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Why the EU and the US play different roles in International Relations

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These topics form part of the pressing agenda of the EU and represent the multifaceted and complex nature of the European integration process. These papers also seek to highlight the internal and external dynamics which influence the workings of the EU and its relationship with the rest the world.

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Power is defined in different ways by different people. Our contemporary world is characterized by the existence of various types of superpowers. Some have strong militaries, others have very advanced economies, and there are some powers that have both of these important qualities and/or many others. The United States and the European Union have undoubtedly become two of the most influential and powerful entities in the world. They are both very well developed in terms of their economies, which is the most important means of achieving greatness in the contemporary world. Although military might has been more influential in the past when wars were more common, the US still holds on to its advantage in that area. The EU, on the other hand, does not rely on military power and, in fact, does not really possess such a force of its own. Consequently, the foreign policies of the two entities differ greatly as a result of their diverging capabilities. The values of each entity as well as their definitions of security contribute to the contrasts in their external policies which, in turn, lead to their varying positions in the international arena.

The European Union and the United States differ greatly in their set-up, their values, and in their perceptions of the world. In order to compare them, one needs to acknowledge that they are two very different types of entities. While the US is a state of its own with one single federal government, the EU is not. Rather, it is an institutional framework of the integration of a multitude of sovereign states throughout Europe. Membership has grown over time through the accession of more and more states. The structure of the European Union as a “union” between states, both enhances and inhibits its actions in different policy areas. While there are areas where the member states have agreed to surrender their sovereignty by giving the EU powers to act on their behalf as a single actor, the European Union only has the powers which the member states have chosen to give it. Therefore, it cannot act as a concrete entity in all cases.

Nevertheless, over time, the developments that have led up to the formation of the European Union as such have served to increase its capability to represent its constituents. In his book Issues in EU and US foreign policy, Cebeci argues that “although the EU is a ‘unique and non-unitary actor,’ its foreign policy on specific issues can be compared and contrasted with that of the US — a traditional state/unitary actor” (9). Therefore, it is possible to compare the two actors in the international arena. However, it's important to keep the structural difference between the two in mind when doing so, as it provides important insights into the divergence of the issues they face.

The history of the evolution of the European Union is vital in understanding the developments that have led up to its international role today. The EU emerged as a result of a long integration process centered on specific values and ideas. The development of the European Union has gone through several important phases. While initially European integration focused strictly on economic cooperation, over time, the European institutions have undergone some major expansions in their spheres of influence. At first, the cooperation was confined to two major economic areas between the six founding states of the European Coal and Steel

Community. The aim of this institution was to end wars in Europe through the building of positive economic relationships. The areas that were brought under the cooperation treaties increased over time. Subsequently, the European Economic Community was created, establishing even further economic cooperation between the member states. More and more states started joining the EEC as its power grew. The European Bloc was expanding greatly and that began to change the power structure of the world. Although the US has long been considered the sole superpower in the international arena, the European Union has slowly been gaining considerable influence through its growth both in territory as well as in economic terms. It is the biggest international bloc in the world, and it is a major trading power with a GDP higher than that of the US (The Economy). After economic cooperation was solidified, the member states embarked on the task of political integration. This, however, has been a more complicated task marked by numerous achievements but also several major setbacks.

Perhaps the biggest step towards integration was taken with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. It is the treaty that created the European Union and turned it into the entity that still exists today. “By instituting a European Union, the Maastricht Treaty marked a new step in the process of creating an “ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe” (1 Novak). Cooperation among the member states was deepened by the enlargement of the powers of the European institutions. The “three-pillar structure” that the Maastricht Treaty established brought about a tremendous change to the trend of focusing solely on economic cooperation. Security and defense issues were now included in the sphere of influence of the EU as the second pillar, and justice and home affairs were added as the third. In addition, the first pillar solidified the economic integration of the member states through the creation of a Monetary Union. Perhaps the most important development in terms of the Union’s single external policy has been the incorporation of the second pillar of security and defense. “By establishing the second pillar — The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) — through the Treaty of Maastricht, the EU has acquired a common policy extended to all the sectors of the security and external policy, building the basis for an enhanced cooperation framework between member states” (Ligia). Therefore, the European Union was at that moment established as an institution that could act as an international actor on behalf of the member states not only in economic policies, but also in political ones.

The values that the European Union enforces within its borders, such as democracy, rule of law, human rights, etc., have all been formed by and serve to solidify the integration process. The inclusion of “Justice and Home Affairs” into the treaties of the union, as well as “Security and Defense” had the effect of institutionalizing the exact values that the integration project had been preaching. In addition, the EU also spreads these values throughout the world through its interactions with other actors in the international arena. “The EU’s political values, encoded in its treaties, are well known and widely cited in the EU’s official discourse on foreign policy issues” (12 Bosse). As the European Union has become a more prominent actor in foreign affairs, it has increased its power to influence other actors. The desired objective of the formation of the European Union was to increase cooperation in order to ensure peace and prosperity. In its foreign relations, the EU has generally acted in a similar way — it aims to create cooperative relationships with most of the actors that it interacts with.

As a result of its concretely established values, the European Union has developed into a very unique type of character in international affairs. Its foreign policy can be contrasted with that of the US: “the EU is not focusing as much on military power, because Europe has developed its own model of conflict resolution, placing more emphasis on shared values and low

politics” (4 Bindi). The EU has not used military force throughout its own integration process and abstains from using it in its external relations. It wants to solidify its role as a peaceful actor and as one that promotes the values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights. It “is known to be a civilian power that employs diplomacy and economic means to attain its foreign policy goals” and it considers the use of military force to be “a last resort” (301 Cebeci). The US, on the other hand, is a very strong military power and employs this strength in its relations with various international actors as well as in its policies towards international issues. This is a major difference between the two actors — one is a civilian actor employing soft power, while the other is a military actor employing mainly hard power in its external affairs.

