



Taking Stock on the Role of the EU in a Fragmenting International Order

Oriol Costa and Esther Barbé

INTRODUCTION

This volume has looked at some of the dilemmas that a fragmenting liberal international order (LIO) poses for the EU as an international actor. The formation of the EU's global role has been closely associated with the LIO in its post-Cold War version, as Western norms and institutions expanded and previously existing regimes embraced more intrusive understandings of their associated normative commitments (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). To be sure, the European Economic Community did conduct external relations during the Cold War, including in fields in which the Treaty granted internal but not external competences, on account of the ERTA ruling of 1971. Also, coordination on foreign affairs precedes the end of bipolarity, as European Political Cooperation started in 1970 (Allen et al., 1982). However, most of the EU's development

O. Costa (✉) · E. Barbé
Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), Barcelona, Spain
e-mail: Oriol.Costa@uab.cat

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

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as an international actor took place from the 1990s onwards, with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, the creation of CFSP and CSDP, and a profound engagement with the UN system (Laatikainen & Smith, 2006) and multilateral institutions (Oberthür et al., 2013), which led to diplomatic coups in fields such as climate, landmines and international criminal justice (Groenleer & van Schaik, 2007).

In other words, the relationship between the EU and the LIO in its post-Cold War version is very intimate. That they are joined at the hip is illustrated by the fact that while LIO expanded (beyond the West) and became thicker (with new norms and institutions), the EU enlarged and became deeper; and that the LIO tackled new regulatory and normative concerns at the same time the EU started conceiving of itself as an exporter of norms (Manners, 2002). The construction of the EU and of its foreign policy since the end of bipolarity has been an integral part of and has been enabled by the transformation of LIO 2.0 (its post-World War II incarnation) into LIO 3.0 (the post-Cold War one) (Ikenberry, 2009).

Hence the EU probably has become the polity that is more dependent on the LIO to articulate its international role. It has relied on its multilateral institutions and international norms to gain recognition as an actor and to forge internal consensus (Costa, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, its aspirations for world politics have also depended on the LIO, which has led the EU to act both as a power for change and for the status quo. Take for instance the Pascal Lamy-inspired doctrine of managed globalization, a grand project to reform the relationship between globalization and public authority, and between trade and other policy goals (labour rights, the environment and consumer rights). This doctrine, which the EU endorsed in 1999 and has periodically resurfaced since (albeit under new labels), depended on a powerful multilateral system able to embed liberal markets and retain a preference for globalization (Meunier, 2007). In other words, the international role the EU has devised for itself is to a great extent a function of the LIO, even when the EU aspires to reform the international order.

This book interrogates the extent to which the EU can sustain its capacity to be an international actor independently from the fate of the LIO. Is the EU able to craft a strategy to tackle the fragmentation of the LIO and remain internationally relevant? Can the EU outlive the conditions under which its foreign policy developed? Should the EU accept or resist fragmentation? We are agnostic about what the right strategy

would be. It might imply rejecting the idea that one should play by the rules of a fragmenting order, or it might imply the opposite. We assume that preferences about this will vary across issue areas and across actors—an assumption that holds in our collection of cases, even if acceptance of the logic of fragmentation seems to dominate.

The introduction to this volume assumes that strategies can be reflective of three different worldviews, or ways to conceive of one's own relationship with the international order: as expressed by the national community (nationalists), as organized at the European level (Europeanists), and as part of a broader Western block (Atlanticism). Nationalist approaches will tend to see the nation state as the right level to articulate participation in international affairs. They will hence strive for national autonomy in a fragmenting order, whether to embrace such fragmentation (under the idea that national sovereignty demands a less intrusive international order), or to resist it. A Europeanist approach will claim that the best way to adjust to or combat the fragmentation of the LIO is for the EU to act as a Union and independently from other countries. Finally, Atlanticism will see the EU as unable or unwilling to take on that endeavour, and a broader Western alliance as a more appropriate instrument for the purposes of resisting centrifugal forces or taking part in a more competitive and dangerous environment. We think there is analytical merit in distinguishing these three approaches, but this does not imply that they cannot be found in different combinations in the real world. As shown by contributions to this volume, actors can juggle more than one approach when they advance their proposals, and policies can also reflect composite preferences.

