

Superstate or Superpower? The future of the European Union in world politics¹

This is a time of great uncertainty, and possibly great change, for the European Union. Enlargement to 25 Member States or more, the arrival of a new currency, and the evident need for the wide-ranging reform of both institutions and policies together mean that we have reached one of those points where standing still is not an option. We either go forward or must fundamentally appraise certain cherished assumptions. Accordingly there is much talk about future scenarios, and in particular about whether Europe will end up as a superstate, or a superpower, or both. These are two big concepts which are regularly part of our discussions of the European Union and its future, even if they are rarely analysed in relation to each other. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in a speech which he made to the Polish Stock Exchange on 6 October 2000, explicitly linked the two concepts, while tending to see them as alternatives. He addressed in particular, with what is rather unusual honesty in these matters, the issue of whether or not Europe should be a superpower. Indeed, one of the unusual things about Mr. Blair is that he is willing to discuss foreign policy in conceptual terms, in a way in which British politicians have been allergic to for many years. The famous British pragmatism leads to the downgrading of the importance of ideas, but Blair has broken out of that trap.

Mr Blair also made an important speech in Chicago in April 1999, during the Kosovo war, on what he called 'the doctrine of the international community', and in the Warsaw speech he entered deliberately into the debate about the final shape of Europe, begun by Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister earlier in the year. In the Warsaw speech Blair says:

'Europe's citizens need Europe to be strong and united. They need it to be a power in the world. Whatever its origin, Europe today is

no longer just about peace; it is about projecting collective power.’ And he went on to say ‘Such a Europe can, in its economic and political strength, be a superpower, a superpower but not a superstate.’

Thus Blair, and probably those who share his Third Way views, prefer Europe to be a superpower, not a superstate, notwithstanding the suspicion with which all great powers are now regarded – understandably, given how they have historically abused their positions. One could argue that there is an inherent association in many people’s minds between the terms great power and superpower on the one hand, and arrogance on the other. Although all too often this is a matter of mere political abuse, the one remaining superpower in particular has come to be associated with hegemony, domination and imperialism, and many other ways of referring to the ability to call the shots in the world. This is ironic given the disappearance of the European empires, and of the Soviet Union, all of which engaged in more direct forms of imperialism than the United States. But the subtleties of American domination breed feelings of powerlessness precisely because of the diffuseness of the target, and it is this which Europe may also risk attracting if its ‘civilian power’ transforms itself into a kind of superpower.

Now, if this is the case, why should it be that the European Union should want to be a superpower? Part of the answer lies in the pressure to live up to the universal values, such as human rights, and free trade, which we espouse in our diplomacy. Many would argue that we must acquire the capabilities to project our values and to defend them if they come under threat. And we must also consider the argument that becoming a superpower might be the only way for Europe to cope with the consequences of globalisation, if the latter are as serious as has often been suggested.

What I shall do here is to say something about the two concepts of superstate and superpower, and to discuss their interrelationship, with a

view to analysing how recent developments might have some implications for each of them.

First is the concept of superstateness. This could in practice be a synonym for superpower, but it is not, except in popular parlance, where the two are sometimes confused. The idea of a superstate in this context really refers to the notion of a fully federal Europe, that is, an EU which would turn into a state truly called, and a big one at that. Admittedly a federal state involves by definition a good deal of devolution and subsidiarity, but it is still a proper state, in which the present national members would become so reduced in status as to resemble the States of the American Union, the Länder inside Germany, or indeed the provinces/autonomous regions of Spain.

This vision is currently a nightmare for many in the United Kingdom, as it is for many in Denmark, and perhaps Portugal and Greece. The same would probably be true of the last three countries to enter the EU, Austria, Sweden and Finland. But it would not at all be a disaster scenario for the Benelux countries, indeed for the original six, including France, Germany and Italy. Spain and Ireland might well share their view – although Ireland is an interesting, complex case. In many ways it is pro-integrationist, but if it came to the point of a unity in which Ireland would have to coexist rather more intimately in terms of common political and military adventures with the United Kingdom than it currently does, that might prove more complicated than people think. The recent referendum result on the Treaty of Nice, so surprising to many in on the EU circuit, is a case in point.

