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## The Soft Power Dilemma: Can the European Union Sacrifice the Carrot and the Stick and Command with Soft Power Alone?

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## THE SOFT POWER DILEMMA: CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION SACRIFICE THE CARROT AND THE STICK AND COMMAND WITH SOFT POWER ALONE?

**Helen Pollock**

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries are often described as a “unipolar moment,”<sup>1</sup> a time when the United States supervised the entire world. It has bankrolled wars, exercised its power in international institutions, and acted as a global watchdog to keep the other nations in line. But the United States’ methods are falling out of favor in the international community, and the European Union may have the potential to share some of the United States’ responsibilities. What was once a loose coalition of only six states is now an organization representing twenty-seven nations, with a currency rivaling and even overpowering the dollar, and the single largest economic market in the world.<sup>2</sup> However, the EU does not have the capacity to use hard power as effectively as a nation like the United States. This paper will examine the EU’s use of soft power to influence international outcomes, and evaluate whether the EU can afford to rely not on hard military or economic power, but on its soft power capabilities.

### **LIMITATIONS ON THE EU’S MILITARY HARD POWER**

As an actor in international politics, the EU has the option of using two methods to influence other nations and policy outcomes: wielding hard power or soft power. Hard power is an actor’s ability to influence the decisions of another global entity through “inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks),” and it is used most frequently in the form of military power and economic power.<sup>3</sup> The EU has the potential to use both, but in practice, it rarely puts either to use. First, for a complete understanding of the EU’s military hard power, two issues must be addressed: the military capabilities of the EU’s member states and the capabilities of the EU as a whole. As separate nations, the member states of the EU have 1.6 million troops and spend €160 billion on defense (statistics second only to the United States) and two of the member states are nuclear powers.<sup>4</sup> Although the US and the EU have roughly the same number of men and women under arms, the EU states spend only 40 percent of what the US spends on their military, and allocates much less of it to research and development or airlift capabilities.<sup>5</sup> In fact, these statistics do not reflect actual deployment capability; many of the member states’ troops are not well trained for battle, since they perform mostly non-

combat tasks, and some of them are conscripted soldiers. In addition, these troops cannot be committed quickly to a conflict, because bureaucratic reaction time is relatively slow, and many of these forces are also currently dedicated to NATO operations.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to distinguish between the troops of these individual states and EU forces, because only EU forces can be deployed by the organization. The capabilities of the EU as a whole have been growing since 1999, but to date, the “reality of EU deployment remains confined to humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks, and tasks for combat forces in crisis management.”<sup>7</sup> The current effort for a European “army” takes the form of EU “battlegroups.” The 1,500-man EU battlegroups can be deployed within 5 to 10 days of receiving orders and tailored to specific operations.<sup>8</sup> Despite the commitment of 100,000 troops, 400 aircraft, and 100 naval vessels to the project, it does not constitute a standing army. These forces are earmarked only, and cannot be deployed instantaneously. Provisions of the plan also give member states the right to refuse to deploy their share of the forces,<sup>9</sup> which could hamstring any operation.

As it stands, the EU has no official army to use as military hard power – whether as a “stick” to deter action or as the means to go to war. Without an army or a means of deploying troops, the EU has no hope of applying military hard power. This is largely the result of two limits on EU military power: the extent of integration and the reliance on the US for security.

The first and most important limit on military hard power through a European army is European integration. By encompassing 27 states, along with their languages, incompatible domestic legal structures, and national identities and biases,<sup>10</sup> the EU has discovered that it is nearly impossible to unite all of the member states under a common foreign policy. The failures of integration were obvious in Kosovo during its bid for independence in 2008; the EU made a blanket statement in support of Kosovo, but Spain – having a Basque population of its own clamoring for sovereignty – refused to join the common policy.<sup>11</sup> The EU grapples with conflicting political agendas and even multiple states with military neutrality, as well as a history of conflict and fighting between them. In the guarded political climate after World War II, the European nations rebuilt and became fiercely protective of their sovereignty. In addition, many of the countries’ strong nationalistic pride dates back to the imperial age and beyond; Great Britain, Spain, Germany, France, Italy, and other members have had a taste of empire and domination, and their citizens remember their nation’s heyday. National identity is an everyday roadblock to an integrated foreign policy, and thus limits the institution of a military force.