This volume presents a wide range of case studies, spanning eight policy domains—namely, nuclear non-proliferation (Benjamin Kienzle), critical raw materials (Martijn Vlaskamp), global health (Óscar Fernández and Robert Kissack), trade (L. Johan Eliasson and Patricia Garcia-Duran), infrastructures (Eduard Soler i Lecha), violence against women (Diego Badell and Esther Barbé), artificial intelligence (Giovanni Briganti Dini) and security and defence (Eva Michaels and Monika Sus). They have been chosen to represent a broad selection of policies illustrative of the EU's international role. They also vary in important aspects: in terms of the extent to which powers are delegated to the EU, the degree to which the EU is influential at the international level, or the alignment between EU and US policies. However, in spite of dealing with extremely variegated cases, contributions to this book present findings that can be linked by

way of a limited number of common threads. We present them in two different subsections below. We first address findings regarding the fragmenting LIO, and then we turn to the politics and policies of the EU's reaction to such fragmentation.

ON FRAGMENTATION

Fragmentation is quite simply a process of change from a more unified condition to a more fragmented one. This deceptively banal assertion has three important implications. First, we need a baseline. Asserting fragmentation requires being able to compare the present with the previous state of things. The introduction to this volume identifies such a baseline with the international order of the post-Cold War years (1990s and 2000s). This choice implies asserting that fragmentation is predicated only on the latest iteration of the LIO—Ikenberry's LIO 3.0 (2009). Secondly, since fragmentation is a process, stating that the LIO is fragmenting does not require us to believe the baseline was un-fragmented, or that the end point in this process is complete fragmentation (a world perfectly splintered along fault lines dividing essentially self-contained political and economic blocs). Finally, what exactly is being fragmented is also relevant. We understand the LIO as composed of different norms and institutions broadly aligned with each other. This forces us to be explicit about the level of analysis. The two latter issues organize our discussion in this section. We will first tackle the question of pre-existing and coetaneous modes of fragmentation, and then turn to the issue of where fragmentation is located.

Other Fragmentations

As stated above, picking a baseline against which to assess fragmentation does not imply making the case that such a baseline was un-fragmented. There are instances of fragmentation that precede the end of the decade of the 2000s,¹ the moment in which the process of fragmentation that

¹ It would be unreasonable to establish a single watershed event to mark the beginning of this phase. But we can think of a confluence of indicators: open contestation of human rights norms at the UN Human Rights Council already in 2008 (Gowan & Brantner, 2008), Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, the August war of 2008, the more regular use of vetoes by China at the UNSC on issues not directly related with

this volume is interested in can be said to have started. There are also instances of fragmentation that, while at least partially contemporary with such a process, are not associated with it. Let us begin with the former cases, and then deal with the latter.

Two of the chapters in this volume show a good deal of in-built, longer-lasting fragmentation—those devoted to violence against women (which descends from the regime human rights; see Badell and Barbé, this volume) and the “hybrid institutional complex” on health (see Fernández and Kissack, this volume). Both human rights and health were part of the post-WWII order, and they were conceived as universal regimes from their inception. This sets them apart from other policy areas, in which the end of the Cold War drove the aspiration to make Western institutions global. Perhaps for this reason, both regimes were designed to allow for regionalization. The creation of regional bodies on Human Rights (e.g. the Council of Europe, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights), and the deployment of regional offices of the WHO implied providing opportunities for the localization of norms (Zimmermann, 2017), while retaining their universal reach.

