**Testing the Boundaries of Order? Europe, the European Union and a Changing World Arena**

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**Abstract**

This paper sets out to re-assess a number of arguments made in the past twenty years about the relationships between Europe, the EU and international order, in the light of current changes within the world arena. Specifically, it starts from the emergence of an apparently new international and European order after the end of the Cold War, based on new forms of institutions, rules, negotiation and boundary-making and on new roles for key actors including states and the European Union. It goes on to examine the key mechanisms underpinning this order, including the interactions between markets, hierarchies and networks and the impact of the EU as a ‘normative power, a ‘market power’ and a ‘realist power’. The paper then explores the challenges to this conception of European order emerging from power shifts at the domestic and European levels, the impact of economic crisis, the fragility of existing boundaries and the emergence of a multipolar or ‘interpolar’ world arena. Finally, it assesses the capacity of European actors, and specifically the EU, to absorb, divert or capitalise upon these challenges over the next decade, and argues for the emergence of a pluralistic yet resilient European order centred on a reformed EU.

**Introduction**

Over the past quarter of a century, since the end of the Cold War and the accompanying transformations of the 1990s and beyond, there has been a consistent strand of thinking about Europe, the European Union and the generation of international order (see for example Carlsnaes and Smith 1994, Keohane, Nye and Hoffmann 1993, M. Smith 1996, 2008, Niblett and Wallace 2001, Elgström and Smith 2000, Carlsnaes, Sjursen and White 2004, K. Smith 2004, 2014). One aspect of this thinking has concerned the relationship between old states, new states and the European order: how far have the changes since the early 1990s revived or transformed the role of states in generating and maintaining order? A second aspect has related to the links between order and stability: how far have new mechanisms of order created stable boundaries and institutions both in Europe and beyond? A third aspect gives a central role to the place of negotiation and the establishment of negotiated order: how far have negotiations provided a robust foundation for the accommodation of change and challenges, and what role has diplomacy played in consolidating and developing order? A final aspect centres on the role(s) played by the European Union in generating, consolidating and developing order: to what extent has the EU become the centre of a stable European order, and how has this related to the challenge of change both inside and outside the continent?

There are many more such questions that might be asked about European order and the roles of the EU, but this article focuses on the four set out above. Specifically, it starts from the emergence of an apparently new international and European order after the end of the Cold War, based on new forms of institutions, rules, negotiation and boundary-making and on new roles for key actors including states and the European Union. It goes on to examine the key mechanisms underpinning this order, including the interactions between power structures, market structures, institutional structures and normative structures and the impact of the EU as a ‘realist power’, a ‘market power’, an ‘institutional power’ and a ‘normative power’. The article then explores the challenges to this conception of European and international order emerging from power shifts at the domestic and European levels, the impact of economic crisis, the contestability of existing institutions and norms and the resulting emergence of a multipolar or ‘interpolar’ world arena. Finally, it assesses the capacity of European actors, and specifically the EU, to absorb, divert or capitalise upon these challenges over the next decade, and explores the implications of two scenarios: on the one hand, the emergence of a pluralistic yet resilient European and international order in which a reformed EU would be a central component, and on the other hand the development of a fragmented order in which the EU might be paralyzed or marginalised.

**Order After the Cold War**

The emergence of a new European order after the end of the Cold War was a confused, confusing and apparently paradoxical process. The collapse of the multinational empire centred on the Soviet Union and the emergence of a set of new, often fragile states in central and eastern Europe raised fundamental questions about the nature of statehood and of the ‘system of states’, which in important ways remain unresolved. The notion of a ‘neo-medieval’ system in which competing and overlapping centres of power enjoyed a conditional form of sovereignty, producing a ‘mosaic’ of economic, diplomatic and military organizations at national, international and sometimes subnational levels conveyed a powerful sense of the unstable and contingent nature of order (Zielonka 2006). In this context, the European Union after the Maastricht Treaty provided at least a partial anchor, especially through the membership perspective and the creation of multiple dialogues that engaged most of the ‘new’ states (K. Smith 2004, Weber, Smith and Baun 2007). The tension between the desire for independence and the drive to become part of an integrated Europe was evident, but either finessed or suppressed in the process of enlargement – a process which itself contributed to the generation of a new form of multilateral negotiated order in Europe (M. Smith 2000, Niblett and Wallace 2001). This order was not uniform or all-encompassing, but it did form the core of a new set of understandings about desirable forms of order, centred on the EU and linked to a broader vision of global order founded in a rules-based and institutionalised form of globalism.