Nonetheless, a superstate, meaning a large federal state, does not equate to a big state in the other sense, of *étatisme* or even Keynesianism, that is to the idea that the state grows at the expense of the private sector. In fact one could argue that the agendas of recent EU meetings, from Lisbon in March 2000 onwards, suggest a reverse drift, so

that if the European Union becomes a more successful political entity, and a more integrated entity, then the state element of that Union would become relatively smaller, and the private sector would proportionately enlarge.

The current condition of the European Commission, with its clipped wings and generalised demoralisation, is perhaps an indication of the declining role of government, even at the meta-level. The general drift towards a combination of economic deregulation, liberalisation and the reassertion of the individual member (nation) states, the prototypical states of the Union, suggest that *étatisme* is not the real issue, although French motivations for wanting European integration are not unconnected with wanting to translate their own idea of a (strong) state to the European level.

Whatever happens in a federal Europe, I think it is likely that the notion of a 'social Europe' referred to by Oscar Lafontaine, that is to say our common values, cultures and laws, which distinguish us from the United States through the importance of the social market, the welfare state and so on, would remain. But that would not be, in itself, a case for saying that there was an overbearing, centralising state, within a federal entity. Or at least it would be a matter of judgement and prediction as to how that would turn out. None of us can actually know in advance. We all have our views; we engage in vigorous political debate and extrapolate from other experiences and from political science. But no-one can know, because human experience never repeats itself exactly. In the United Kingdom, there is a tendency to assume that federalism would involve a domineering central government in Brussels, and that in turn produces some pretty fierce resistance. But to some extent the eventual outcomes will be shaped by the nature of the arguments still to take place across Europe, including with the candidate countries for the next round of enlargement.

What we can say in relation to our experience so far of the EU as a battleground between the public and private sectors, is that over the history of European integration, but especially after the Single European Act, the arrival of a single market and the gradual adoption of certain Anglo Saxon economic practices (summed up in the term 'flexibility') have gradually reduced the role of the state and made the European Union a freer playground for private enterprise, not just European but also American and Japanese. On the other hand, there are still wide differences between the expectations of public services in different countries, with Germany and France still stressing the importance of the state and the United Kingdom more wedded to privatisation – or perhaps one should say, given the ideology of the Third Way, to 'public-private partnerships'.

In this sense one could argue that the EU, as a project, is something of an agent of globalisation, rather than, as Anthony Giddens has said, a pioneering response to globalisation. The EU has often been criticised, especially by the Greens, as a giant free market system which has made things easier for big capitalism. There is certainly a debate to be had over whether the EU is basically the only way in which Europeans can manage globalisation, defend themselves against its excesses, and cope with its transformational consequences. This is where the politics must be found. If you are interested in the politics of globalisation, that is in where actorness and agency reside, it is often said that weak states can no longer defend themselves unless they are willing to raise decision making to the regional and continental level. Alternatively, plenty of observers continue to see much life left in the nation-state, albeit in conjunction with both various kinds of international groupings, and local or regional governments.

Moving on to the concept of superpower, we find that it has been written about surprisingly little in the academic literature. In the early 1970s Johan Galtung wrote a famous book entitled *The European Community: A Superpower in the Making*.² His argument centred on the

warning that Europe integration could become a new form of colonialism. If Europe were to become a big power in the world, and in his view it was in the process of becoming one, this would be the means by which the power of the European empires, which had only just been demolished, could be perpetuated.

The notion of superpower itself dates from the work of William Fox in the United States in 1944. He is supposed to have invented the concept, bracketing the United Kingdom along with the Soviet Union and the United States, as states which dominated the world and were capable of determining the structure of the international system. The judgement on the UK pretty soon came to seem anachronistic, with the label of 'superpower' sticking only to those states with the global reach and resources to deploy their power anywhere on the earth's surface and to run large territorial spheres of influence – that is, the United States and the Soviet Union. This was particularly the case after the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 inaugurated the era of intercontinental ballistic missiles, which at the time only Moscow and Washington had the capacity to produce.

The concept of superpower refers both to absolute and to relative characteristics, relative in the sense that there was a huge gap between the Soviet Union and the United States on the one hand and the other states of the world. It is interesting that we barely use the term 'Great Power' any longer in international relations, because the most important states are defined either as superpowers or as middle-range powers. If the EU is to develop into a more effective entity than it currently is, it would be a great power rather than a middle power, but not a superpower.

