The EU as an International Actor: Unique or Ordinary?

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Abstract. It is often argued that the EU is a peculiar if not unique international actor. Unlike other major actors, it is a largely civilian power promoting universal norms in its vast neighbourhood and beyond. This article will test this proposition by comparing the EU’s external policy to those of the United States, China and Russia. Five variables will be examined: (1) international aspirations and self-images; (2) governance form and structure; (3) means of governance; (4) borders and the scope of governance; and (5) centre-periphery relations. The article will conclude that all four actors share certain important characteristics. They all represent huge territorial units with sizable power resources across various fields. They all consciously apply these power resources to influence if not manipulate domestic politics in their respective peripheries. They all justify their power politics by reference to noble norms and values. But because of its peculiar governance system, fuzzy borders and predominantly civilian policy means, the EU practices its politics differently from the three other actors considered here.

I Introduction

It is often argued that the EU is a peculiar if not unique international actor. Unlike other major actors it is a largely civilian power promoting universal norms in its vast neighbourhood and beyond. This article will test this proposition by comparing the EU’s external policy to those of the United States, China and Russia. The United States, China and Russia represent three types of Europe’s ‘other’: actors whose characteristics are said to be antithetical to those of the EU, albeit for different reasons. However, the article will conclude that all four actors also share certain important characteristics. They all represent huge territorial units with sizable power resources across various fields. They all consciously
apply these power resources to influence if not manipulate domestic politics in their respective peripheries. They all justify their power politics by reference to noble norms and values. And they all claim to be very special if not unique. Of course, the four actors in question also differ, and these differences have an important impact on the way they practise power politics. For instance, the article will show that Europe’s polycentric system of governance is better suited to creating institutional structures and setting up rules of legitimate behaviour than to swift and bold power projection abroad. Identifying and explaining a set of similarities and differences between these four actors is the main objective of this article.

1. Research Framework

The comparative analysis proposed here is seldom employed in the field of international relations, and as Simon Hix has discovered, its use has also been contested in the field of European politics. At the centre of the controversy is the issue of statehood. Unlike China, Russia or the United States, the EU is not a state, but a kind of ‘unidentified political object’ to use Jacques Delors’ expression. Is it fair to compare the EU to individual states? Are we not trying to compare ‘stones and monkeys’?

The Union indeed lacks some of the essential structural features of a state. It has no effective monopoly over the legitimate means of coercion. It has no clearly defined centre of authority. Its territory is not fixed. Its geographical, administrative, economic and cultural borders diverge. It is a polity without a coherent demos, a power without an identifiable purpose, and a geopolitical entity without defined territorial limits. The European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) can also be seen as a misnomer because EU Member States are allowed to act outside the EU framework, as in fact they frequently do, either through formal international organizations or informal coalitions of the willing, contact groups and bilateral initiatives.

However, one wonders whether the notion of stateness can effectively be employed to undermine the credentials of any comparative analysis. To start with, the notion of stateness is quite hazy and not always helpful. The United States, Russia and China are all states, but they are all very different, if not

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unique in their own particular ways. Iceland, Sudan and Costa Rica are also states but clearly in a different league from the United States, Russia and China. When it comes to power politics, the EU is certainly in the same league as the United States, Russia and China and should be judged in similar ways.\(^5\) It is enough to pay a visit to some parts of the Balkans, Eastern Europe or North Africa to see that this distinctive ‘unidentified political object’ can exercise power as skilfully as any fully fledged state. In fact, there is a growing body of literature arguing that the EU resembles a kind of empire, whether post-modern, cosmopolitan, normative or neo-medieval.\(^6\) China, Russia and the United States are also frequently seen as empires.\(^7\) This article will not try to prove that all or only some of the four actors examined are indeed empires. Such a task is largely futile if only because there is no commonly accepted definition of ‘empire’.\(^8\) However, using the concept of empire suggests that the Union shares certain important characteristics with other powerful international actors and thus legitimizes comparisons. As Giovanni Sartori put it: ‘The comparisons in which we sensibly and actually engage are thus the ones between entities whose attributes are in part shared (similar) and in part non-shared (and thus, we say, incomparable)’.\(^9\) Drawing a map of similarities and differences between the four major actors is likely to enhance our knowledge about the current international system and about the role of the EU in this system (see Table 1 at the end of this article).

Moreover, a research agenda focused on empires invites us to consider factors that are often seen in a different light by international relations’ scholars, when not ignored altogether. For instance, studies of empires demand a focus on such variables as the scope and structure of governance, the nature of borders, centre-periphery relations or respective civilizing missions. This is because empires, unlike classical Westphalian states, do not necessarily possess pyramidal governance within fixed borders. They treat neighbours as peripheries with disregard for their formal sovereign status. And they believe that their imperial policies are

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guided by universal norms and values rather than selfish national interests. With this in mind, we propose focusing on five (comparable) variables: (1) international aspirations and self-images; (2) governance form and structure; (3) means of governance; (4) borders and the scope of governance; and (5) centre-periphery relations. Of course, in a single article each of these variables can only receive a synthetic and inevitably incomplete treatment. The objective here is to engage in preliminary, but comprehensive, comparisons and see whether these comparisons offer any meaningful insights for understanding the EU’s ‘external’ behaviour.

