

THE UNLIKELY EUROPEAN SECURITY ACTOR: EVIDENCE FROM THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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Kaunert's and Zwolski's (2013) book *"The EU as a Global Security Actor: A Comprehensive Analysis Beyond CFSP and JHA"* presents a noteworthy argument stating that the EU's ability to play a role as a global security actor depends on three criteria: scope of integration (strength of the EU's legal instruments and procedures), capabilities (EU's -resources, instruments and cohesion) and recognition by other international actors. The extent to which these criteria are met determines the EU's global influence as an international security actor. The authors test their hypothesis through five unique cases of traditional and non-traditional security issues, namely climate change, terrorism, migration and refugees, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and piracy off the coast of Somalia, concluding that the EU has the capacity to become a global security actor, albeit not always to the same extent for all kinds of security threats.

Following the three criteria approach it becomes relatively obvious that the EU is more equipped to deal with non-traditional security threats such as the climate change as opposed to more mainstream 20th-century inter-state security issues. The recent crisis in Crimea, which poses a 'traditional' security threat for the region, presents a complex challenge to the EU and questions its ability to act as a global and even as a regional security agent. The Russian intervention in Ukraine made the Baltic neighborhood feel extremely uneasy, if not afraid, and the entire EU unconfident regarding the status of its energy security.¹ Equally important it left the EU perplexed and without an effective reaction plan, which is not surprising given that Russia is too big, too powerful, too nuclear, too close to Europe, and more importantly too energy significant for the EU to ignore. Inevitably, the crisis also brought to the surface security expectations that were, since the end of the Cold War, unnecessary for EU member states.

While the EU was never really expected to replace NATO, there is an ongoing effort in Brussels to construct a common European security (and foreign) policy that would allow the EU to have a heavier footprint in

¹ Indicative of the dominant feelings in the Baltic region is the reaction of the Lithuanian President, Dalia Grybauskaitė, who compared Putin to Hitler and Stalin arguing that the former wants to maintain as much control as possible on the Baltic states. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/22/ukraine-crisis-lithuania-idUKL6N0P30FB20140622>

global security affairs. However, the EU's actions towards the Ukraine crisis demonstrate that in cases of traditional security threats the EU's arsenal is comprised of weapons that are essentially suitable only for economic warfare. The aim in other words is to counter political or military threats using economic means. This form of warfare is not in any way a European Union discovery; it has been practiced since before the Peloponnesian War. But usually economic-related measures are backed up by the threat of military interventions, as has frequently been the case with North Korea and Iran. What makes this case interesting is that it is the first time that such course of action is tried without the backup of a military threat, raising the question whether this is nothing more than a toothless measure and subsequently the EU a toothless security actor when dealing with such threats.

The rationality behind this form of warfare in this case is based on the logic that if the Russian economy is hurt, so will be Putin's legitimacy. Specifically, financial sanctions aim to cast shadow on the Russian economic future, create trouble for Russian companies – especially those with loans in foreign currencies – and make government borrowing more expensive. Even though the Russian economic growth primarily depends on energy exports, these measures should still work given that Russia – unlike Iran and North Korea – is part of the global financial and trade system and as such it too relies on the presence of a stable domestic banking and financial system and needs the trust of domestic and international investors.

If the abovementioned logic was solid, then the EU could handle this crisis as a major security actor given its economic power; unfortunately for the EU the sanctions do not seem to have the wanted impact. This is not surprising however as sanctions are more of a long-term tool and can work only if the financial pain inflicted on the target country cannot be tolerated; Russia however seems to have a very high tolerance. The significant Russian reserves in foreign currency, coupled with the energy status quo with 30% of Europe's natural gas coming from Russia, contributes to the development of a high tolerance level and reduces the chances for short-term and potentially even long-term impact. Indicatively the Russian bond market is stabilizing and investors seem ready to start reinvesting in Russia, meaning that the measures have so far had little or no impact.²

Returning to our original question and whether the EU can potentially become a global security actor, the Ukraine crisis demonstrates that the weapons available to the EU to handle traditional security threats are not sufficiently powerful to render the Union a major international security actor. It seems unable to deter military and political interventions in its

² <http://online.wsj.com/articles/russian-bonds-rally-despite-ukraine-crisis-rumbling-on-1401454175>

own neighborhood and powerless to offer enough security guarantees to its own members. It is NATO planes that patrol the Baltic States, NATO troops that enhance their presence in Poland and it is towards NATO that Eastern European states look for security. The Russian intervention and the subsequent EU response clearly demonstrate that the EU does not fulfill any of the three criteria for being a global security actor: there is little scope of integration for such crises, very limited capabilities and more importantly there seems to be no recognition by either external and more notably internal (i.e. EU member states) actors that the EU can fulfill the role of a major international security actor.