The United States is an important obstruction to EU military power because the EU has long relied on the US for its security needs through NATO, creating a “transatlantic dependence.”<sup>12</sup> The Atlantic alliance is an “extra insurance policy” against aggression from member states or outside powers like Russia.<sup>13</sup> While the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War “in theory freed Europe from the need for American leadership, the Balkan wars of the 1990s revealed that Europeans still depended on the US to keep peace on their own soil.”<sup>14</sup> Since US forces managed most of the major conflicts through the 1990s, many EU countries limited their own defense spending. In Kosovo in early 2008, the United States, not the European Union, opposed Russian support for maintaining Serbia’s control and ensured the protection of Kosovo’s new sovereignty. EU member states (with the exception of Spain) supported Kosovo through NATO, not through any formal European institution. The EU had no collective military hard power with which it could intervene,

and could not even reach a consensus on what action should be taken, leaving the conflict largely in another power's hands.

### **LIMITATIONS ON THE EU'S ECONOMIC HARD POWER**

The EU is the largest economic market in the world, with 458 million consumers, more than the US and Japan combined.<sup>15</sup> Its members "create about one quarter of the world's gross national product and one fifth of the world's commerce."<sup>16</sup> In addition, the combined GDP of its member states is almost \$12 trillion<sup>17</sup> and with the integration of their currencies, there is increasing demand for the euro to take over as an alternative international reserve currency.<sup>18</sup> The EU is now an economic giant, with the currency, the market, and the economic power to prove it.

The EU is also quickly becoming an economic regulatory power because of its ability to encourage other countries to adopt its standards and its talent for using globalization for its own ends. The EU can refuse access to its market – a huge blow to any company – unless a country adopts its production standards; the organization has also subsidized the adoption of those standards in developing countries, making it free or at least affordable to comply with the regulations.<sup>19</sup> As the number of countries involved in the EU's regulated market increases, it can exert greater pressure on the nations that have not complied. As a result of EU-established standards, farmers even outside of Europe are refusing to plant biotech crops like genetically engineered corn, and American companies have stopped using ethanol in their skin care products.<sup>20</sup> While these seem like inconsequential changes compared to the extent of the global market, the fact that the EU can influence American standards and encourage farmers to choose more expensive production options means that the EU is successfully establishing itself as an economic "norm setter."<sup>21</sup>

The EU can use these resources as economic hard power. Preferential market access has been used to gain regulatory concessions, but it also provides a powerful incentive for foreign states to support other EU goals. For example, the EU denied China access to its armaments market through a trade embargo after the Tiananmen massacre of 1989; the embargo helped influence China's gradual improvements in protecting human rights until the ban was lifted.<sup>22</sup> However, the EU has become increasingly unwilling to use sanctions to enact its policies. The sentiment among Europeans is that since "governments can evade sanctions' effects [and] the real victims are likely to be innocent citizens of targeted nations,"<sup>23</sup> sanctions should not be used. The EU can also manipulate development assistance to influence other countries, especially in the developing world. It is the world's "largest donor of 'development assistance,'"<sup>24</sup> granting \$44 billion in 2003, almost three times as much as the US.<sup>25</sup> By granting or withholding these funds in response to another nation's policies, the EU might wield greater influence; however, the EU does not use development assistance for the same reasons it does not impose sanctions. The EU does not care to punish citizens for the actions of their government, and thus does not employ these methods. Though the EU has great potential for using economic hard power, it chooses to rely on others means of influence.

### **HOW DOES THE EU COMMAND WITH SOFT POWER?**

The EU has become an expert at using soft power instead of hard power to achieve its goals internationally. Soft power allows a nation to "obtain the outcomes it wants... because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, [and]

aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness.”<sup>26</sup> A nation’s soft power relies on its ability to maintain political policies that “shape the preferences of others,”<sup>27</sup> and on the international reputation it can create. The EU is unique in its reliance on soft power rather than hard power; traditionally, the great global powers have relied on hard power capabilities like a large standing army to give them legitimacy. The EU has no such capability, and yet it continues to act as a major player. It represents a new kind of great power: one that uses economic benefits and soft power policies to work in its own national interest, grant humanitarian aid, and attempt to solve international conflicts. The EU has four chief means of employing soft power: filling the power vacuum left by mistrust of the US, making its ideals attractive to the rest of the world, maintaining its international reputation, and capitalizing on the appeal of enlargement.