II International Aspirations and Self-Images

All four actors under consideration have noble aspirations and see themselves as agents of peace and development, not only in their respective peripheries but also in the world. In this sense, the EU is certainly not unique. American ambitions are more global than in the case of the EU, Russia and China. The US normative agenda is also framed in more universal terms to make it suited for application in various cultural and geographic contexts. As President Bush stated on the eve of the invasion of Iraq: ‘We are serving in freedom’s cause – and that is the cause of all mankind’. 11

The universalism of the American ‘project’ stems from the widespread belief among the American establishment, from both left and right, that all people are born to be like Americans, that they are all safer under the United States’ hegemony, and that the surest way for them to progress is to embrace the American model of a capitalist economy. They see America as an ‘indispensable nation’ maintaining global order and possessing an economic project congruent with the deeper forces of modernization. The current economic crisis has not undermined US self-confidence if only because other powers have not attempted to exploit American weakness or offer a plausible alternative to the American model. Besides, those who do not share the US normative agenda are quickly reminded of America’s formidable power in all its dimensions. In fact, American leaders repeatedly argue that the reason they never cease to augment their power is to maintain their ability to save the world from the enemies of freedom and capitalism. One cannot do any good without power, it is argued, and by extension ‘might is right’. As John Ikenberry put it: ‘The United States makes

its power safe for the world and in return the world agrees to live within the American-led international order’. 13

European leaders have much less confidence in the universal application of their model. This is partly because of the colonial experience that taught them to appreciate the importance of cultural variety and partly because of the traumatic legacy of various European wars. Europeans tend therefore to claim technocratic or institutional superiority. They may well insist that their norms are right, but unlike the Americans Europeans are not in a position to claim: ‘might is right!’

Chinese leaders, like European ones, feel superior in cultural terms, but they are haunted by the historical memory of failure. 14 Thanks to the ‘Mandate from Heaven’, China was able to create and sustain for ages one of the greatest civilizations in human history. However, the last two centuries, in particular, have generated ‘a dishonourable inferiority’ complex. The impressive economic growth of recent years has clearly boosted Chinese confidence, but China does not ask other countries to emulate its own model. It presents itself as a ‘responsible power’ that deserves respect and equal treatment from other powers. 15 Chinese leaders are focused predominantly inwards and view China’s own success in fostering economic and social development as their greatest contribution to the world at large.

Russian leaders are clearly frustrated by the loss of geopolitical reach following the collapse of the Soviet Union. 16 They still feel masters in their own periphery, but competition from other powers in what used to be their exclusive domain gets tougher by the day. To keep their influence they must rely on their military power and skilful use of energy resources. But they are annoyed by repeated rebuffs of their ‘security guarantees’, and ‘exploitation’ of their energy resources by the peripheral states. Like China, Russia demands respect from other powers, but her definition of respect implies a special treatment as evidenced by her insistence on participation in the G-8. Russia fiercely refuses to see herself as a ‘rogue state’ misusing its enormous military power. 17


Even the particularly heavy handed treatment of the Chechen resistance has been described by the Russians as an effort to combat terrorism and Muslim extremism.\textsuperscript{18} Military interventions outside Russia’s borders were termed ‘peace keeping missions’ necessary to restore order and to safeguard the lives of vulnerable ethnic Russians. Contemporary Russian discourse makes frequent reference to the enlightenment heritage of Catherine II and Alexander I.\textsuperscript{19} It describes Russia as a stabilizing and pacifying power centre, taming the barbarian forces of chaos, nationalism and religious fundamentalism in its backyard, with positive implications for all of Europe and the world.\textsuperscript{20}

The United States also sees itself as a stabilizing and pacifying power centre, but its objectives are more ambitious, if not revolutionary in some cases. The United States tries to promote freedom and democracy even in such countries as Iraq and Afghanistan. It does not hesitate to topple individual rulers and orchestrate the overhaul of their regimes. The EU ‘does not do regime change’, by its own admission, but it ‘does system change’.\textsuperscript{21} This also sounds revolutionary, but in fact the ambition is much more reformist: the EU tries gradually to reform the periphery through economic and legal engineering. Its objectives are more technical than ideological. The emphasis is on the rule of law, good governance and integration, even though it is hoped that these will in turn secure democracy and protect human rights.

China’s officially proclaimed objectives are also not particularly modest: building a ‘harmonious world’ of lasting peace and common prosperity.\textsuperscript{22} However, it is clear that contemporary China no longer wants to spread the proletarian revolution around the world according to Chairman Mao’s blueprint. On the contrary, China tries to reassure other states that its ever-growing power represents a net benefit rather than a threat to them.\textsuperscript{23}

Many Chinese are fond of arguing that China’s current ambition to foster harmonious coexistence reflects its long-standing cultural tradition, featuring ‘unity and diversity’ (\textit{he er Butong}) and ‘priority to peace’ (\textit{he wei gui}). Unity

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} J. Hughes, \textit{Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
  \item \textsuperscript{19} A. Nowak, \textit{History and Geopolitics: A Contest for Eastern Europe} (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Miedzynarodowych, 2008), 201–234.
\end{itemize}
based on diversity is indeed a Confucian concept. Confucius and his followers such as Mencius or Xunzi believed that differences can be maintained in harmony. Rather than arguing for imposing one’s rules or culture onto others, they advocated leading by example, not through domination and the use of force. In their view, China could help ‘barbarians’ to civilize themselves by the appeal of its universal culture and the attraction of its administrative model. Contemporary Chinese will admit that China has also a tradition that rests on force rather than benevolence. But ‘legalism’ imposing draconian laws by impersonal bureaucracy is ill-suited to the current age of globalization, they argue. This is why China has changed its course and endorsed the concept of the ‘harmonious world’ based on respect for other actors and moral values.