Superpowers tend to have, by definition, a global reach, the capacity to project their power globally, both economic and military, (indeed seeming almost undefeatable in conventional military conflict), and to have a high degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Historically they have also come to be associated with massive nuclear weapons

capacity. The definition of superpower is, therefore, both empirical and historically specific. It is a concept produced in one particular age; it is not something, for example, we use retrospectively in relation to the nineteenth century.

Applying the concept of superpower to the EU has seemed to many so unrealistic that it has inhibited discussion. Yet Willy Brandt talked about Germany as a economic giant but a political dwarf, and Jacques Poos claimed it was 'the hour of Europe' in 1991. Such comments have implied a developmental view of both individual European states and, *a fortiori*, the EU as a whole. It is now more feasible to think that one day the the EU might become a superpower, even if the joke that Europe is an economic giant, a political pygmy and a military worm still just about applies. The language of rankings, and of power, reveals our constant desire to have some sort of taxonomy, some way of putting states or other entities into boxes, so that we may know who has what advantages in the conduct of international relations. The EU so far resists conventional classification, which is why it is so often described as *sui generis*.

A statistical approach helps us to begin the analysis. The European Union in the late 1990s, after the last phase of enlargement, has fifteen states with a population beyond 340 million, already 70 million more than that of the United States. It is on the verge of extending itself further over the face of Europe, towards a population of 400m plus, and with extended borders in the east, north-east and south-east. It is already the world's biggest trading entity and the biggest giver of development aid, but its enlargement will produce a new geopolitics of the European Union, which has led people to wonder whether or not the potential that is clearly there to be a superpower can and will be translated, through various policies or indeed through various historical accidents, into something more approximating that notion.

The notion of 'superpower', as applied to Europe, represents both an implicit *telos*, a sense of possible destiny, and a possible source of

danger for Europe. Many people who are attached to the notion that Europe is a civilian power in the world would be deeply opposed to the idea of superpower Europe, in the conventional sense of superpower that I have just described, particularly in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries.

It may be that we should make the analysis issue-specific, accepting that the EU is (already) an economic superpower, but will not progress to the military status. Such distinctions seem sustainable partly because we know that it is not so easy to make power fungible, that is to say to translate it from one area of activity to another. This has been evident for some time in relation to economic sanctions and conditionality. The political limits of economic diplomacy are fairly clear.

What would the European Union, if it were to be a fully-fledged superpower, look like? It would almost certainly entail six things: firstly, a single effective point of decision, probably also with an elected leader who would epitomise the Union; secondly, the ability to mobilise a full range of resources; thirdly, strong, stable, competitive economic performance, since, as China illustrates, a weak economy prevents you becoming a superpower; fourthly, a Weberian bureaucracy and resilient civil society, in other words a system which can be relied upon to work; fifthly, the ability to project power effectively across the globe, more or less wherever. Henry Kissinger dismissively said of the Europeans in 1973 that the Europeans were now only regional powers, unlike the United States and the Soviet Union. And in many ways, Europe lived up to that statement, even if through its external economic relations and the Common Foreign and Security Policy, it does actually have a global presence, of a significant but not coercive kind.

The last characteristic, but one which needs several question marks in front of it, is nuclear weapons. If Europe were to be a superpower, could it be one without nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them? This may seem an unlikely or dangerous proposition, but it

should be remembered that there has been much talk in recent decades of Britain and France needing to reach some common arrangement over their nuclear weapons, and of the Europeans needing to speak with one voice in the United Nations Security Council. The historical logic may seem to tend in the direction of Europe acquiring the nuclear status of the US, China and Russia, but there are many obstacles, both technical and political, before we even begin to get near such an outcome.

To conclude, it is worth saying a little about the interrelationship between the concepts of superstate and superpower. Let us begin by taking the possibility that the EU might become a superstate, and thus an effective federal entity. In this case would we then have also to be a superpower? Do those two things go hand-in-hand? Would it be inevitable that a superstate would become a superpower?

This is an important question, which policy-makers should not duck. It is arguable that the creation of big capabilities and the ability to use them, would create irresistible temptations to project power. It would produce self-fulfilling prophecies, as well, in the sense that others would respond to the capabilities of which we dispose, because they would be fearful of what the European Union represented, and all the familiar self-perpetuating cycles of realism would come into play.

