

Book Review

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EU POLICY RESPONSES TO A SHIFTING MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

Editors: Esther Izuel Barbé, Oriol Costa and Robert Kissack

Abstract

The volume examines EU responses to recent structural changes at the international level through foreign policy case studies. It provides a new theoretical baseline, coupled with empirical evidence, over the unfolding debate of EU foreign policy in a changing world.

Keywords

EU policy; international organisations; policy responses; international relations theory; WTO

The edited volume describes and examines European Union responses to recent structural changes at the international level. Since the 1980s, changes have occurred in global power balances, reflecting the emergence or decline of international actors. The shifting polarisation of the world has proven to be one of the main challenges for the EU in its conduct of foreign policy. Against this backdrop, Esther Barbé, Oriol Costa and Robert Kissack argue that in response to these challenges, the EU can adopt two policy strategies: accommodate the structural changes by adjusting its foreign policies to the new environment, or entrench its policies maintaining them as they are regardless of structural changes.

The book identifies the two EU responses through EU foreign policy case studies. Eight international multilateral political loci of different policy fields (nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, energy with the Energy Charter Treaty, the establishment and functioning of the International Criminal Court, trade at the World Trade Organization, climate change negotiations, gender issues at the United Nations Security Council, the global financial crisis at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the fight against child labour and the EU in global energy governance) are covered. The book reveals that the EU is not the stringent actor that it is frequently said to be. It rather adopts balanced responses, sometimes entrenching its policies, but also sometimes accommodating the changing international environment and emerging opportunities. Roughly half of the contributors identify entrenchment, and half identify accommodation. The book also shows that entrenchment and

accommodation are not mutually exclusive. In the same policy area, accommodation and entrenchment are very much issue specific. For instance, the EU accommodates the IMF quota reform, but entrenches its policy on IMF lending.

The introductory chapter develops a solid theoretical framework which is used in each of the nine empirical chapters of the volume. A policy response can take two shapes: entrenchment or accommodation. The distinction between the two foreign policy strategies – entrenchment and accommodation – is novel and useful as it focuses exclusively on EU policies, not polity nor participation to international politics. Besides, structural changes refer exclusively to the modification of EU international environment. However, I presume that structural change can also be internal, and that internal structural change would be particularly relevant for studying the EU as it is a unique type of international actor. The most important shortcoming of the theoretical framework is its exploratory rather than explanatory, aim. It does not allow to understand under what conditions and when the EU uses these policy responses. This weakness is openly postulated by the editors and is hopefully foiled to some extent in the conclusion, suggesting ways for further research.

Despite the assumed descriptive nature of the theoretical framework, the editors identify three factors explaining the EU's choice of strategy. Ideas, power and institutions, constituting the changing international environment, are expected to challenge EU foreign policy. Hence, ideas, power and institutions shape the EU's choice for entrenchment or accommodation. The editors expect that the three explaining factors can be congruent or incongruent for the EU. The explaining factors are thus combined in nine possible structural patterns. Structural change is expected to occur when a pattern is modified. The book does not clearly hypothesise these three factors. The three factors identified are investigated in each case study, providing complete information about EU behaviour on the international stage but also in an international system of multilateral institutions. The analyses are limited to multilateral environments, setting aside regional and bilateral responses. The application of the theoretical framework thus does not reflect the whole spectrum of EU responses to structural change.

Relying on this theoretical framework, twelve political scientists develop empirical explorations in nine thematic chapters. One chapter is highlighted here for illustrative purposes, although its characteristics provide indications on the way the nine cases are addressed. The chapter by Patricia Garcia-Duran, Montserrat Millet and Jan Orbie examines the responses of the EU to international trade negotiations structural changes at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Using a process-tracing analysis, the authors identified critical junctures as borders of time-period, and structure the chapter accordingly. The first one corresponds to a structural change (the rise of developing countries) and subsequent EU response (accommodation), and the second one corresponds to an evolution in EU response (from accommodation to entrenchment). The rise of so-called BIC (Brazil, India and China) countries challenged the long-last balance between WTO institutional structure, the ideas carried by major actors (the so-called 'quad': The United States, the EU, Canada and Japan) and the power balance between them. India, Brazil and sometimes China joined the high table of quad negotiations, enshrining the structural change. More generally, tensions between developed and developing countries became more explicit, affecting the institutional and ideational congruence of the trade regime as previously decided upon by Western countries. The authors argue that the EU first adopted an accommodating behaviour, agreeing on concessions to the BIC about cornerstone issues. Indeed, reaching an agreement became problematic (at the expense of tensions in the Council of the EU). In parallel, the EU developed bilateral trade agreements with (future) major trading partners. These were initially made to combine with multilateralism rather than substitute to it. However, the EU reached its negotiations limits (the second critical juncture identified by the authors), and no more concessions to the BIC could be made. Entrenching its

policies, bilateral agreements became a way to substitute multilateralism. In each section of the chapter, arguments are developed in a systematic manner, covering institutional and ideational (lack of) congruence between WTO core negotiators, whoever these are.

The empirical chapters focus in a rather disparate manner on the EU and its changing structural environment. For instance, chapters on climate change and on gender issues at the United Nations Security Council clearly focus on the behaviour of the EU. The chapter on the establishment and functioning of the International Criminal Court seem to describe more the structural changes than the responses adopted by the EU. The freedom of structure deepens the unevenness of the empirical chapters, seemingly accorded to the contributors. Each case is developed based on its own logic, undermining the comparability of the cases. Adopting similar structures for each empirical chapter would have increased the consistency of the book and ease the readers' understanding. Similarly, the finesse of the theoretical framework is not systematically reflected in the empirical chapters. Hence, the precise developments of the theoretical framework seem somehow forsaken as the book goes on.

More than summarising the findings of the empirical chapters, the conclusion suggests four insightful ways forward to deepen the study of EU foreign policy and render it explanatory. To this end, it suggests deepening and extending the theoretical framework, connecting International Relations and foreign policy, focusing more on policy objectives rather than mere strategies, and including EU domestic politics in the picture. The conclusion holds relevance because of two characteristics. First, it does not provide a clear summary of the arguments of the chapters (surprisingly, that is done in detail at the end of the introduction), but rather identifies transversal general observations. Second, the conclusion provides sharp and innovative ways to carry on with 'EU in a changing structural environment' research.

Overall, the book is highly recommended to practitioners and academics. As it rooted in both IR and EU foreign policy literatures, a broad array of political scientists will find interest in the theoretical and empirical developments of the book. It is an intriguing and interest-arousing study since the book provides a new theoretical baseline, coupled with empirical evidence, over the unfolding debate of EU foreign policy in a changing world. The case studies presented by the contributors unravel the complexity of the questions related to EU foreign policy. It also shows that EU foreign policy is rather case-specific, as no general conclusion can be drawn from the findings. The conclusions contrast to some extent with the theoretical expectations, revealing the complexity of the questions asked. The volume provides a strong theoretical baseline for further investigation of the EU response to a world in motion. The challenges facing the EU in its conduct of foreign policy are unlikely to freeze or reverse in the nearby future. For this reason, this book will certainly encourage further research on the EU's response to structural challenges.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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