There are probably few Confucians among the EU’s top officials, but ‘united in diversity’ is now their official motto. Moreover, contemporary Europeans, like their Chinese counterparts, believe that the EU possesses the power of attraction, especially among its neighbours. They also want Europe to lead by example and not by force; as David Miliband put it: ‘The EU will never be a superpower, but could be a model power’. As the case of China shows, the EU is not unique in this particular ambition. Unlike China, the EU has an ambition to spread democracy and human rights; but as mentioned earlier, in this sense America’s proclaimed aims are similar. And Russia, like the EU, would like to be seen as a stabilizing force in Europe embracing multilateralism at least in the rhetorical sense. (Russians are always ready to point out that Europe’s endorsement of multilateralism can also be rhetorical as evidenced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Kosovo without a UN mandate).

This means that if one wants to find examples of the EU’s normative uniqueness one needs to look at very specific values endorsed by the current EU. For instance, unlike the United States, Russia and China, the EU campaigns against the death penalty. However, one wonders whether this kind of example makes the EU a genuinely unique international actor. Let me therefore search for other possible unique characteristics of the EU, starting with a comparison of governance form and structure.

III Governance Form and Structure

The EU, Russia and China govern much more diversified polities than is the case with the United States. However, only the EU has a ‘plurilateral’ or ‘polycentric’ structure of governance. Governance of the other three is hierarchical.29 Both the United States and Russia are federal states with a strong centre, while the EU is a kind of post-modern (or neo-medieval) polity with no single centre of government. China is formally a unitary state, but with a varied degree of autonomy for some of its provinces, especially in the field of trade. While the central government makes crucial decisions, the provinces have substantial powers in implementing them. In recent years, many Chinese provinces, especially in the coastal areas, have sought to develop their own relations with other states and the central Chinese authority has shown a lack of coordination capacity. There is also a considerable degree of territorial devolution of power in the United States, but in the final analysis the governance structures of Russia, China and the United States resemble a pyramid.

Centralization in the United States, China and Russia is particularly pronounced in the field of foreign policy and defence. The US president is the sole commander-in-chief, and he runs foreign policy with limited input from Congress.30 Foreign and defence policy in Russia and China are also centralized, even though it is not totally clear whether the ultimate decisions in Russia are currently being made by the Prime Minister or the President. (The latter has major constitutional prerogatives in these fields). In China, the President is also the General Secretary of the Communist Party which de facto controls state institutions.

The EU governance structure is totally different. Here decisions concerning foreign and defence issues are taken by twenty-seven sovereign states, usually on the principle of unanimity. The President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty have no powers to take key decisions on behalf of the Member States. The coherence of the EU decision-making system is further undermined by the so-called ‘pillar structure’, which separates trade and economics from foreign and security policy.

These differences in governance structure have serious implications for the respective foreign and defence policies of the four actors considered. For instance, the EU is unable to have any distinct international strategy, US or Russian style. Strategy demands the ability to set clear objectives and an application of means to meet these objectives. In the EU decisions are subject to the lowest common denominator. Moreover, the link between policy means and ends

is largely missing: the CFSP has very few policy instruments at its disposal. These are either to be found in the first pillar of the Union or outside the Union structure altogether.

This polycentric system of governance hampers Europe’s efforts to project power abroad in a strategic manner. However, it does help the Union to diffuse internal conflicts over foreign affairs (and this is one of the EU’s most important tasks). Moreover, the lack of clear strategy makes Europe less vulnerable to accusations of pursuing selfish ambitions at the expense of others. This is why Europe, unlike America, Russia and China, is viewed as a benign actor. The complex intergovernmental bargaining process required for EU decisions prevents it from taking some bold and swift actions, but it also ensures that the Union does not take precipitous actions that it would later regret. (It is difficult, for example, to imagine the Union taking a unanimous decision to invade Iraq or Georgia).

A centralized governance system helps the United States, Russia and China to project its power in an instrumental fashion, but it hampers deliberation and constrains the participation of important domestic actors. This has repeatedly caused serious problems for Russia and China, not only because they lack the American system of checks-and-balances, but also because they govern a very pluralistic polity in both ethnic and economic terms. Centralized governance helps actors to ‘bribe’ and punish reluctant foreign states, conduct secret negotiations and manipulate international institutions. Polycentric governance is more suited to creating institutional structures and setting up rules of legitimate behaviour. Centralized governance allows actors to function as an effective fire brigade when problems erupt abroad, while polycentric governance helps create a structural environment conducive to peace and cooperation. Ideally actors would like to have it both ways, but in practice this is difficult. After all crude manipulators cannot act as honest brokers.