In this context, the roles played by the EU were central, and to a certain extent contradictory. The Union became indispensable to the creation of a form of multilateral negotiated order, but there remained key questions about who or what should belong to such an order – in other words, about whether the Union represented a politics of inclusion or of exclusion (M. Smith 1996). By developing a process of managed accession, the EU reflected and refracted divisions both among its existing member states and among those ‘outsiders’ who wished to enjoy the benefits of membership. By emphasizing the importance of institutional density among insiders and the application of rules in a ‘community of law’, the Union automatically created new divisions and raised the stakes surrounding processes of accession and non-accession. It became a key venue – but not the only venue – for the development of new forms of negotiated order, but at the same time, there was a basic tension between negotiations as a form of inclusion and as a form of exclusion. As a result, the emerging post-Cold War European order came to centre quite largely on the Union, but there were clear tensions with other institutions such as NATO, the OSCE and the United Nations in arenas such as those created by conflict in former Yugoslavia or the former Soviet empire in eastern Europe and central Asia (Keohane, Nye and Hoffmann 1993). A key question concerned the extent to which the EU could ‘internalise’ European order, or whether it would remain a part of a broader continental order – and this linked to questions about the nature of the global arena and global order to which the EU could contribute, but which it could not control (M. Smith 2007). These questions in turn related to major issues of the EU’s international role.

**The EU and Order**

It is clear that the EU has a foundational relationship with issues of European and international order. But how does this help us to think about the resources that the EU brings to those issues, and the extent to which the Union can hope to exercise leverage over them? I argue that ideas of international order rely on four central structural attributes: power structure, market structure, institutional structure and normative structure. Each of these is important in its own right, but equally important are the linkages and balances between the different pillars of order. Equally important also are the implications of these components for the roles that might be played by the EU.

In the first place, power structure relies upon the balance of material capabilities and the ability to apply these in specific contexts. The end of the Cold War led to major shifts in the balance of material capabilities, both inside and outside Europe – but these shifts were not unidirectional, cumulative or permanent. In the case of Europe, they had the effect of highlighting the structural power of the EU, but also of drawing attention to the fact that the Union simply did not possess the classical instruments of ‘hard power’. In a sense, the period since 1990 has been one for the Union of successive attempts to equip itself with more instruments of ‘hard power’ and to become a ‘realist power’ (Ross Smith 2015, Rynning 2011, Zimmerman 2007), in the face of resistance among some member states, competition from other bodies such as NATO and the resurgence in Europe of former powers, especially Russia. In Europe itself, it is to some extent appropriate to see the EU as exercising structural power even without the key components of ‘hard power’, but this tension remains to be resolved.

Secondly, the importance of market structure privileges the EU’s role as a ‘market power’ (Damro 2012, 2015), driven by market imperatives and seeking both economic security and economic leverage in a world of ‘competitive interdependence’ (Sbragia 2010). There is no doubt that in this domain, the EU exercises both structural power and power in specific policy domains, not only in Europe but also beyond. But this simple statement of itself raises questions about the ways in which market power is exercised by and through the Union. As a ‘trading state’, the EU centres its international activity on multilateral rules and institutions, but is itself a dense ‘community of law’ centred on the generation of economic benefits for its member states and citizens (Rosecrance 1986, 1993, Smith 2004). Not surprisingly, the internal distribution of these benefits, and the external response to the EU’s search for appropriate mechanisms of stability and growth, create tensions and contradictions. Most obviously, the internal prosperity of the Union and the need for multilateral cooperation in order to create stable and open trading conditions can come into conflict, and indeed can lead to questioning of the EU’s roles when the internal and external imperatives collide.

Third, the generation and consolidation of the international order, both at European and at global levels, has come to rely upon the generation of institutional density and the production of forms of multilevel governance in the European and world arenas. As noted above, the EU is at one and the same time an example of a dense system of rules and institutional processes, and a distinctive sub-system in the broader arena (Hill, Smith and Vanhoonacker 2017: Introduction). This is not just a question of the ‘Brussels institutions’, though – the EU generates and encompasses transnational, transgovernmental and intergovernmental networks that add to the robustness – and some would say, the impenetrability – of its internal order. This is turn provides the basis for claims of legitimacy in multilateral institutions at the global and continental levels, in some cases superseding the claims of EU member states themselves (Laatikainen and Smith 2006, Jørgensen and Laatikainen 2013: Part VI). There is of course a contradiction between the generation of ever-increasing institutional density at the EU level and the residual claims of member states and others to autonomy, and this in turn is linked to the ways in which EU institutions in the broadest sense are seen as providing collective and more specific goods – economic, political and normative.

