpower

Submission to the Schuman Challenge Essay Contest of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Delegation of the European Union to Canada

Alexandra Chronopoulos
MA Candidate, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs
Carleton University

Word Count: 1,771

1 October 2021

Whether or not the European Union (EU) can be defined as a global power depends upon the dimension of power being examined. Hard power, as traditionally delineated by military size and strength, is perhaps the prevailing indicator in the post-Second World War realist world order dominated by the United States. By contrast, soft power can be measured using a number of indicators including, but not limited to, economics, regulation, policy coordination, culture, institutions, and norms. Since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the EU has proven itself to be a sound global power capable of holding its own. Moreover, it can be argued that the EU is more than simply a global power, but rather a superpower and heir apparent to the Pax Americana in the increasingly pluralistic liberal international order. By both traditional measures—hard, military power—and soft power indicators, the EU performs on par with, or in some cases outperforms, the United States and trails far ahead of the emerging BRICS countries. Indeed, this “invisible superpower”¹ has proven itself a stable and predictable power able to evolve and adapt in an age wrought with political atrophy and instability, navigate the treacherous waters of a world in transition, and defend and uphold the liberal world order, underscoring Kissinger’s sentiment that a “reputation for reliability is a more important asset than the demonstrations of tactical cleverness”.²

Military Might: Examining the EU’s Hard Power

Military power is typically defined as a state’s ability to project coercive force to compel others to acquiesce to its demands, political or otherwise. While the EU’s military power does not match that of the United States, there are a number of other indicators used to measure military power in which the EU matches and in some cases surpasses the United States. The conventional measurement for military capability is annual defence spending, which is led by the United States whose spending accounts for approximately 40.7 per cent of global military spending.³ In second place is the collective spending of the EU, which accounts for approximately 12.6 per cent of global military spending, and is ahead of China (10.7 per cent) and Russia (2.4 per cent).⁴ While the United States spends more, the value of the weapons that the EU procures is more competitive than any other state given that the EU ranks as the world’s pre-eminent arms exporter.⁵ Further, the proportion of defence spending greatly understates the

¹ Andrew Moravcsik, “Europe is Still a Superpower and it’s Going to Remain One for Decades to Come,” *Features, Foreign Policy*, 13 April 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

² Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 73.

³ “International comparisons of defence expenditure and military personnel,” *The Military Balance* 121, no. 1 (2021): 517, accessed 28 September 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003177777>.

⁴ “International comparisons of defence expenditure,” *The Military Balance*, 517-522.

⁵ Moravcsik, “Europe is Still a Superpower,” <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

military advantages the EU enjoys, which include: investments in stocks of defence technology, material, training, inter-generational experience, and enduring alliances amongst the 27 member states, NATO, and with the United States itself.⁶ Europe, much like the United States, maintains an entrenched network of security partnerships and alliances with dozens of countries and bases around the world, unlike Russia or China who have few allies upon whom they can call.

Undoubtedly, the EU wields hard military power just as deftly as the United States, as evidenced by a string of defence and security policy decisions. As of 2020, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) has been activated, enabling member states to pursue greater defence cooperation; the European Defence Fund has been created and funds from the EU budget have been dedicated to collective military spending; the European Defence Fund will support capability development with €13 billion over seven years; and ahead of the next seven-year budget cycle, the EU has proposed €30 billion in common funding for defence-related initiatives.⁷

The Power of Persuasion: Examining the EU's Soft Power

Military might may have been in vogue a century ago as the pre-eminent tool of global power, but states today—especially Europeans—are skeptical of its use because of its expense and uncertainty relative to potential gains. Indeed, there has been no direct conflict between great powers since the Korean War.⁸ As such, countries today turn to other tools of statecraft, the most important of which is economic power projection, which the EU wields masterfully. As of 2020, the EU's collective nominal GDP sat at approximately \$15 trillion USD, making it the second largest economy behind the United States but ahead of China and India.⁹ Looking beyond GDP, the EU also maintains the world's largest multinational single market, is the world's largest trader of goods and services, and the world's leading foreign investor.¹⁰ Such superlatives combined with the raw size of its economy grant the EU a number of superpower-esque privileges, namely manipulating access to its markets, conditioning economic assistance and