IV Means of Governance

These observations are reinforced by the asymmetrical policy means at the disposal of our four actors. Most notably, the United States, China and Russia have a formidable military power, while the EU is basically a civilian power trying to shape the external environment by trade and ‘preaching’. Of course, the United States also uses its formidable economic power and cultural appeal to meet its objectives. However, unlike the EU, the United States always assumes that the military force can be used when economic and cultural diplomacy fails to produce the desired objectives.  

31 See the special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 169–327.
Russia is primarily a military power and a rather mediocre economic force despite its sizable oil and gas resources. Russia’s nuclear arsenal is still on a par with the United States. Russian soldiers are still stationed in Moldova and Georgia, severely constraining the domestic options of these formally sovereign states. Russia also has military installations in four other former Soviet republics: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine (where her Black Sea Fleet is based at Sebastopol in the Crimea). China, like the EU, is primarily an economic power. However, unlike the EU, China was able to implement double-digit increases to its defence budget for the last two decades, placing a growing emphasis on air, maritime and strategic missile capabilities.

Over the last decade the EU has also acquired military capability and it has become involved in several military or civilian-military operations in no fewer than three continents. There has also been a proliferation of various EU military institutions such as its Military Committee, Military Staff and the European Defence Agency. However, these institutions remain small, if not purely symbolic, while individual EU missions have involved only very small contingents of soldiers. True, more than 50,000 soldiers from EU Member States have served in recent international operations, but currently the Union has only three so-called Battle Groups on standby, each of around 1,500 personnel.

The United States, in contrast, has a truly unprecedented level of military power. It has more than 700 military installations located in over 130 countries worldwide. The Pentagon’s budget is equal to the combined military budgets of the next twelve or fifteen states. This gives the United States a unique technological superiority over the military of other states by air, land and sea. The United States does not just possess this military power, but also quite frequently uses it. Currently the United States sustains two large military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (although its combat forces have just been withdrawn from Iraq). It also regularly attacks military or even civilian targets in different parts of the world in pursuit of suspected terrorists. Russia has also repeatedly intervened militarily outside its formal borders, including in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Moldova.

This military capability is an enormous asset for the United States, Russia and China, but there are also costs involved, both political and economic. To have a gun 'at hand' not only widens opportunities for action but also endows one with much greater responsibility for one’s actions. Military intervention always brings about enormous human suffering, often without meeting the intended political objectives. The economic costs of sustaining a huge military are also being questioned, especially during the current economic crisis. For instance, since the invasion of Afghanistan eight years ago, the United States has spent USD 223 billion on war-related funding for that country, according to the Congressional Research Service.

The lack of a significant military power has severely constrained EU freedom of action. However, in one sense, and often unintentionally, the EU’s civilian status has been a blessing. Because the current Union’s power is not military in nature...
other states do not fear it and feel compelled to balance it. In other words, the
Union’s civilian power does not repel other states, but instead it attracts them. By
contrast, China with its constantly growing military might is viewed with suspicion
by most of its neighbours even though it has refrained from using force against any
of them since its twenty-nine-day incursion into Vietnam in February 1979.

Economic power certainly enhances actors’ ability to shape their external
environment, but in the modern world economic power implies interdepen-
dence.33 This has repeatedly been experienced by Russia, whose use of gas as
a lever to exert political concessions from Ukraine and other neighbours has
undermined its credentials as a reliable economic partner throughout Europe.
China understood much better how to play power politics under conditions of
interdependence even before it became the third largest economy in the world.
During the current global financial crisis, as during the Asian financial crisis a
decade earlier, China has not tried to take advantage of its economic partners’
indebtedness.34 China’s policy in Africa is also shaped by interdependence.
Africa is now China’s major supplier of oil, minerals and other commodities
without which it would be difficult for China to sustain her rapid economic
growth. And so China cultivates remarkably friendly relations with numerous
African states, including those run by corrupt politicians. Chinese leaders regu-
larly visit Africa, offering concessionary trade, infrastructure loans, and scholar-
ships to African students. Refraining from using political conditionality linked to
aid and trade puts China at advantage over the United States and EU in Africa,
both of whom insist on conditionality.

China’s enormous economic might and ever-growing military capability have
not as yet resulted in a tangible increase of its soft power. The EU, together with
the United States, generates around 80% of the international norms and standards
that regulate the global markets.35 Although China is now member of most
intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), it is usually the United States and the
EU that shape their agenda. For these reasons China, perhaps more than the EU,
deserves to be characterized as an ‘economic giant but a political dwarf’.