In addition, the gradual development of the LIO over the decades has had a fragmenting logic of its own, distinct from the logic of great power competition. To begin with, it has led to a remarkable degree of functional differentiation. This has been a long-standing concern of international legal scholars. Already in October 2000, the President of the International Court of Justice told the General Assembly of the United Nations that the “international legal order” was being fragmented. Pierre-Marie Dupuy has identified two causes for this, both of them linked to the “general phenomenon of the ongoing expansion of international law’s material scope”. The first cause, of a normative kind, “stems from the tendency towards greater autonomy of special regimes”. The second one is organic, and has to do with “the growth of methods and procedures (not all judicial) which ensure the application of law” (Dupuy, 2007: 2). Researchers devoted to global governance have reached similar conclusions. Biermann, Pattberg, Van Asselt and Zelli associate fragmentation with modernity and its trend towards functional differentiation. That is,

Chinese interests from 2011 onwards, the failure in 2008 and 2010 to reform decision-making within the World Bank in ways that emerging powers would consider sufficient, the commencement of BRIC summits in 2009 (followed by BRICS a year later).

“the incremental way in which international institutions have emerged implies that many policy domains are not regulated by a single international regime in the traditional understanding” (Biermann et al., 2009: 16). Seen from this point of view, fragmentation is an effect of the success of the LIO, but it also comes with downsides: the growing institutional density in the international system fosters “collisions between norms or rules at the international level [...] and between international and national ones” (Kreuder-Sonnen and Zürn, 2020: 242). The fact that three of the chapters in this volume address their issue areas in terms of regime complex or hybrid institutional complex is reflective of this process.

On other occasions, fragmentation stems precisely from the *liberal* in LIO. The liberal turn in the health hybrid institutional complex led to the emergence of transnational public–private partnerships that have vertically fragmented the regime. As argued by Fernández and Kissack, “many global health actors specialize in vertical policy initiatives, i.e. the eradication of specific diseases”, which can lead to inter-institutional competition (Fernández and Kissack, this volume). Hence a “widely held view is that the global health hybrid institutional complex would benefit from further coherence [...] and focality”, around the WHO (Fernández and Kissack, this volume).

In other words, we should not see the LIO in its 1990s and 2000s incarnation as entirely unified or in any other way free of fragmentation drivers. There was in-built (regional) fragmentation associated with the design of some universal regimes, and the success of the LIO itself after the end of the Cold War (and its being liberal) was leading to a more functionally diverse order. At the same time, none of the extra flexibility provided by regional bodies/offices or functional or vertical differentiation seems to have precluded contestation of the universality of Human Rights or the role of the WHO. As argue by Badell and Barbé, “three out of the five permanent members of the Security Council [...] have challenged to a different extent the universality of human rights”. And two of them, the US and Russia, have undermined language and obligations regarding violence against women. In November 2017 in a resolution presented to the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee, the US “attempted to replace the condemnation of ‘all forms of violence’ against women and children with the phrase ‘unlawful violence’”, as if there were lawful forms. That same year, “Russia enacted a law that decriminalized certain forms of violence against women” (Badell and Barbé, this volume). In the field of health, the COVID-19 pandemic “challenged the

global authority of the World Health Organization, which got caught in the crossfire of great-power competition” (Fernández and Kissack, this volume). Put differently, the current contestation of international norms and institutions seems to pose a new kind of challenge that does not fit into the slack built into regimes by previous or coetaneous forms of fragmentation.

Levels of Analysis

We consider now the issue of the levels at which fragmentation can occur. As mentioned above, the fact that the LIO is both an order as a whole and is composed of different norms and institutions raises the issue of what is being fragmented when the LIO fragments. We claim that fragmentation of the LIO takes place at three different levels: that of individual regimes pertaining to the LIO; that of interactions between processes of fragmentation taking place in different regimes; and finally that of the LIO as such. Let us look at each of them in turn.