There are multiple examples where these crucial differences between the two international actors can be witnessed. One trend that emerges across various international issues in which the EU and the US have participated in some way is their different attitudes towards cooperation in political affairs. The US, considering itself as a global hegemon and an unbeatable military power, tends to act unilaterally in many cases. In its desire to satisfy its own personal interests, the US often disregards the international community. What is interesting is that it initially had had a “formative role in the creation, during the early post-war era, of the most important multilateral institutions in the contemporary world” (118 Peterson). However, over time, it has tended to separate from these institutions as their structures have changed. As many “hegemonic stability theorists” have stated, “hegemonic powers are most likely to favor the establishment and maintenance of multilateral institutions, from which they benefit disproportionately” (117 Peterson). Therefore, as more and more states became part of these institutions and have added their specific interests to them, US predominance has become less and less powerful. The US role in determining the direction of these multilateral frameworks waned and for that reason, the US has opted to act alone by using its hard power when it doesn’t have the support of the international community. It does so in order to preserve its hegemonic position in the world — it wants to exert its power worldwide.

The European Union, on the other hand, is a multilateral actor. In a way, it is actually a multilateral entity, as it is composed of individual member states that have agreed to cooperate in various policy areas. Therefore, the EU is more inclined to act in cooperation with other states and multilateral institutions when addressing world issues. In George Christou’s analysis of the EU’s role in global governance, he states that: “the EU has clearly stated that its ‘commitment to multilateralism is a defining feature of its external policy’” (Christou). It has refrained from acting on its own in problematic areas; its major strength lies in cooperation. In addition, it has followed a more multi-faceted approach, through which it encourages other states to adopt its values through the extension of trade agreements and aid. Its “power of attraction” is one of the EU’s most powerful tools in terms of foreign affairs. It “derives from the fact that it is a unique model in history, constructed on common values, mutual interests, solidarity and joint policies for economic development and convergence, with the aim to preserve peace, stability, and welfare for all European peoples” (Skordeli). The EU uses its status as the “world’s largest market and the biggest world trade power” to attract countries to cooperate with it. In order to do so, however they have to respect the Union’s values of democracy, human rights and rule of law (56 Bindi). The European Union demonstrates that cooperation has had a favorable effect both politically and economically for its member states. Consequently, its values spread and become more beneficial as more and more states are tempted to follow in the EU’s footsteps.

The approaches of the European Union and the United States towards the rest of the world differ greatly: “the US has a more geo-strategic orientation in its approach, whereas the

EU tends to view the world in economic and normative terms” (298 Cebeci). Unlike the United States that only seeks to prove its international power dominance, the EU aims at ensuring peace and stability throughout the world. This is evident in the European Union’s role in reconstruction and development aid, as well as in its European Neighborhood Policy. According to the website of the European Commission, “the EU is the largest donor of development aid in the world” and “it takes various political actions to reduce poverty and offers grants to developing countries” (International). This is indicative of the Union’s multi-faceted strategy towards particular issue areas. Rather than just focusing on reforming the governments of troubled states by imposing its own systems on them, the EU works to establish a positive relationship with them and to use its power of attraction to inspire them to adopt their governmental values. This is very different from the US approach of invading issue areas, overthrowing their governments, and imposing a completely new type of government on societies that aren’t prepared for such a change. In the long-term, the EU approach is likely to be more successful as the states are likely to slowly get accustomed to the values spread by the Union rather than having them forced upon them.

The ENP, or the European Neighborhood Policy, is a major external project of the European Union. It is a program of the EU that demonstrates its commitment to its soft power status in international relations. As stated by the European External Action Service, “the ENP translates the EU’s wish to build on common interests with partner countries of the East and South and commitment to work jointly in key priority areas, including in the promotion of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion” (European). As more countries have joined the EU, these countries’ neighbors may feel neglected and they might find themselves facing new trade restrictions with their previous export-import partners. The ENP, in turn, creates a framework through which these countries can engage in some cooperation with the members of the European Union. The “ENP’s rationale is to ensure that those not taking part in the enlargement exercise are not completely left out either” (Bosse 39). Through this initiative, the Union aims at strengthening its relations with its neighbors for the purpose of spreading its values and ensuring peace in the world around it. Therefore, it is evident that the EU is very committed to enhancing its civilian role in the world. The US, on the contrary, has not been very active in promoting good relationships with its neighbors, and where it has established some cooperative institutions, it has mainly been for the purpose of enhancing its own well-being. This has been amplified recently with the new administration under President Donald Trump, who has identified some of the country’s neighbors as problematic to overall US welfare.

The entity that is the European Union has turned into one of the most important players in the international arena. Its values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law have been established and solidified throughout the long process of integration that it has gone through. Now, as an actor in international relations, it uses its power to project its values onto the rest of the world with the purpose of building peace and prosperity. It is precisely in its status as a civilian multinational actor that it can be contrasted with the United States, which has been largely focused on expanding its military might with the purpose of maintaining its hegemonic position in the world. While the two entities have very different structures and histories, their foreign policies are interesting to compare as they both play vital roles in issues throughout the world but they do so in very different ways. Examining their actions in different situations provides insights for understanding how international relations are implemented and what the most successful policies are. In a world in which wars are rare and military power is not considered the main form of power anymore, perhaps the European Union is more prepared to address the numerous world issues as it has a more multi-faceted approach in comparison with that the US.

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