This analysis would suggest that those actors who must rely primarily on
economic power are more likely to seek accommodation than conflict, to engage
with multilateral organizations and to search for long-term legal or diplomatic
agreements with their partners.36 This certainly applies to the EU and probably
also to China. Of course, economic interdependence is not enough by itself to

33 R.O. Keohane, Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World (London: Routledge,
2002).
34 S. Qiang, ‘Subtle Changes of Major Power Relations: A Perspective on the Reform of
prevent all kinds of unilateral, confrontational postures. Time and again, the EU has challenged the US government or some of the American companies such as Microsoft, Qualcomm and MasterCard, for instance. China engages in militant rhetoric each time foreign officials meet exiled Tibetan or Uighur leaders such as the Dalai Lama or Rebiya Kadeer. However, economic powers seem to consider confrontation as a second best option and hesitate much more than other type of powers to launch diplomatic, let alone military attacks.

V Borders and the Scope of Governance

Actors need instruments of power to guarantee the security and welfare of their respective territories and people. Complications arise when we try to define which territory and people are considered truly theirs and as such deemed worthy of investment and protection. At stake is the definition of borders and relations between the centre and periphery. Borders are not simply lines on the ground, but complex institutions rooted in culture and history. They not only define the core and peripheral territory but also various categories of people: insiders and outsiders, privileged and discriminated against, accepted and rejected. Legal aspects are merged with ideational ones here, because borders in the latter sense are part of political belief and myths about the unity and diversity of people living in certain territories. In both legal and ideational terms, borders can be hard or fuzzy, stable or mutable.

US borders are fixed, while EU borders undergo regular adjustments, both in territorial and functional terms. There is no major disjunction between administrative boundaries, military frontiers, cultural traits, and market transaction fringes in the United States. In the EU we have different and only partly overlapping legal, economic, security and cultural spaces. Successive enlargements have allowed the EU to acquire new territory, but they have produced ever more variable geometry.

Russia’s borders are very recent. They emerged after the rapid and confusing collapse of the Soviet Union, and a sizable Russian population lives outside them. Numerous Russian territories, as well as those of her neighbours, are prone to contestation. The 2008 military clash between Russia and Georgia over Ossetia and Abkhazia showed the volatile nature of the problem. But Russia’s rule within its current borders is also being challenged, most notably in Chechnya. China’s borders are also being contested, largely from within. The greatest conflict occurs in Tibet, Xinjiang, and the southern part of Mongolia. China also has territorial claims of its own, most notably over Taiwan and a large number of islands in the South China Sea. The fuzziness of China’s borders is reinforced by the special

status of Hong Kong and Macao. And there are also over 40 million overseas Chinese, mostly living in Southeast Asia.\(^{38}\)

It is easy to see how borders shape the policies of the actors concerned. The EU has never had any territorial claims, and yet it has enlarged several times in its relatively short history. These enlargements have often been undertaken reluctantly, but they have proved the most effective means of shaping the EU’s unstable environment. This was first seen after the fall of the dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain, and later after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. Obviously each enlargement represents an import of diversity and so the Union has spent most of its energy on fostering legal and economic convergence as well as a cultural sense of identity. Allegedly even more energy has been invested in reforming institutions to make the ever larger Union workable.

Russia’s policies are very much determined by developments in the former Soviet space, what Russia sometimes calls her ‘near-abroad’. This is not only because ethnic Russians face discrimination even in fully fledged ‘post-Soviet’ democracies such as Estonia or Latvia. This is also, if not largely, because the former Soviet republics are trying to exercise their sovereign rights by asserting their political independence from Russia. According to many Russians, they do this in a way that denies their common culture and history and ignores their persistent economic dependence on Russia. In addition, some of the former Soviet republics seek EU membership or to develop friendly relations with the United States and China. This only increases Russia’s preoccupation with her borders and her immediate neighbours.\(^{39}\)

China’s preoccupation with borders seems even greater than in the case of Russia. This is partly because of the complicated question of Taiwan and partly because of the persistent challenge to its rule in Tibet and Xinjiang in particular. As a consequence, Beijing is hyper-sensitive about its sovereignty and adamant about its ‘one-China policy’. But the notion of one China does not acknowledge fully the enormous diversity of this country in ethnic, economic and cultural terms. Nor it is obvious what the borders of China proper are. Three twentieth-century Chinese leaders, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Mao Zedong, all drew the map of China differently; each during his career changed his mind over whether one or other territory was part of China.\(^{40}\) Today most Chinese believe that Taiwan belongs to the People’s Republic of China, but in other times many Chinese believed that Thailand, Mongolia, Turkistan, Vietnam and Korea were


\(^{40}\) Terrill, n. 7 above, 193.
Chinese too, at least in large part. China, like Russia and in a different way the EU, needs to reconcile itself with the fuzzy nature of its borders and find a proper way of handling them.\textsuperscript{41}

America’s border politics look simple by comparison with the three other actors considered here, although the existence of the so-called ‘non-incorporated territories’ such as Puerto Rico, Guam and Samoa implies some fuzziness, too. Moreover, the border with Mexico is porous and it is probably futile to attempt to seal it, given the economic and demographic gaps between the United States and its southern neighbour. However, in comparative terms US borders are fixed and hard, confronting the US leadership with far fewer challenges and dilemmas than is the case with the EU, Russia and China. For instance, when French Quebec tried to gain independence from Canada, the United States did not contemplate incorporating the English part of Canada within its borders. Nor is it conceivable that America would enlarge further south because of economic or political instability in Mexico or Cuba. In other words, the relatively hard and fixed US borders generate less cross-border interdependence and make US relations with its neighbours more asymmetrical. This leads to another important topic: centre-periphery relations.