Trade provides an example of individual regime-level fragmentation, which is perhaps the most self-explanatory. As argued by Eliasson and García-Durán, although challenges to the international trading system had been mounting before, since 2017 “there is increased protectionism and greater emphasis on geopolitical and security considerations in many countries’ trade policies”, as well as “increasingly, political coercion exercised against states, firms and their intellectual property”, in what amounts to a “weaponization of trade” (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume). Donald Trump’s ascendancy to the presidency was a key moment in this process, as he undertook a systematic dismantling of trade rules and institutions and instilled a great deal of great power competition in trade policy. China also “contributed extensively to these developments, as did others (South Korea, Brazil), and to a limited extent, the EU itself” (Íbid.). Connectivity, the material infrastructure upon which trade (together with cooperation and people-to-people relations) takes place is also fragmenting, with different great powers (and most conspicuously China) promoting infrastructure designed to project its power, soft and hard, across the globe (Soler i Lecha, this volume). Great power competition is also shaping infrastructures, that have accordingly become part of what Leonard calls “connectivity wars” (Leonard, 2021).

On other occasions, fragmentation cannot be completely understood without looking into the ways in which regimes interact with each other.

Martijn Vlaskamp argues in his contribution to this volume that as concerns raw materials, “trade runs most of the time rather smoothly”, but that “there is a large shadow of fragmentation looming over it”. Between 2009 and 2020 “export restrictions on critical raw materials increased more than five-fold”, particularly by China, India, Argentina, Russia, Vietnam and Kazakhstan, with Indonesia’s ban on its nickel exports to stimulate investment in processing facilities being a recent example of this trend. This has led to the widespread anticipation of a future breakdown of trade rules in this field, an anticipation with very real effects on state behaviour. Critically, the introduction in trade policies of considerations pertaining to great power competition, and the erosion of the WTO as a guardian of trade rules, described above, is also part of these calculations: there is little in the way of institutional guardrails in the future of trade in raw materials.

Finally, fragmentation can also take place at the order level. Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a policy area in an international context in which a global regulation of AI is already perceived as almost unthinkable. Hence, the expectation has been that regulation would coalesce around different, possibly incompatible standards articulated by big economies—fragmented regulation with strong geopolitical undertones. From this point of view, it is hard to speak of a fragmenting regime in AI. There is no unified regime to fragment. Nevertheless, this state of affairs is making a strong contribution to fragmentation, as it removes a key policy area from the remit of any global international order, and it fuels the rivalry between great powers to gain a competitive edge in the technology that might drive the next industrial and military affairs revolutions. Even if there is no regime-level fragmentation, AI technologies are very quickly “leap[ing] from mere theoretical possibility to representing the cutting edge of geopolitical competition” (Briganti Dini, this volume).

ON THE EU IN A FRAGMENTING LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

We address here the ways in which the fragmentation of the LIO is shaping the politics and policies of EU foreign policy. Contributions to this volume explore very different cases that show how variegated the landscape of possible reactions is. Nevertheless, they do point in four different directions, which we explore in this section. First, there is little resistance to the logic of fragmentation. Second, there is also very little

resort to exclusive nationalism in responding to fragmentation, although national themes do coexist with Europeanist and Atlanticist ones in the stances taken by many actors. In third place, we find a widespread preference for combining elements of Atlanticism and Europeanism. Finally, we point out that deciding to change tack in foreign policy (and adapt to a fragmenting LIO) is likelier when decision-making is easier. However, that comes with paradoxes of its own. Two of our cases (trade and infrastructures) seem to indicate that on some of the occasions in which the EU seems more able to embrace a strategic understanding of its international role, influential bureaucracies with globally inclined worldviews are able to course-correct and tame the geopolitical turn in EU foreign policy. We turn now to each of these observations.

Acceptance of Fragmentation

In the first place, the EU has not mounted any systematic opposition to the fragmentation of the LIO. For all the defence of a rules-based order, the EU has been relatively quick to accept that such rules would on many occasions be of a regional scale, or defer to the logic of great power competition.