According to John McCormick, the EU “relies upon soft power to express itself and to achieve its objectives, and...finds itself at a moral advantage in an international environment where violence as a means of achieving influence is detested and rejected.”<sup>28</sup> Although international violence has not gone completely out of style as McCormick suggests, the modern political climate is conducive to the EU’s focus on soft power if the EU can prove that this kind of influence is effective. The world’s only real superpower, the US, has worn out much of its welcome on the other side of the world; the United States’ “war on terror” is becoming increasingly unpopular and the country is now regarded as a “bull in the global china shop.”<sup>29</sup> This is a consequence of wielding hard power unilaterally and displaying little regard for the capabilities of other poorly armed nations. Hard power and unilateralism have lost their credibility as the only means of obtaining power, and the EU capitalizes on this disrespect for political tools associated with the United States. The EU has also proved that it is willing to flex its political muscles in international institutions, even when it means opposing the United States. In 2001, the EU used its member states’ 15 votes to remove the United States from the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, as protest against the US’ refusal to join the International Criminal Court and the global landmine ban, as well as its continued use of the death penalty. By standing up to the United States, the EU signaled that it can be powerful in its own right, and that the hard power tools used by the United States are not the only method to influence international politics.

The EU’s standards, ideals, and structure have become increasingly attractive to the outside world. Not only has the organization extended its economic reach, but it has also expanded the acceptance of its political culture. As the largest source of humanitarian aid, providing 47 percent of the world total in 2001, the EU “buys good will and thus augments [its] soft power even in regions where it has no obvious or direct geopolitical interest.”<sup>30</sup> All over the world, other countries are adopting EU standards and policy frameworks, even without the EU providing economic incentives. For example, the EU’s policy on personal data privacy – strictly limiting the way that states can use personal information – has been adopted in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Japan, Peru, and Uruguay.<sup>31</sup> Such policy inheritances can enhance respect for EU ideals in these countries, without the EU directly intervening in their politics. The EU has engineered a unique reputation as an economic giant with a “business first” attitude and a willingness to help developing countries. This grants the organization a moral high ground from which it can critique the United States and pursue its own goals, like fostering economic freedoms, protecting human rights, and allowing third world countries to develop and join the international community.

The EU’s reputation as a multilateral organization is one of its greatest assets, because

it serves as a model for a new type of regional institution and can tailor its response to every international political dilemma. The EU can “obtain the outcomes it wants...because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, [and] aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness.”<sup>32</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has announced its intentions to form a “common market in goods, services, capital, and labor by 2020,”<sup>33</sup> a move inspired by European success. Other regional organizations like the African Union and the South American Community of Nations also look to the EU for guidance, and “affinities with their institutional cultures...are potentially important avenues for European influence in those regions.”<sup>34</sup> In addition, the EU can choose to be represented in every political conversation by the member state whose national identity or political structure is more closely aligned with the nation the EU wants to influence. Other countries are more likely to come to the diplomatic table if they feel that the EU has an appreciation for its needs; in return, the EU can wield influence in many other parts of the world.

In its immediate neighborhood, the EU’s most effective use of soft power is the influence it can exert by the suggestion of enlargement.<sup>35</sup> In order to receive the benefits of EU membership, potential members adopt EU standards, change their governmental structures, and adjust their foreign and domestic policies to align more carefully with the EU. The two most recent additions to the EU, Romania and Bulgaria, made huge concessions to join; the EU made the “provision of economic aid partly dependent on progress in areas such as judicial and administrative reform”<sup>36</sup> in both countries, encouraging them to adopt fair practice laws and restructure their court systems. They responded to these pressures and a number of other conditions, and successfully joined the EU in January of 2007. Another example of the soft power influence that enlargement can have is the effect the EU has had on Turkey. Although Turkey enjoys a trade agreement that grants it most of the commercial privileges of EU membership, the country still seeks to join the EU. In response to consideration of its membership, Turkey has made improvements in human rights, reformed its laws on the freedom of expression, limited the role of the army in its national politics, and improved its electoral processes.<sup>37</sup> The country had “drastically revised laws and policies on such sensitive issues as the death penalty, the treatment of ethnic minorities, and the role of the military”<sup>38</sup> even before the EU had agreed to discuss its membership; the elusive idea of EU membership was enough to spur huge changes in Turkey’s government without any formal negotiations with the EU. The suggestion of enlargement, inclusion, and integration is a powerful tool; other countries want the success and influence that the EU has created for itself, and the most direct means of obtaining it is to join the EU.