\section*{VI Centre-Periphery Relations}

Periphery can mean the outermost part, but it also used to describe a region within a precise boundary or a zone constituting an imprecise boundary.\textsuperscript{42} The one common feature is an asymmetric power relationship between periphery and centre. The centre will always attempt to control the periphery, and does not treat it on equal footing. This does not necessarily imply open discrimination and exploitation. Some peripheral actors are given access to the decision-making and resources of the metropolis. The relationship between centre and periphery can be harmonious and based on mutual dependency, and is not necessarily hierarchical and conflict ridden.\textsuperscript{43} The centre can exercise control over the periphery through a variety of military, economic and cultural means. Control can be formal or informal to various degrees; it can be based on coercion or incentives, or a combination of both.

Fuzzy borders in the case of the EU, Russia and China imply a fuzzy notion of their respective peripheries. For instance, Ukraine and Georgia are formally outside Russia’s borders, but they are both treated by Russia as her periphery

\textsuperscript{41} See W.A. Callahan, \textit{Contingent States: Greater China and Transnational Relations} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), or Ung-Ho, n. 38 above.
because in the past they belonged to Russia and then to the Soviet Union. Moreover, they still contain sizable Russian populations. China treats Taiwan in a similar fashion, even though for the first half of the twentieth century Taiwan was ruled by Japan. (And the notion of ethnic Chinese is very complex). Tibet, Xinjiang and ‘Inner Mongolia’ are formally within China’s borders, but because of their distinct histories, ethnic composition and geographic locations they do not belong to China’s centre and are treated as peripheries. Russia treats its internal peripheries such as Dagestan or Chechnya, both of which are rebellious and inhabited by mainly non-ethnic Russians, in a similar way.

In the case of the EU, the definition of periphery is even more confusing. The EU, EMU and Schengen have different memberships, creating different peripheries and centres. Although Norway and Switzerland have decided not to join the EU, they are nevertheless gradually adopting EU laws and their economies have merged with the EU’s centre. Bulgaria and Romania have joined the EU, but their record in adopting and implementing EU laws remains poor while their economies remain peripheral, especially when compared with Norway and Switzerland. Turkey, a regional power centre in its own right, is hastily adopting EU laws to enhance its prospect of EU membership. Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina currently have no prospects of joining the EU, but they are de facto semi-protectorates governed by European officials under the formal auspices of the United Nations.

The United States basically has no internal peripheries, although the case of Puerto Rico and other so-called ‘non-incorporated territories’ complicates the issue. (Puerto Rico is part of the United States by special arrangement and has commonwealth status). Moreover, since US borders are relatively fixed and hard it is difficult to talk about external peripheries in the same sense as discussed above. However, the United States tends to treat the entire world as its periphery because the scope of American territorial control is truly global and so is the scope of its interests. As Andrew Bacevich argued, American political leaders ‘have demonstrated their intentions of tapping that mastery to reshape the world in accordance with American interests and values’. US control is more informal than in the case of the EU, with no formal territorial acquisitions on the agenda. Nevertheless, the US global military, economic and cultural reach allows it to impose severe domestic constraints on all actors around the globe.

This brings us to two important dimensions of centre-periphery relations: the scope and form of territorial control by the centre. The EU, Russia and China are fully engaged in global politics. For instance, China has not only dramatically increased its trade with Africa, Latin America and the Middle East over the last

44 M. Alexseev (ed.), *Center-Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia: A Federation Imperilled* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999).

few years; it has also become a leading donor of aid and contributor to UN peace keeping operations. All three actors are also able to impose severe domestic constraints on numerous global actors. Consider, for instance, the EU’s many successes in linking trade concessions to the adoption of its labour and safety standards by formally sovereign trade partners. However, the scope of meaningful territorial control of the EU, Russia and China is by and large regional rather than global. Most notably, none of these three actors is able to impose severe domestic constraints on the United States and on each other. The United States, on the other hand, is capable of so doing to all other actors, no matter where.

The form of territorial control exercised by the four actors in question varies considerably. The EU’s relations with its external peripheries are not just about aid, trade and security cooperation; they are largely about the export of EU governance to these countries. Its neighbouring countries are asked to ‘approximate their legislation to that of the Internal Market’ and in exchange they are offered ‘further integration and liberalization to promote the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital (four freedoms)’. The EU’s aim is not separation from, or containment of, troublesome neighbours. Its aim is to bring these neighbours closer to the Union through legal and institutional convergence and joint infrastructure projects.

US relations with its global periphery are different. The power imbalance and its hard borders make it difficult for peripheral actors to gain access to US decision-making. These relations are by their nature hierarchical, and the hierarchy is basically perpetual. The United States can be generous towards its clients, but peripheral actors cannot contemplate becoming part of the American governance system. Even America’s closest allies are not recognized as equals. They are asked to support American policies and share the burdens.