The few exceptions seem to confirm the rule. The regime complex on nuclear non-proliferation is not (yet) marked by fragmentation. According to Benjamin Kienzle, “although the future of the nuclear non-proliferation regime is far from assured, there is mounting evidence that the regime has been extraordinarily successful” in upholding the central non-proliferation norm (Kienzle, this volume). It has shown “relative stability and endurance” in the face of challenges from (a) “states that undermine the fundamental norm of the non-proliferation regime”, (b) discontent among non-nuclear weapon states about “the pace of nuclear disarmament”, and (c) ever more difficult collaboration between great powers in the regime, particularly between the United States, Russia and China. In this policy area, the EU has very little capacity to act. Some of the most important challenges of the regime “are largely beyond the control of the EU and its member states”. Perhaps as a result, EU foreign policy in this domain has registered no remarkable change. Although there is some internal drifting apart between states for and against the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the EU keeps orchestrating and financially supporting the work of international institutions in this area “and ensures the implementation of stringent export controls in

the EU” (Kienzle, this volume). The EU has kept to its script, perhaps the only one that is available to the Union.

The second exception is violence against women, which we have addressed in the previous section of this chapter. In this area, the EU has so far been able to take on both internal and external contestation of the Istanbul Convention. As argued by Diego Badell and Esther Barbé in their contribution, “the EU has presented itself as the main actor willing to combat the ongoing fragmentation in the area of violence against women”, formally rejecting US attempts to “water down the existing consensus”, and launching the Spotlight Initiative in 2017 in partnership with the UN (Badell and Barbé, this volume). In this case, rejecting the logic of fragmentation does not need to stem from the limited availability of other options. Rather, it seems to reflect the wager that insisting on the universality of norms and institutions dealing with violence against women (and human rights) is the best way to defend EU views or preferences. The calculation might well be that there is nothing strategic about accepting the fragmentation of these regimes, no advantage to be gained by conceding this core norm.

Finally, in the field of health, the EU has taken a rather ambiguous position. On one hand, the Commission has been “a strong advocate for broadening consideration of health policy transversally (‘Health in All Policies’) and in relation to macro climate and conservation issues concerning animal health, biodiversity and sustainability (‘One Health’)”. On the other, despite this advocacy for the ontological unity of the field, the EU and its member states have embraced vertical fragmentation as well.

Apart from these partial exceptions, the most usual line of action has been a resigned acceptance of the logic of fragmentation, which does not exclude the voicing of more universally minded preferences kept, alas, on the back burner.

Little Exclusive Nationalism

Exclusive nationalist positions, i.e. nationalist positions that exclude any combination with Europeanism or Atlanticism, are very much restricted to a rather small cluster of states, with Hungary being the one that most consistently upholds this stance. We find that nationalist, Europeanist and Atlanticist approaches to how the EU should respond to a fragmenting order are not neatly separated from each other in practice.

Balancing acts between Europeanist and Atlanticist stances are possible and indeed common (we will come back to this later). States are also adept at putting together positions that combine them with nationalism, when the distribution of competences does not preclude a meaningful national role. Óscar Fernández and Robert Kissack find that EU member states “exhibit all three orientations to varying degrees”. Although Europeanism dominates in the form of “widespread enforcement of the Commission’s global health agenda, and willingness to participate in Team European initiatives”, states are always ready to engage in “patriotic promotion of national strengths and contributions to global health governance”, or to endorse “some Atlanticist elements –such as advocacy of market-oriented solutions” (Fernández and Kissack, this volume).

But the fragmentation of the LIO has not been a rallying cry for the return to the nation state. A fragmenting LIO has not been interpreted as a reason to fragment the EU. On some occasions, EU integration is too entrenched to enable those kinds of reactions to emerge. In the field of trade, for instance, nationalism is just out of the question, as it would imply “each member-state promoting their interests regionally and internationally, with no autonomous EU capabilities”, something not possible according to treaty language. Even a milder version of this, which would prevent further strengthening EU capabilities, is openly endorsed only by a few political parties such as the True Finns (Finland) and Vlaams Belang (Belgium) (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume).