Finally, the normative structure of the European and broader world orders demands consideration, shaping as it does the ideational contexts and challenges faced not only by the EU but also by a host of other internationally acting bodies. The ‘reigning ideas’ of European and international order are strongly linked to the notion of ‘normative power Europe’ (Manners 2002, Sjursen 2006, Whitman 2010) and the associated assumption that the EU is a ‘force for good’ in the world arena because of the ideas that it encompasses. This in turn reflects in part the search during the immediate post-Cold War period for forms of European identity and normative order at a time of normative confusion and contention. The EU has represented for many a central repository of ideas associated with liberal international order, and a key expression of those ideas. Not only this, but the ideas themselves – rule of law, good governance, human rights and others – have been given concrete expression in a host of the EU’s international agreements and institutional engagements. A central issue in this area, inevitably, is the extent to which these normative commitments can survive engagement with material political, security and economic imperatives – and with the emergence of competing normative orders in the global arena (Hyde-Price 2006, Youngs 2004, 2010).

Seen in this context, the EU’s Global Strategy (EEAS 2015, EU 2016, K. Smith 2017) can be interpreted as an attempt to bring together the four strands of European and international order, and to devise criteria for the mobilisation of EU resources in pursuit of such order. Significantly, the Strategy was intended to be ‘global’ in two senses: first, in having a global reach and in placing the EU’s neighbourhood within a broader global order, and second, in bringing together the institutions and resources of the Union in a ‘joined up’ system of external action. In other words, in terms of the argument here, the Strategy responded to the need for action in all four of the domains outlined in this paper: power, market, institutions and norms. In pursuit of this synthesis, the Strategy also attempted to square the circle of material power and normative power, by committing the Union to the pursuit of ‘principled pragmatism’ as a guide to action. Further, the Strategy committed the Union to pursue three key elements in furthering its global role: ‘strategic autonomy’, ‘resilience’ and a coherent ‘comprehensive approach’. Each of these elements raises important questions about the nature and direction of EU external action, but in the context of the argument here, they can be seen as the most recent attempt by the Union to define its approach to questions of European and international order. Importantly, this approach is to be pursued in a European and broader international arena that is by the Union’s admission ‘complex, connected and contested’ and which thus poses major challenges to those who would attempt to shape it.

**Challenges**

It is clear that the current period poses major if not fundamental challenges to each and all of the components of European and international order as outlined above. Not only this, but there are major challenges to the EU itself as a form and focus of international order – a potent combination. Whilst it may be convenient to lump together the period since 1990 as the ‘post-Cold War era’, international order has moved through several phases over the past twenty-five or more years, and each of them has posed challenges and opportunities for the EU.

In terms of power structure, we have already seen that the EU’s position in Europe has changed markedly over the period since 1990. But alongside this change, the broader international arena has arguably changed more profoundly and continues to change in fundamental ways (Alcaro et al 2016, Brown 2017). From a period in which US hegemony appeared not only complete but also assured for the foreseeable future, there have emerged major and persistent challenges, not only from outside but also from inside the USA. The power shift in the world arena is incomplete and certainly inconclusive, but it has also played into a US domestic context in which a curious mixture of ‘declinism’, victimhood and the desire still to dominate has permeated US politics. This is not a new combination, but it has been given a new and radical twist by the politics of the Trump administration. From a European perspective, the US remains the continent’s most significant other, but the combination of Trumpism with Russian revanchism under Vladimir Putin (not to mention a more assertive Chinese stance on world order issues) has proved a mercurial and disruptive set of forces (see for example Cohen 2018, Glasser 2018, M. Smith 2018b, Stokes 2018, Nye 2019). When this is combined further with challenges to the existing power structure within the EU, both at Brussels level and in national contexts, the level of uncertainty and potential division only increases.

At the same time, there have been persistent and pervasive challenges in the area of market structure – the core, some would argue, of the EU’s engagement with issues of European and world order. The impact of the financial and sovereign debt crises over the past decade has been corrosive at a number of levels. In the global arena, it has created conditions in which the existing structures of market power have been partly if not largely overturned – linked to the emergence of ‘rising powers’ and especially China in the global political economy, it has subverted expectations about the future shape of the world economy and the viability of international economic institutions (Alcaro, Peterson and Greco 2016, Brown 2017, Riddervold and Rosén 2018, M. Smith 2013). This subversion has been compounded by the actions of the Trump administration in either ignoring or confronting the rules-based order in trade and related areas, and it has been transmitted broadly in the global economy by the persistence of high levels of economic interdependence (Rachman 2018). The emergence of an ‘interpolar’ world (Grevi 2009), in which the rise of new centres of power is combined with persistently high levels of interdependence, is nowhere better illustrated than in the current turmoil surrounding world trade and multilateral commercial institutions. Whilst this has been the centre of current and recent challenges, the global financial structure and areas such as the economics of development bear witness to continued turmoil and the potential for further disruption.

