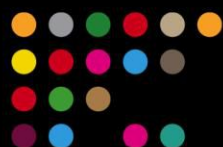


Survival of the Fittest, Not the Strongest: Why the EU Will Prevail in the Global Power Game

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The debate on how the European Union (EU) will survive the current economic crisis is in full swing. Even optimistic observers, however, seem to agree that the EU will at best play only a minor role in the global power game. While some optimistic voices about Europe's global power could be heard five or six years ago, the financial crisis has dampened most of this cheerfulness. The United States, while declining in influence, is predicted to still play a major global role, matched or perhaps even superseded by the rising power of China. It is a bygone era when Europeans, for better or worse, shaped the international system and politics around the world. So goes the usual story.

I argue, on the contrary, that the EU will prevail in the global power game – and that it will do better than any other major power, new or old. Given the current euroskepticism – in and outside of Europe – this argument may seem odd, even controversial. Yet I can see no harm in trying an argument, hoping it may contribute to the debate on global power shift in general, and Europe's role in this in particular. In brief, I hold that there will be no place for states with superpower ambitions in the evolving global order. To prevail in this environment of fragmented power, it is essential to (1) accept the end of fully sovereign decision-making (which EU members have already done), (2) accept that speaking with *a clear* voice is more crucial than speaking with *one* voice, and (3) develop ability to constantly operate and negotiate in multi-level and multi-lateral contexts, involving a varying and complex set of public and private actors. In this global order, the game is about the survival of the fittest, not necessarily the strongest. Given the EU's pooling of sovereignty, the parallel and not always coordinated external actions of the EU and its member states, the complexity of its institutional setting, and the multi-level and multi-lateral features of EU policymaking policy – the EU and its member states are arguably more fit than any other major power in the world.

Goodbye superpower(s)

The emerging global order has many names: “post-international”, “post-modern”, “post-Westphalian”, and “neomedieval” are but a few of the notions floating around among scholars and experts. Regardless of what it is called, however, the evolving order is often described in fairly similar terms, focusing on some combination of globalizing (integrating) and fragmenting features. Let me briefly bring attention to four more specific features, all of which point to a general fragmentation and diffusion of power:

1. *Many-headed political bodies.* Foreign ministries have lost their monopoly on “foreign affairs”. Branches of government, and groups and individuals within the bureaucracy, develop their own interests and relations within and across borders in working groups, committees and policy networks – not always in agreement with the thinking and policy on the top-level. Such “transgovernmental relations” are a real but underestimated force in global politics. At least since the 1970s, scholars have forcefully argued that the assumption of the state as a unitary actor must be relaxed. Leaders of democratic states rarely want to control every aspect of every policy domain, and leaders of all states, whether democratic or not, are rarely able to exert full control of society. Paradoxically, in academic as well as in political debate, states are commonly described as if they were individuals with a single mind and ability to act as such – “countries” “think” and they “do” things. In reality, if there is any reason to retain the human metaphor, states and other actors in world affairs are looking increasingly schizophrenic. Political leadership is still possible and indeed vital, but leaders should not expect to be the only one with a say in world affairs, “on behalf” of their polity.
2. *Multi-level policy-making.* Boundaries between levels of policy-making are increasingly blurred in the emerging global era. Municipalities, regional governments and other subnational governments not only work with (and

sometimes against) central government, but also develop relationships horizontally among “peers”, and also vertically, bypassing national governments directly approaching international bodies. The links between local, national, and international levels of policy-making are getting reinforced and increasingly complex. This is at least partly because globalization makes major problems simultaneously affect agendas on several levels, calling for multi-level policy-making. The problem of transnational terrorism, for example, is affecting and being dealt with simultaneously on all levels, from the UN Security Council to local governments trying to cope with incidents and violent groups. Moreover, the growth of multi-level policy-making is not only strengthening links across formal decision-making levels, but is also opening new transnational arenas, including a mix of different types of governmental and non-governmental actors.

3. *Multi-lateral politics.* That a state “cannot go it alone” in managing global problems is sometimes rejected by so-called “realists” as having little more than symbolic meaning. True, some states persist in unilateral action, with leaders often quoting their action as being determined by “national interests” – a euphemism for what is often, though not necessarily, based on nationalistic and irrational assumptions of some particular status or standing in world affairs. In reality, however, major global challenges – climate change, pandemics, the global financial crisis, transnational terrorism – demand multi-lateral management. Unilateral action can prevent decisions to be made, but it cannot provide effective management of truly global problems.
4. *The growth of private authority.* Non-state power has grown considerably in recent decades. Industry, the news media and other corporate actors are gaining influence in world politics making a strong mark on the world stage, and so are political parties, pressure groups, religious organizations, and