Equally it would mean that a big, effective Europe would have even more extensive international interests than it does at the moment. Clearly, we have global interests at many different levels already. But do we have global interests *qua* the European Union, rather than as Greece, Britain, employees of Philips or BMW, or even as an individual citizen, perhaps married to a Japanese and with children brought up as young Australians because of the roving nature of our work? Insofar as modern international relations revolves around the debate between communitarians who believe that loyalties ultimately lie with our community (whether state, nation, religion or whatever) and cosmopolitans, who believe that it is our common, multicultural humanity

which now principally defines us, the European Union may be seen as the latest and most feasible means of providing a form of community. And to protect our interests and to project our concerns in the contemporary world system would inevitably mean that the EU would have to be active globally, not just within the confines of Europe and its 'near abroad'.

It is true that in our current period of history, for the first time we have major powers that do not behave assertively in the way that they did in the nineteenth century, and which do not always seek to use military power or to expand their territory. Germany and Japan fall into this category, and so probably does the People's Republic of China, which gets a bad press in many respects, but whose foreign policy, if the occupation of Tibet is regarded as untypical, could be regarded as relatively restrained, given its size, history and pride in its own civilisation.

There are, of course, very particular reasons why the countries listed are relatively restrained, and perhaps the EU as a whole would also have its particular motives for self-restraint. Projecting forward from our current discourse, it may be that we would wish to become a 'civilian' superpower – for all my earlier suggestion that this would amount to a contradiction in terms. We tend to think of ourselves in such terms. Europeans like to think that they have distinctive and desirable values, forged in the cradle of history (albeit too often bloody) and that if the EU came to resemble the United States in size and capabilities, it would not be tempted to behave in the same way. That is not to say that Europeans forget American sacrifices in two world wars, or that they criticise the whole of American foreign policy. On the other hand, there is a complacent tendency to assume that Europeans could not be guilty of some of the things that we now call arrogance in their performance of a superpower role, especially in the Third World.

It is indisputable that the EU is in a process of change, towards having an increasing size, a greater weight in the world, and possibly also a sharper external boundary between itself and outsiders. Indeed, that is

why people want to get into it; the EU promises the prosperity and protection of a big player in an uncertain world, while the fact of a hard external border means that there must be something worth having inside what must appear from the outside as 'fortress Europe', even if that has never been a fair description. Such perceptions can become self-fulfilling, and help the EU to become more of an effective decision-making entity and international actor. Nonetheless, superstateness is still a long way off and thus the dilemma about whether a superstate must become a superpower is not yet urgent. Indeed, while the two thirds increase in the number of Member States which might take place in the next two years would heighten the theoretical need for a federal solution, it is unlikely to make it easier to achieve one.

The converse, of whether the European Union can be a superpower if it is not a superstate, is perhaps more pressing. Can we behave as Tony Blair wants us to, in projecting power on the world stage, no longer just concerned with the general value of peace but asserting our important interests and distinctive values, while at the same time eschewing federalism? Can the European Union get all the resources it wants for a powerful projection of itself in the world, plus the decision-making capability, without also having a powerful central executive - in a word, without a European government?

The question is far from being purely academic, because many of the requirements of an effective European foreign policy would involve major shifts in institutions and priorities. A huge increase in defence spending will probably be required even to achieve the 'headline goal' of 60,000 men under arms, let alone the other things that might go with true superpowerdom, such as nuclear weapons, military bases far from European shores, and a sophisticated intelligence system. Even common embassies, which promise a cost saving in the long run, would almost certainly involve quite considerable investment and cost in the short run, in terms of laying off diplomatic staff and adapting buildings. These would

impose budgetary strains as well as political difficulties over differential responsibilities .

The present EU political system is poised uneasily between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, but we know that Pillar 2, on foreign policy, is still predominantly intergovernmental. Even if there is no further spillover of the 'Community method' this may still lead slowly to the consolidation of a *de facto* European alliance, up to the NATO level and inevitably in an intermittent condition of rivalry with NATO. NATO is an effective, integrated system despite (or perhaps because of) its intergovernmentalism. The conventional explanation for NATO's effectiveness, given that it is a coalition of diverse sovereign states, is that it is subject to the hegemonial leadership of the United States, which provides massive resources, a command structure and has the political clout to knock heads together.

