The EU has been described as a civilian power, normative power and soft power. How would you characterise the EU’s power potential?

Perceptions of the European Union have changed remarkably over the last decade. In the early 1980’s, many questioned whether the EU was even a serious international actor (Bull, 1982). Now the debate is what kind of international actor the European Union is. As such, this essay will outline why the European Union has become a major power within global politics and the type of power the EU has become. Defining power can be difficult, particularly given the subjective nature of the concept. Weber describes it as “the chance of a man, or a number of men to realize their own will in communal action, even against the resistance of others”. Yet, like all definitions of power, it fails to adequately differentiate the difference between power and influence. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the dictionary’s definition of power, which states that power is the ability to do things in a given social context and affect others to get the outcomes you desire. The European Union’s power potential should be viewed through this lens. “We are one of the most important, if not the most important, normative powers in the world” stated European Commission President José Manuel Barroso in a 2007 interview. Does his statement reflect how the EU is perceived and its ability to wield power as an international actor or is it ignorant of the vast complexities that underpin the EU’s actor hood? To suggest that the EU is merely a civilian, soft, smart or normative power is to oversimplify the debate, which does injustice to the EU’s power potential in the twenty-first century. Duchene defines the EU primarily to be a ‘civilian’ power. He argues that the EU’s power is derived from its capacity to exert a large degree of influence on third parties, based on its own successful model of using economic and political models of security and stability (Duchene,
1972). In contrast, Manners argues that the EU’s power is rooted in its normative behaviour exemplified in its model (Sjursen, 2006). Whilst Manners and Duchene’s arguments have some credit, both fail to account for the growing competency and shared EU foreign policy objectives. This essay will argue that the European Union cannot be pigeonholed into any one stream of power, rather it embodies strong elements of a 'soft power' and increasingly the potential to transform into a fully-fledged smart power.

A historical analysis into the formation of the EU can be useful in defining the EU's power potential in today's global politics. When the European Community was proposed in the 1950s, Churchill proposed that a United States of Europe with strong defence capabilities, akin to the United States of America be established. In particular, Churchill was insistent upon a European Defence Community with a standing European army. However, a war-weary Europe rejected Churchill’s proposal and decided instead to develop a European Community based on the pooling of steel and coal industries to make inter-state war difficult (Riotta, 2011).

The EU is a unique international actor and as mentioned earlier, it cannot be pigeonholed into any particular paradigm. Rather this paper suggests that the EU’s past actions reveal that it utilises ‘soft power’ as its primary form of influence. Furthermore, realists fail to account for the large degree of institutionalized multilateral cooperation embodied in the Common Security and Defence Policy (and its predecessor the European Security and Defence Policy), further straining traditional concepts of power relations(Grieco 1997). In rebuttal, Euro-sceptics and traditional realists argue that “When all you have is a pen, everything looks like a treaty” in reference to the EU’s lack of hard power (Van Ham, 2011). Consider that the CSFP and its predecessor the ESDP now comprise a central part of Europe’s security architecture. Neorealists fail to account for such institutionalized
multilateral cooperation. In many ways, the EU has challenged traditional concepts of power, especially the dominant neo-realist branch of international relations. I would suggest here that the EU’s soft power capacity has been improved through its ability to adopt a common security and foreign policy agenda. This gives Europe a chance to engage in Soft power 2.0 or ‘smart power’ as suggested by Nye in the 2007 Center for Strategic and International Studies report (CSIS, 2007). Though the report was aimed at America, the European Union has been the clear driver of this concept. It has been able to innovate and transcend traditional notions of power, by relying on soft power and in more recent times utilising valuable elements of hard power. This paper suggests that the EU has the distinct advantage of a well harnessed and effective ‘soft power’ approach that will only legitimise its pursuit of a ‘smart power’ strategy in the twenty-first century.

The EU by its nature has the unique ability to muster international support for its foreign policies. In stark contrast to the American culture of over-militarization and low tolerance for long-term investments with distant pay-offs, the EU has been able to demonstrate long-term commitment to strategic projects, particularly with respect to institution-building and development (Gray, 1994, pp.593, 597). In addition, EU policy has been less confrontational and belligerent, and has the potential to succeed where U.S ‘hard power’ militarism has failed (Van Ham, 2010 pp.577). This legitimacy and attractiveness lie at the heart of the EU’s power potential.

The EU’s unique international role has allowed it to transcend beyond the Hobbesian anarchic system of international relations. Instead, it embraces the Kantian goal of perpetual peace. The ‘warrior’ mentality associated with neo-realist’s account of power politics has been challenged by the world’s largest economic bloc. The EU has often been labelled as a metro sexual power in that it has abandoned traditional hard power macho mechanisms to exert influence on the global stage.
(Parag Khana, 2004). Van Ham characterises this power to be weak, arguing instead that the EU shed feminine aspects of its behaviour and join the "exclusive rank of super powers run by supermen"(Parag Khana, 2004 pp.58; Van Ham, 2010 pp.587,589). Therein lies the tragedy. Van Ham and other sceptics of the EU’s soft power fail to recognise that the EU’s gentler, kinder and soft power approach is its greatest asset (Van Ham, 2010 pp.587). Its embrace of the soft power approach is part of a moving trend away from neorealist notions of power politics. In any case, classical realist approaches cannot be used to characterise EU relations even if it did decide to rely on hard power because neo-Realism is premised upon the state as a central actor.