In other words, both the United States and EU effectively constrain the sovereignty of their respective peripheries, but the governance system exported by the EU envisages a high degree of shared sovereignty. The more peripheral countries adopt EU rules, the greater access they have to EU decision-making and resources. The United States does not share sovereignty with its periphery. US influence is more about hierarchy and domination, often backed by its military presence. This does not necessarily make the United States unpopular in its peripheries. In fact, various peripheral actors compete for United States favours rather than trying to resist American control.

Both Russia and China sternly deny sovereignty to their respective internal peripheries, often with the help of their armies. Russia has also repeatedly intervened militarily in its external peripheries and used its economic leverage to obtain political concessions there. China has been much more restrained in its

external periphery, but the case of Taiwan shows that it does not rule out the use of force outside its formal territory and, in fact, makes ongoing preparations for such an eventuality. This is probably so because China regards Taiwan as its internal rather than external periphery.

VII Conclusions: Return of Empires?

Three concluding observations can be deduced from the above analysis. First, regardless of their differences, the United States, EU, Russia and China also share certain important characteristics. They all are vast territorial units with the ability to influence (if not manipulate) the international agenda and shape the notion of legitimacy (if not normality) in various parts of the world. They all seek to impose domestic constraints on a plethora of formally sovereign actors by applying a combination of diplomatic, economic and military means. And they all have a kind of civilizing mission to accomplish vis-à-vis the external environment. In my view, these are all key characteristics of empires, but because the term empire carries considerable negative historical connotations, they are all empires in denial. (And as mentioned above, there is no commonly accepted definition of empire). That said, the United States, EU, Russia and China today do what all historical forms of empires have always done, namely they exercise control over diverse peripheral actors through formal annexations and/or various forms of informal domination.

The second concluding observation concerns the differences between these four actors. Although all four claim to be unique in normative terms, this claim seems far more applicable to them in structural terms. Moreover, these structural characteristics tell us more about our actors’ behaviour than do their normative visions of the world and of themselves. For instance, our analysis shows that Europe’s polycentric system of governance is more suited to creating institutional structures and setting up the rules of legitimate behaviour than to swift and bold power projection abroad. Put differently, the EU’s system of governance is conducive to the type of foreign policy advocated by Hugo Grotius or Immanuel Kant, but ill-matched to the type of policies advocated by Thomas Hobbes or Niccolò Machiavelli.47 No wonder therefore that the EU engages more in the former type of foreign policy than in the latter. The United States, China and Russia might well embrace the normative vision of legal order advocated by Grotius or of moral order advocated by Kant, but their system of governance is well suited to Hobbesian politics, and so they often engage in them. These observations are also reinforced by the asymmetrical policy means at the four

actors’ disposal. The lack of sizable military power makes it difficult for the EU to engage in Hobbesian politics. On the other hand, it is tempting for actors with sizable military power such as the United States or Russia to forget about Grotius and Kant and follow the path of Hobbes.

The nature of our actors’ borders is also revealing especially for understanding the pattern of centre-periphery relations. The fuzzy nature of the EU’s borders makes the Union particularly exposed to developments in its immediate periphery. This interdependence forces the EU to become engaged in the politics and economics of the periphery. There is path dependency logic in the process of enlargement. Each enlargement brings the EU new neighbours and these new neighbours usually end up as candidates for EU accession. This situation makes it easier for the periphery to get access to EU resources and, in some cases, even to the EU’s decision-making system. The relatively hard and fixed US border generates less cross-border interdependence and makes America’s relations with its neighbours more asymmetrical. Its peripheries cannot count on any access to US decision-making or make claims on American resources.

The third concluding observation concerns the evolving pattern of conflict and cooperation between the four actors concerned. This article has shown that the United States, EU, Russia and China often contest similar spheres and spaces. This is likely to generate conflict, regardless of other factors such as leadership or diplomatic arrangements. Most notably, because the United States treats the entire world as its periphery this is likely to impinge upon the EU, Russia and China.48 Consider the case of EU-US relations. The United States has been actively engaged in European politics since World War II. It helped to rebuild the devastated economies of Western Europe and extended its nuclear umbrella over the region. The United States also supported the project of European integration.49 However, the United States has never ceased to compete with the EU for the loyalties of individual Member States, and it has also regularly intervened in the internal politics of these states.50 Europe’s dependence on America has diminished since the end of Cold War, but the 2003 dispute over the invasion of Iraq showed America’s ability and readiness to split Europe into two opposing camps.

The EU is a more equal and coherent actor in the field of trade than in the security field. Nevertheless, the United States economy remains an important, if not the most important, reference point for economic decisions in the EU.