⁶ Moravcsik, "Europe is Still a Superpower," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

⁷ Enrique Barón Crespo and Pelayo Castro Zuzuárregui, "The European Union: A Sound Superpower in a Multipolar World," in *The Difficult Task of Peace*, ed. F. Rojas Aravena (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 194-195, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21974-1_8

⁸ Moravcsik, "Europe is Still a Superpower," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

⁹ "GDP (current US\$) – United States, European Union, China, India," World Bank National Accounts Data, The World Bank, accessed 29 September 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US-EU-CN-IN>.

¹⁰ Moravcsik, "Europe is Still a Superpower," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

exchange, exploiting regulatory and institutional dominance,¹¹ negotiating as a bloc at the WTO maintaining its status as a principal force alongside the United States,¹² and upholding the world's largest network of trade agreements building perhaps the world's largest free trade network with 45 agreements spanning 76 countries.¹³ The euro also remains the most viable global currency next to the dollar. Moreover, this economic power projection is stable despite the EU's sluggish demographic growth. The linear relationship between population growth, GDP, and global power is an relic of centuries past; today, large populations are "national overhead costs"¹⁴ that detract from a state's ability to provide economic growth, social mobility, and public services. Indeed, with such burdensome populations, a robust military and active foreign policy are luxury goods. The EU and its relatively small population permits it to enjoy a high per capita GDP (which is equal to 282 per cent of the world's average),¹⁵ allowing it to provide its citizens the protections and growth they demand whilst also being able to maintain its military and foreign policy objectives.

Undoubtedly, the EU is the world's regulatory superpower as a result of its size and governance. In recent years, its ability to fine Google, force Apple to repay billions in unpaid taxes, and investigate Cambridge Analytica and Facebook¹⁶ is a testament to the Brussels Effect,¹⁷ which forces the EU's trading partners to adopt high European product standards and ultimately exert vast political influence by unilaterally regulating the world's markets.

While the EU is not a single sovereign state, in practice it acts as a single force on the world stage thanks to its cohesive policy coordination. While many criticize the EU for being too decentralized to wield substantial global power, the facts suggest otherwise: EU member states share a formal mandate to cooperate despite serious disagreements, which countries often resolve through constructive abstention; while the EU does not mandate uniformity, governments often form "coalitions of the willing" to push through policy; and given the bloc's convergent national laws, strategies, and interests, compatible and mutually reinforcing policies are the norm.¹⁸ Accession into the EU is perhaps the bloc's most powerful and cost-effective policy instrument

¹¹ Moravcsik, "Europe is Still a Superpower," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

¹² Andrew Moravcsik, "Europe: The quiet superpower," *French Politics* 7 (2009): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fp.2009.29>.

¹³ Crespo and Zuzúarregui, 188.

¹⁴ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2009): 97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i20699428>.

¹⁵ Crespo and Zuzúarregui, 187.

¹⁶ Crespo and Zuzúarregui, 189.

¹⁷ Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 25.

¹⁸ Moravcsik, "Europe is Still a Superpower," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.

for spreading peace and security that has helped stabilize dozens of neighbouring states. Even despite internal threats (the rise of populism and Brexit) and external grievances (instability in Russia, the Middle East, and North Africa), the pendulum continues to swing in the EU's favour, as member states know that in a world of uncertainty, a united bloc is the only viable option to foster prosperity and collective solutions.

An integral part of the EU's soft power is its construction and support of multilateral institutions that are attractive to join. The EU itself is one such example, and others such as the UN, ICC, and the WTO would arguably not exist in their current form without European influence. The EU has effectively swayed global dynamics through these institutions by imposing conditionality in exchange for membership or collectively rewarding compliance.