### **IRAN: A CASE STUDY OF EUROPEAN SOFT POWER**

In Iran, the EU has taken the lead in negotiations regarding the cessation of the nuclear program. The diplomatic negotiations, beginning in early 2003, hoped to avoid another military confrontation in the Middle East, prevent Iran from obtaining military nuclear capabilities, and protect the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty.<sup>39</sup> By combining the EU-3 (Great Britain, Germany, and France) along with the United States, Russia, and China (altogether the EU-3+3) and working in conjunction with UN Security Council involvement, the EU hoped to attain consensus among the major powers and project a united policy against Iranian nuclear proliferation. In October of 2003, the EU-3+3 signed the negotiations’ first agreement: in return for European recognition of Iran’s right to light water reactors for manufacturing energy as well as other trade programs, the Iranian government agreed

to suspend nuclear activities and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors into the country.<sup>40</sup> Despite early successes, the negotiations broke down in 2006; Iran resumed the production of enriched uranium in April of that year and announced its intention to install 3,000 centrifuges – enough to move forward with a nuclear program.<sup>41</sup> The EU-3+3 has since struggled with Iran's rejection of IAEA/UN inspectors in early 2007 and threats to the existence of Israel, among a host of smaller conflicts and problems.<sup>42</sup> To date, no satisfactory agreement has been reached, though the negotiations are continuing. It seems unlikely that the EU-3+3 will be able to obtain an agreement acceptable to all parties, since both sides hold powerful cards and escalation may be imminent.<sup>43</sup> In terms of limiting nuclear proliferation, the negotiations have been a failure.

But reaching an unassailable agreement was not necessarily the EU's only goal in Iran. If one of the EU's objectives was to offer itself as a part of the negotiations and promote the organization as a reasonable alternative to the United States, it has projected that image successfully.<sup>44</sup> Finding a reasonable solution to Iranian nuclear demands is desirable, but the EU also has more pragmatic goals: increasing the power of its own reputation and the prestige of its international policies.<sup>45</sup> By leading the Iranian negotiations, the EU bolsters its reputation, one of its most influential soft power advantages, and carves out an important place for itself in the most pressing conflicts of international security and defense. Even though the EU has not been wholly successful in completing its stated objectives, it will benefit from representing both the EU and the Western world on the international stage.

### **THE SOFT POWER DILEMMA: CAN IT WORK?**

The sources of European power have been identified, but it remains to be seen whether its reliance on soft power is a formula for lasting international influence. A number of problems remain for the EU regarding the effectiveness of its power and the limits of its diplomatic tools, and the EU's international power is still being defined. Iran is an example of the limits of European power on the global stage; the nuclear conflict is one of the most dangerous situations that the world faces, and the EU has shown that it cannot handle it with soft power alone. Its participation in the negotiations has contributed to its growing reputation, but the EU was not able to solve the conflict or succeed where the United States has not.

The problem of security has the potential to derail the EU's reliance on soft power. The European Union's relationship with the United States is especially troubling, because the EU needs the US to provide its basic military legitimacy. The EU will continue to rely on the US or another great power with military presence as long as it is without an army of its own, which gives it much less leverage internationally. The EU is associated with American military operations in many countries by its own accord or through NATO, and if these operations go awry, the EU is also responsible. Even when the EU is not in agreement with the United States' military policies, they have few means of opposing these decisions. As member states' defense budgets continue to decline,<sup>46</sup> it is questionable that they will be able to protect themselves as needed.

But for now, the EU occupies the perfect position; its security needs are provided for with very little effort, and its policies have aligned closely with the United States. In situations where EU and US policies have differed, the EU has not been completely tied to American decisions. In Iraq, many EU countries refused to provide troops or have since recalled them in the face of what many Europeans see as American failure. As a result, the

US has been forced to act unilaterally, which undermines the international community's goodwill. This vacuum is a potential space for the EU to fill, since it does not have the military capabilities to act on its own like the United States and is an institution founded on multilateralism. In fact, non-integration has its benefits. The difficulties of integration assure other nations that they need not fear a militant or aggressive EU, making them more likely to invest in the European market and come to the diplomatic table. The EU wields 27 votes in international institutions instead of only one, maintains a reputation of unaffected commerce and multilateralism, and represents the "good cop" abroad, a perfect situation for an organization with the EU's goals.<sup>47</sup> Many countries are attracted to the idea of a coalition of cooperative states, especially one that has proved to be so economically successful. The existence of the union implies that it can manage diplomatic conflicts, balance differences in foreign policy, and allow for national identities and biases, which are all important for resolving any international conflict. The maintenance of member state sovereignty is actually a boon, because it reminds other countries that the EU is familiar with cooperating and balancing national interests. Though soft power clearly has its limits – as suggested by the negotiations with Iran – the EU still has significant influence in international affairs.

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