50 V. de Grazia, Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth Century Europe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
A similar pattern of competition exists in the field of mass communication, innovation and culture. One day, this competition could well generate a major transatlantic conflict. Europe may disintegrate as a result, or else unite itself even further when faced with the American policy of *divide et impera*.\(^{51}\)

Another type of contest for the same space and spheres exists between the EU and Russia. What Russia considers its ‘near abroad’ is also the EU’s near abroad.\(^{52}\) For instance, the EU’s recent Eastern Partnership initiative involves countries that Russia sees as its own periphery: Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine. No wonder the Partnership has been fiercely criticized by Russia. Although Russia and the EU have different dimensions of power, they contest all possible spheres. Military issues were at stake when the EU intervened in Kosovo, and Russia in Georgia.\(^ {53}\) Political issues were at stake when they supported opposing sides during the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine. Economic issues were at stake when the two clashed about their respective rights to engage in each other energy markets.\(^ {54}\)

One could multiply similar examples across other regions of the world. The question is about the scale of possible conflict and the margins for accommodation. So far, none of the actors considered perceives its competition in zero-sum terms.\(^ {55}\) Moreover, with only a few exceptions such as the issue of Taiwan, the actors do not deny their respective claims to legitimacy. Their normative agenda also largely overlaps even though they attach different meanings to such terms as free market, democracy or multilateralism.

To sum up, the EU may not be such an exceptional actor in normative terms as is often suggested. Even in structural terms the EU could be classified together with Russia, China and the United States as a kind of empire. But because of its peculiar governance system, fuzzy borders and predominantly civilian policy means, the EU practises its politics differently from the three other ‘empires’ considered here. The EU’s territorial acquisitions take place by invitation rather than conquest. Its legitimizing strategies do not follow the usual imperial motto: ‘might is right’. The periphery is often able to gain gradual access to the


decision-making of the European metropolis. Its sovereignty is not denied, but merely constrained by the EU’s policy of conditional help and accession. A map listing major differences and similarities between the actors considered here can be found in Table 1.

The map brings together various cognitive and material factors. It lists both policy means and aims; power relations, and the ways they are being legitimized and perceived. Structural characteristics such as borders and governance are also listed together with policy paradigms and modes of engagement. The table is quite comprehensive and suggests a research agenda that goes beyond the current discourse of realism and constructivism. The use of comparative methodology in international relations and European politics is likely to remain contested. However, this article has tried to show that assessing the EU’s uniqueness in comparative terms can be quite revealing. Assessing the EU’s uniqueness in moral or abstract theoretical terms would probably be less enlightening and more controversial.

Table 1. EU, United States, China and Russia Compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major features</th>
<th>EU</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governance structure</td>
<td>Polycentric in concentric circles</td>
<td>Federative but highly decentralized</td>
<td>Unitary but with some regional autonomy</td>
<td>Federative but fairly centralized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance paradigm</td>
<td>Mixture of social, liberal and Christian democracy</td>
<td>Liberal democracy</td>
<td>Mixture of communism, Confucianism and legalism</td>
<td>Electoral autocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of territorial control</td>
<td>Neighbours aspiring to EU membership</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Chiefly within formal state borders</td>
<td>Partly over former Soviet republics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of territorial control</td>
<td>Rule biding through the extension of acquis communautaire</td>
<td>Informal penetration</td>
<td>Formal acquisitions</td>
<td>Inter-state formal arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of external borders</td>
<td>Fuzzy due to the export of laws and successive enlargement</td>
<td>Clear, stable and sharp</td>
<td>Fuzzy due to intense economic exchanges, ethnic links and territorial acquisitions</td>
<td>Fuzzy due to the complex legacy of the Soviet Union and its abrupt dissolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives in the periphery</td>
<td>Reformist: good governance</td>
<td>Revolutionary: freedom and democracy</td>
<td>Gradual assimilation in ethnic, economic and political terms</td>
<td>Restoration of the influence over the former Soviet space</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Table Continued...*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major features</th>
<th>EU</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mode of orchestrating change in the periphery</td>
<td>Institutional engineering</td>
<td>Regime overhaul</td>
<td>Ethnic engineering and economic development</td>
<td>Political engineering and military intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leverage used in the periphery</td>
<td>Membership prospect, market access, aid</td>
<td>Military and economic might, technological innovation, media and mass culture</td>
<td>Market access, ethnic links, and military pressure</td>
<td>Energy resources and military might</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power relations between metropolis and periphery</td>
<td>Periphery gradually gains access to decision-making of the metropolis</td>
<td>Perpetual asymmetry and hierarchy</td>
<td>Periphery is gradually incorporated to the metropolis through various forms of self-governance</td>
<td>Perpetual asymmetry and hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sovereignty in the periphery</td>
<td>Constrained through sharing</td>
<td>Constrained through political domination and/or military presence</td>
<td>Denied under 'one China' principle</td>
<td>Constrained through formal arrangements and economic domination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives vis-à-vis other powers</td>
<td>Multilateralism</td>
<td>Primacy</td>
<td>Multi-polar world</td>
<td>Respect and special treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-image</td>
<td>Superior in technocratic terms but hunted by the legacy of war and conflict</td>
<td>Uniformly noble and benevolent</td>
<td>Culturally superior but embarrassed by the 'dishonorable inferiority' of the last two centuries</td>
<td>Culturally superior but shaken by the abrupt dissolution of the Soviet empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of universalism</td>
<td>Global but low</td>
<td>Global and high</td>
<td>Moderate and only within the Asian context</td>
<td>Moderate and only within the former Soviet Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimizing strategies</td>
<td>Our norms are right</td>
<td>Might makes right</td>
<td>Promotion of 'harmonious world'</td>
<td>Guarantee of stability and order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>