others. The number of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs, e.g. Amnesty International, Red Cross, and World Wild Fund) has grown tremendously, from a couple of hundred at the end of WWII to far beyond 100,000 as of today. INGOs are also increasingly gaining access to important policy-making fora, such as global conferences on climate change. Moreover, the coming decades will see an ever growing saliency of individual power than ever before, according to many “global trends reports”, as seen for example in how individual bloggers made a significant political imprint during the Arab Spring in 2011. Private authority is not replacing state power, but more often growing in close relationship with public authority. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have become almost a mantra in many countries, especially in Europe and in North America. PPPs make governments think they can evade both some of the costs and some of the responsibilities for what were once essentially public responsibilities – public transport, health care, education, and even space missions. To private actors, PPPs open up new markets in areas previously dominated by public monopolies. At the end of the day, the growth of private authority challenges but does not do away with state power, but it contributes toward the fragmentation of power.

If we, for the sake of argument, accept these features as characteristic of the emerging global order, they will have clear implications for how power is perceived and distributed. In this coming world, absolute power is absolutely impossible to achieve. Seeking hegemonic state power – as for example the leaders of China and Russia are doing – is often misleadingly described as an element of “realist” power struggles. In reality, they express nationalistic ambitions, driven by emotion and identity rather than by any rational calculus. Dreams of hegemonic power in general, and superpower status in particular are recurring in political debate, not only in China and Russia but also in the United States, and to a lesser degree in former “great powers” such as France and the United Kingdom, as well as in “emerging powers” such as

Brazil, India, Japan, South Africa, and Turkey. I contend that such struggles for power are counterproductive, even dangerous. As people will increasingly experience how leaders may talk the talk but are unable to walk the walk of great and superpower politics, frustration and disillusionment will follow. People will gradually experience how state power is perforated and dispersed, how multi-headed actors speak with several voices, and how policy-making is increasingly the results of complex multi-level, multi-lateral processes involving both public and private actors. Leaders of states aspiring on superpower status may continue to demand what they perceive as their “rightful” place in the global power game, but they will not be able to deliver.

The EU is living in the future

The EU and its member states are already living in the future – a future that eventually might look similar in other parts of the world. It was in Europe that the ideals of sovereignty and the nation-state were first developed, which later became the foundation of the international system of states. Once again, Europe is the breeding pot of an order – admittedly a very disorderly order – that will shape politics around the world. This time, however, Europe will set the standard not through conquest and imperialism, but through how Europeans adapt to the challenges and opportunities provided by globalization and the fragmentation of power. In the European Union, 27 member states and a number of central EU institutions (including the embryonic External Action Services) are involved in a dense network of multi-level politics and policymaking, also including regions and other subnational actors, transnational party networks, and many other stakeholders. EU politics is shaped by elements of federalism and intergovernmentalism, constitutionalism and many informal elements of integration, such as public-private partnerships and advocacy coalitions.

The model that Europe will provide is not about sovereignty and the nation-state, but rather about the opposites of these originally European concepts: sovereignty is perforated and pooled, politics and policy-making is a multi-level and multi-lateral

business, involving complex networks of private and public actors, with increasingly blurred lines in between. On a global scale, this development is not taking place overnight, and there are and will continue to be elements and pockets of resistance and remembrance of older and more neatly organized systems.

Survival of the fittest, not the strongest

What currently looks like weakness – the complexity and multi-headedness of the EU – reveals how the EU has already adapted to the future. There has been no grand scheme behind this adaptation, however. The debate on how to reinvigorate the EU's global role occasionally reveals traditional views on great power ambitions, but the effect of adaptation is there nevertheless. This adaptation does not convey strength in any traditional sense – mobilization of economic, political and military resources still count in world affairs, as does the ability to speak with just one voice. But as the world is increasingly moving towards the complex order described above, the continuing fragmentation of power will hit existing or aspiring superpower(s) much harder than it will affect the EU.

At the end of the day, simply being well adapted to a new disorderly world order will not guarantee success in terms of goal satisfaction. Adaptation, or being fit, is an antidote to misperceptions and wishful thinking, but it does not in itself lead to effective management of problems – pandemics, climate change, the financial crisis, terrorism, and other major challenges. Effective problem management also requires cognizant analysis of the globalized yet fragmented nature of power, and realistic self-understanding of what skills and abilities are essential for coping with this global order. Three requirements are: (1) accept the end of fully sovereign decision-making, (2) accept a constant chatter of voices (thus being clear, convincing and foresighted is more important than commanding unanimity of opinion) , and (3) develop ability to constantly operate and negotiate in multi-level and multi-lateral contexts. How to cope and achieve strategic foresight under such conditions is an essential yet difficult

task for anyone thinking seriously about power and globalization, as is currently being done by a group of think tanks discussing a European Global Strategy (www.europeanglobalstrategy.eu).

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