All of this implies that the institutional structure that nurtured the liberal world order – and indeed, the EU itself - for decades is now open to question as never before (Ikenberry 2018). This can be conceptualised as a chronic crisis of multilateralism, both as an idea and as a set of institutional commitments (Bouchard, Peterson and Tocci 2014, Rachman 2018, Smith 2018a). At the global level, the extent of commitment to multilateral institutions by a number of leading players is contested, as are the detailed commitments themselves in the case of trade (for example, by the Trump administration’s use of national security rationales for the declaration of trade wars). Different versions of multilateralism compete, at the same time as bilateral and regional agreements proliferate, and the fluid nature of commitments and undertakings leads to opportunistic and disruptive behaviour (M. Smith 2018c). Within Europe broadly defined, the use of economic instruments to subvert or disrupt political institutions (for example through oil and gas supplies) has become more frequent, with uncertain consequences. Equally, whilst the institutions of European integration might be attacked and challenged from without, they are also challenged from within, by the rise of neo-nationalist politics within member states and by the probable departure of the United Kingdom.

Finally, the normative order underpinning conventional conceptions of European and international order is challenged. The crisis of multilateralism noted above is not merely a crisis of institutions – it is a crisis of a normative order, in which the ‘reigning ideas’ associated with open processes of international commercial and financial exchange are contested (Smith 2018a). It is important to register that these ideas are foundational for the EU (although some would argue they have never been perfectly reflected in EU policies) and thus that this is an area in which external and internal challenges combine to produce a kind of multiplier effect. The neo-nationalist political movements that have become prominent in a number of EU member states draw not only on European roots but also on varieties of ‘transnational nationalism’ reflected most obviously in the Trump administration, but also in other radical right-wing movements (Glasser 2018). The emphasis on ‘sovereignist’ politics that characterises many neo-nationalist groupings challenges not only the external but also the internal order of the Union, and thus raises questions about the EU’s roles in both the European and the broader international order.

**Responses**

How should – how can – Europe and the EU in particular respond to the set of challenges outlined above? Recent years have seen a number of proposals for the extension and/or reform of the Union’s institutions, and have also seen the working through of the Lisbon Treaty provisions, especially in the area of external action and diplomacy. But they have also seen a resurgence of ‘domesticism’, effectively giving priority to the treatment of internal problems (both at the EU and at the member state level) above the projection of EU power, interests or values. One symptom of this tension is the idea of ‘foreign policy as antidote’ (Gnesotto, Grevi and Ortega 2005, Juncker 2018) – the idea that a more activist and extended set of external actions can defuse some of the internal tensions – but this is in a sense a circular argument, since the internal tensions are precisely what might set strict limits for an extension of EU external activism. So we are at a potential turning point or sticking point in the relationship between the EU and European or international order, in which the stakes are heightened but the internal constraints on external activism may be reinforced – partly because the stakes and potential risks are more salient. As Erik Jones and Anand Menon have recently argued (2019), the gap between the ‘dream’ of European unity and the reality of division and fragmentation and reality is at a historic turning point – one that has broader implications for the role of Europe, and the EU in particular, in broader international order.

One way of developing these arguments is to go back to the four elements of international order sketched in the previous sections of this article, and to ask what resources (actual and potential) the EU can deploy in attempting to shore them up. In the first place, the Union still finds itself in an ambiguous position in relation to international power structures, although it has taken some significant initiatives since 2016 in relation to collective defence planning and structured cooperation. In principle, more resources are available, but there are still important constraints on the perceived legitimacy of action in ‘high politics’ beyond diplomatic engagement. When it comes to market structure, the EU still occupies a prominent position as a leading commercial actor, and has developed a range of tools to exercise leverage through deployment of its economic power in such areas as development cooperation in the global arena – but there are new and potent competitors in such domains, most notably China. At the European level, the EU has shown an inclination to engage with geo-economic issues, but has encountered severe problems when geo-economics and geopolitics become closely linked, as in the case of Ukraine.

The Union still occupies a leading position in the institutional power structures of Europe and the world arena, but the undermining of institutions in key areas of the global political economy (trade, environment) has meant that the EU has suffered a loss of leverage in the multilateral system, allied to the losses arising from its own internal economic and institutional contradictions. Again, in this area, a distinction should be made between engagement in Europe, despite the setbacks that have arisen there, and engagement in the world arena. Finally, the credentials of the EU as a key pillar of the European and global normative structure have been challenged both by internal developments and by the growth of competing normative ‘poles’ with different interpretations of what it means to be a ‘force for good’ and with resources to back them up.