The EU's influence extends well beyond its borders and the borders of established, democratic states. Indeed, European social and political models are more attractive to burgeoning democracies than American alternatives, as noted by leading legal scholars who have observed that third wave democracies increasingly adopt European elements of governance into their constitutions. This is largely because the constituents of most states favour the European pillars of generous social welfare and health policies, parliamentary government, adherence to international human rights, and a small role for money in politics.¹⁹ In projecting this level of civil influence, the EU clearly has the comparative advantage over the world's other leading players, including the United States and China, and over rising powers like India and Brazil.

Nevertheless, the EU's power does not stop there. Europe is a champion of social peace as the world's leading donor of developmental assistance and the largest importer of goods from least-developed countries;²⁰ it is home to some of the largest infrastructure networks in the world, facilitating its economic growth and domestic cohesion;²¹ it wields mass scientific and innovative power, particularly through Horizon 2020 which maintains a budget of nearly €80 billion over seven years to fund the world's largest research and innovation program.²² European art, culture, and traditions are not relegated to its quaint boulevards and pedestrian streets, but are binding agents of cohesion and attraction internally and abroad: in just under three decades EU membership has increased from six to 28 states (pre-Brexit) with the prospect of accession extended to countries in the Western Balkans; Europe educates more foreign students than any

¹⁹ Moravcsik, "Europe: The quiet superpower," 413.

²⁰ Crespo and Zuzúárregui, 190.

²¹ Crespo and Zuzúárregui, 190.

²² "What is Horizon 2020?," Horizon 2020, European Commission, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/what-horizon-2020>.

other country; and pursues an active neighbourhood policy to diplomatically intervene in surrounding regions to resolve conflict, promote economic and political reform, and further extend its influence. Looking to the past, Europe was for many decades the only Western body communicating with Tehran, responsible for negotiating the ceasefire in Georgia, and shouldering the financial burden of sanctions on Russia. Looking to the future, it is clear that the EU will play an essential role in a Palestinian settlement, cement its role as a leading diplomatic force in Africa, and an important ally to Latin America.²³

As the world becomes increasingly multipolar, the idea that the global order must be dominated by a single hegemon else perish in Thucydides' Trap is an anachronism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, the EU has and continues to wield as much power and influence, regionally and globally, as the United States and other rising powers, such that it not only enjoys the title of global power, but indeed superpower. Europe has its problems, not least of which is the existential threat of populism and moving on from Brexit. And while Brexit weakened Europe, it also presented a source of strength, underscoring to Europeans that their internal interdependence is paramount to their existence. Ultimately, the EU is neither a romanticized ideal of liberalists, nor a failed experiment of realists. The EU is *realpolitik*. Its military prowess combined with its civilian capabilities paint the EU as a full-spectrum power and a realist product of European self-interest, coming of age in a world of giants in which to compete, one must be a giant themselves.

²³ Moravcsik, "Europe: The quiet superpower," 410.

Works Cited

- Bradford, Anu. *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Crespo, Enrique Barón and Zuzuárregui, Pelayo Castro. “The European Union: A Sound Superpower in a Multipolar World.” In *The Difficult Task of Peace*, edited by F. Rojas Aravena, 171-202. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21974-1_8.
- “GDP (current US\$) – United States, European Union, China, India.” World Bank National Accounts Data. The World Bank. Accessed 29 September, 2021. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US-EU-CN-IN>.
- “International comparisons of defence expenditure and military personnel.” *The Military Balance* 121, no. 1 (2021): 5-525. Accessed 28 September 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003177777>.
- Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2015.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. “Europe is Still a Superpower and it’s Going to Remain One for Decades to Come.” Features. *Foreign Policy*, 13 April 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/13/europe-is-still-a-superpower/>.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. “Europe: The quiet superpower.” *French Politics* 7 (2009): 403-422. Accessed 28 September 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fp.2009.29>.
- Slaughter, Anne-Marie. “America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century.” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2009): 94-113. Accessed 28 September 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i20699428>.
- “What is Horizon 2020?.” Horizon 2020. European Commission. Accessed 30 September 2021. <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/what-horizon-2020>.