The EU is a unique international actor that cannot be pigeonholed into the existing frameworks of the current international order. The European Project in many ways is a new phenomenon, and even though it has existed for some time now, few scholars have been able to accurately describe its position on the global stage. Kagan is accurate in describing Europe’s neglect of power politics as embodied in its choice to remain militarily weak (Cooper, 2003, p.159). Europe’s strategic culture has shifted dramatically in the post WWII period. In particular, its embrace of public diplomacy and other soft power tools has increased its appeal to third parties. Europe’s characterisation as a ‘soft power’ is more appropriate than a ‘normative’ power as the latter implies an emphasis on value judgements, which can often conflict with the EU’s foreign policy goals. In particular, soft power values public diplomacy highly. The EU’s public diplomacy strategy has been highly effective. If Nye’s definition of public diplomacy is taken to analyse its effectiveness, it is evident that the EU has mastered the art of public diplomacy. In particular it has been able to build lasting relationships with key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences and harnessing strategic communication methods (Nye, 2004 pp.107-111). Nye describes this approach as a “two-way street” in which the EU has been able to engage with civil
society on development issues, improved information-sharing capacities and providing guidance, advice and economic incentives; of which are attributes of the soft power approach (Nye, 2004, pp.77). For example, in a poll conducted in the 1980s in Eastern Europe, Western Europe outranked the United States as the preferred model for economic growth, democracy and individual freedoms for its citizens (Pisano-Ferry, 2010; Nye, 2004, pp.77).

Since Europe’s resources are not drowned in traditional hard power mechanisms, it has allowed it to contribute significantly towards developing its soft power tools. This is particularly evident in Europe’s contribution of more than half of all overseas development assistance to poor countries, four times more than the United States (Nye, 2011). This adds enormous legitimacy to the EU’s soft power agenda. Add to that, in recent times Europe has embraced limited elements of military power, but has done so wisely. It is reasonable to suggest then that Europe is in a transformative phase, moving from being purely a ‘soft power’ towards engaging in ‘smart power’ mechanisms. Nowhere is this more evident than in Europe’s vast contribution to peacekeeping operations under the banner of multilateral organisations. Take the EU’s policy towards Iran’s nuclear programme for example; it has demonstrated a less confrontational and belligerent foreign policy approach. If I may speculate here, it is more likely that EU policy will bring Iran closer to the international community than the hard stance taken by the United States. Though it one can only speculate as to whether ‘European diplomacy’ will always succeed (Hyde-Pryce 2008). The recent development of limited hard power mechanisms and greater cohesion in European security and defence policy embodied in the CSDP will not undermine the EU’s soft power. Rather, given they are primarily designated for peaceful purposes; they will only increase the EU’s legitimacy (Krotz, 2009).
As suggested earlier, the European Union has built on its soft power mechanisms to develop limited mechanisms of military power that will bolster its reputation as a ‘force for good’ in international power politics. The smart power narrative the EU is moving towards has allowed it to combine soft and hard power resources into formulating successful strategies for 21st century problems (Nye, 2011). This approach has built on the EU’s soft power approaches, particularly its investment in alliances, partnerships and institutions, but has added to it smart military tools. The EU’s embrace of such hard power mechanisms is a recognition that elements of hard power can be utilised to advance a progressive cause (Evans, 2003). This smart narrative has allowed the EU to invest in joint military Research & Development, defence procurements and engagements in highly efficient military operation (Schmitt, 2003). According to Van Ham, this element of military power has allowed the EU to transform into a “fully fledged statal entity on a continental scale” (Van Ham, 2010 pp.585-587).

A new smart power might well be on the rise as the EU’s influence grows on the global stage. Firstly, it has built a smart power strategy, particularly regarding the utility of ‘hard power’ in conflict zones. In stark contrast to the U.S. where foreign policy tends to be over militarized and the Pentagon’s funding dwarfs that of the State department, the EU has opted for a multilateral approach that utilizes the UN, thereby adding legitimacy and cost-effectiveness to its military operations (Nye, 2011 pp.144). Recognising that the utility of traditional methods of military power have diminished, the EU has embraced a new generation of strategies and methods that have been tailored to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This striking new level of efficiency is a key factor as to why the EU is becoming a ‘smart power’. As Nye suggests, promoting democracy, human rights and the development of civil society are not necessarily best handled with the barrel of a gun (Nye, 2011 pp.144).
The EU has pursued ‘smart power’ strategies robustly in recent times. In particular, it has been successful in designing strategies and demonstrating skilful leadership in pursuing this agenda (Nye, 2011 pp.291). Sjursen suggests in her article *What kind of power*, that the adoption of a more cohesive foreign policy embodied in the CSDP raises concerns about the EU’s military ambition. Yet when examined closely, after Lisbon the EU has not adopted a different foreign policy agenda, nor is it likely to in the near future. Rather, the CSDP is part of a well designed strategy to pursue a smarter EU foreign policy (Sjursen, 2006). In many respects the EU’s smart strategy is paying off. In a recent poll for example, the vast majority of Americans agreed that the European Union had an important role in solving the world’s problems, even though militarily it remains quite weak (Nye, 2011).

In conclusion, whilst the EU partially fits Duchene’s characterisation of a ‘civilian power’ in that it emphasises multilateral cooperation, improved governance and democratic norms, it fails to explain why the EU has increasingly embraced military interventions. Manners ‘normative power’ characterisation of the EU also fails to provide a clear, all-encompassing definition of the EU’s role as an international actor. Instead this essay has argued that elements of Duchene’s civilian and Manners’ normative concepts of power exist within the framework of the EU’s soft power approach. In recent times however, the soft power characterisation of the EU has proven inadequate, particularly given the growing militarization of EU foreign policy. The EU has moved to embrace limited elements of ‘hard power’ that it had previously neglected. It has devised a series of new generation smart strategies that will utilise elements of both hard power and soft power, giving it the potential to be a ‘smart power’ or soft power 2.0 as described by Nye.
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