Another – and complementary - way of exploring the ways in which challenges to European and world order might be met by the EU is to return to the four aspects of international order identified at the beginning of this article: statehood, stability, negotiated order and the legitimacy and centrality of the EU itself. It seems clear that in recent years, the tension between statehood and the search for forms of order across or among states and other actors have become more rather than less severe, and that this can be discerned in many of the EU’s internal and external activities. At the same time, and linked to this tension, the search for stability in Europe and beyond through the consolidation or the transformation of boundaries has become more fraught, with issues such as migration highlighting the imperfect nature of cross-national consensus on what the boundaries of Europe and the EU should or could be. As a result, the tension between a politics of inclusion and a politics of exclusion remains severe and persistent, with new symptoms and stresses arising from the old roots. Not surprisingly, the nature and extent of negotiated order in Europe and the wider world arena have been questioned and in important respects constrained: whilst modest gains might still be made in the extension of the EU order through accession, the Union’s neighbourhood has become more rather than less contested and is likely to remain so. In this context, as noted above, the EU’s credentials as a supplier of order, both within the wider Europe and beyond, have come into question, and the extension of its external actions and ambitions at least to some extent curtailed, despite the apparent ambition of the Global Strategy. What the Strategy labels ‘principled pragmatism’ may well be an appropriate response to the circumscription of its resources and potential leverage, but it is a far cry from the heyday of the EU as a ‘force for good’ at the European and the global levels.

**Conclusion**

What kind of future for the EU and European order, in a global context, can be deduced from this argument? Two alternatives can be proposed, each of them reflecting the impact of the challenges and constraints outlined above. The first might be labelled ‘A reformed Union in a pluralist European and world order’. In this alternative, the EU overcomes its current internal tensions to create new institutional and material resources, and succeeds in deploying them within Europe and beyond. But both the European order and broader global order in the mid-21st century will require action within a more pluralistic context, with new alignments of forces at the transnational, transgovernmental and intergovernmental levels. The challenge for the EU will be to develop and deploy new instruments, but above all to adapt them to shifting constellations of power, markets, institutions and norms both internally and externally. The pursuit of a leading role in international order carries with it – as it always has – potential costs and risks that are multiplied in a more pluralistic arena, and the EU will have to both identify and respond to these costs and risks both in the short and in the longer term. Such a process demands legitimacy and leadership in areas that are currently questioned both within and outside the Union – and such legitimacy and leadership cannot be generated simply by institutional reforms.

The other alternative future might be labelled ‘A paralyzed EU in a fragmented European and world order’. In this version, fragmentation would take place both within the Union and outside, with the two tendencies reinforcing each other. Reform of the EU institutions and practices would be obstructed from within and challenged from outside, whilst order and stability would become commodities in short supply. Such a situation would be self-reinforcing, in the sense that problems within the Union would be compounded by and fed by challenges from new constellations of actors, pursuing partial aims and a materialist agenda focused on short-term gains. The EU’s retreat to ‘conditional multilateralism’ or ‘contingent multilateralism’ would be accelerated, and this in turn would reinforce tendencies towards fragmentation in the broader field of global or regional governance. A further effect of this set of processes would be to re-nationalise key areas of policy within the Union, especially foreign, security and defence policy but also central areas of commercial and financial action. The EU would not be destroyed, at least in the short term, but would be eroded, by-passed and ignored in an expanding range of issues and situations.

Neither of these scenarios is likely to come about in an unalloyed form, but each of them can be inferred from current tendencies. Each of them in turn reflects major changes in the opportunities and risks facing the EU, both in Europe and beyond, through a combination of shifts in power structures, market structures, institutional structure and normative structures. Calls such as that made by Jean-Claude Juncker in his valedictory State of the Union speech (Juncker 2018) for a new and more proactive approach to EU external action embody both an appreciation of the challenges and an awareness of the opportunities surrounding Europe and the EU, but they are not panaceas in light of the constraints and risks faced in Europe and beyond. In this respect, the Global Strategy’s attempt to address the Union’s external action in a multidimensional and multilevel fashion responds to many of the key challenges faxing the EU, but it raises further questions about the EU’s presence in key issues and areas of international order as well as creating new dimensions of risk and uncertainty in a fluid world arena. A blend of prudence, pragmatism and purposeful opportunism will be required to steer the Union through the turbulent waters that lie ahead.

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