The EU does not have a hegemon, or even the prospect of one. There are traces of a bigemony, or rather a diarchy, in that Britain and France are the two dominant states in matters of security policy, just as France and Germany have been in the process of general integration. The Anglo-French initiative of St. Malo in December 1998 was the product of the only two EU states with the capability to project conventional military force beyond their shores, finally deciding to allow moves towards the militarisation of the EU.

The consequence of that dramatic initiative has been to break all the taboos on the EU becoming a 'normal' power, including some in Washington where there has always been a visceral distrust of European autonomy in 'pol-mil' matters. Things have moved on rapidly since 1998, with the summits in Cologne, Helsinki and Nice, to the point where the EU has been making plans to take over from the NATO peacekeeping force in FYR Macedonia. If the EU is to develop a true security and Defence Policy, however, it will require at least Britain and France to remain of one mind, and more probably the *de facto* emergence of a *directoire* which

would also include Germany, Italy and Spain. It will also require, as already suggested, serious decisions about the commitment of new resources and the location of decisional powers. Will the EU be capable of providing the core and the lead in future coalitions of the willing which may be mobilised for key trouble-spots?

If this capacity is to develop – and it certainly can no longer be ruled out as fanciful – it will take time, decades more than years, and it will require a significant shift in foreign policy culture across Europe. Taking major actions, and entering into commitments independently of the United States will mean adjustments in the pacificistic attitudes of many of the smaller European states, and a willingness to accept, at least in the first instance, Anglo-French leadership, on the part of the other large states.

In conclusion, we may say that although it is now more than just theoretically possible that the EU could become a superpower, such a status is still a long way off. Charles Grant of the Centre for European Reform, who is a well-known optimist and enthusiast for European cooperation, wrote last year a piece of futurology about what the European Union would look like in the year 2010.³ Even he was modest in his expectations. He saw the headline goal being extended, together with more systematic military cooperation, and perhaps joint projects coming to fruition such as that for an Airbus (A400) heavy transport aircraft. It was not a landscape dramatically different from that we have at the moment.

Most of the possible components of superpowerdom are now available, given that the militarisation of the EU has started, the Euro is about to come into operation, there is a commitment to large-scale enlargement, and a debate, at least, has begun in the Convention on the *finalité politique* of the Union. We might say that almost all of the pieces are on the table, but they are still from being assembled. Certainly if we

want this to be a vehicle which can actually go places, then we must recognise that as yet it does not even have its engines in place, let alone engines which have been fired up and can be relied upon for long service. The crucial relationship between foreign and defence policies, for example, has hardly begun to be clarified.

If I had to bet on the shape of future developments I should say that the status of superpower, if it arrives, will depend on the creation of some kind of superstate first, because there is only so much that can be done with coordination, variable geometry and all the rest of it. That superstate is not here yet, or even around the corner, but the issues of the Euro and indeed of enlargement, have brought us right to the edge of the crucial constitutional questions in Europe, not just in the technical question of should we have a constitution, but in the deeper sense of what are the constitutive principles on which we want to base ourselves and which we distinctively share. Inherent in this are the normative issues of whether either superstateness or superpowerdom are desirable in themselves, but that represents yet another extensive debate.

The current discussions in the Convention, leading to yet another Intergovernmental Conference, are a welcome way of opening the debate on the issues of constitutional principles and the values which lie behind them. But they are unlikely in themselves to resolve the problem of whether it is the external capabilities or the internal conformation of the EU which should be our main priority. Nor can they do more, even with a major package of changes, than start the process by which the Union could become either a superstate or superpower. The outcomes will only be visible, if achieved at all, in twenty years or more.

It is possible that some kind of unforeseen foreign policy or international relations crisis, of the kind which 11 September 2001 seemed to presage,, to could lead to the great leap forward, the *saut qualitatif*, just as the Second World War finally produced Franco-German cooperation in the form of the Coal and Steel Community and eventually the European

Communities. The reverberations of the attack on the World Trade Center for the international system are only just beginning to be felt, and it may be that the EU will now find itself having to make some very hard choices in foreign policy in the next five years, which will have inevitable implications for its internal structure. For history is nothing if not unpredictable. And if change largely takes the form of 'disjointed incrementalism', in Charles Lindblom's phrase, it is the disjointedness which requires attention as much as the incrementalism.

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² Johan Galtung, *The European Community: A Superpower in the Making* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

³ Charles Grant, *EU 2010: an optimistic vision of the future* (London, Centre for European Reform, 2000)