Sheer scale matters as well. When it comes to critical materials, nationalism would imply that “national raw materials should go firstly to the country’s national industry”. However, given that most EU member states only have “very limited raw material reserves in their territory” this would be entirely unreasonable (Vlaskamp, this volume). In addition, export restrictions on raw materials would obviously violate Single Market provisions. But even beyond the effects of treaty language and scale, exclusive nationalism has a limited role in the way the EU is reconsidering its international in the face of a fragmenting LIO. Eva Michaels and Monika Sus argue that “nationalists [...] perceiving their nation-state as an individual participant in international affairs, seem inexistent in EU security and defence matters” (Michaels and Sus, this volume).

If anything, we find exclusive nationalism as a component of such fragmentation, not as a strategy designed to tackle or adapt to it. This is the case of violence against women, in which Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary have allied themselves with a transnational network of illiberal NGOs

mainly based in Central and Eastern Europe in their opposition to the Istanbul Convention. International contestation of the norms contained in the Convention has hence resonated internally in the EU as part of the “push for a less universalistic understanding of human rights” (Badell and Barbé, this volume). Finally, it is interesting that nationalism seems on occasions to be more easily combined with Atlanticism and Europeanism, as in the cases of AI (Briganti Dini, this volume) and infrastructure (Soler i Lecha, this volume).

Europeanism and Atlanticism

Actors are prone to combine elements of Europeanism and Atlanticism, which seem to appear together quite frequently.² This requires some exploration, as the divide between Atlanticism and Europeanism is one of the themes of this volume.

Trade offers an interesting example of the combination of Atlanticist and Europeanist inclinations in EU responses to the fragmentation of the LIO. In spite of its preference for a “liberal, rules-based international system” of trade, the EU has reacted to serious challenges to this system by becoming more strategic and allowing foreign policy considerations become part of the calculation on trade policy (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume). However, the EU has not (perhaps yet) faced any stark dilemma between a Europeanist approach to this being more strategic, by which the EU would have to act on its own as a block, or as part of an Atlanticist one, in which the EU would coordinate with the US and other Western allies to address a more competitive environment. If on the one hand “these developments have seemingly made the Commission [a key actor as concerns trade] more Atlanticist”, including “opening investigations into Chinese electric vehicle subsidies and discriminatory public procurement policies”, at the same time the Commission is also “very much aware that a Europeanist position may be needed in the near future”, something that the EU’s new trade defense instruments (TDI) and changes in industrial policy would allow (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume).

The balance of Europeanism and Atlanticism seems to tilt in one direction or the other depending on the prospects for reciprocity in the White

² However, these are not always the most relevant categories—see Kienzle (this volume).

House. Changes in orientation in the US administration have had a clear influence on the politics and policies of the EU's foreign policy in the face of a fragmenting international order. EU strategies on trade and AI shifted towards Atlanticism during the 2019–2024 term of the Commission, a move predicated on the capacity of the US and the EU to coordinate regulatory approaches at the US-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC), established with Joe Biden's ascendancy to the White House. As argued by Giovanni Briganti Dini, when it comes to AI there has been "increasing Atlanticism" in the speeches of heads of EU institutions "over the course of the [2019–2024] Commission term of office, though never abandoning European principles". This has translated into coordination, organized at the TCC, of "US' and EU's chips exports bans as well as reshoring policies, especially regarding high-end chips used or AI applications".³ Convergence has not been entirely unidirectional, though, as "the US has begun to enforce tax and anti-trust law on its technology giants" (Briganti Dini, this volume).

Also in the field of security, the Biden presidency has encouraged what Michaels and Sus (this volume) refer to as "a transatlantically sustainable understanding of [European strategic autonomy]", reducing the urgency to face a starker bifurcation between Europeanist and Atlanticist positions for which there might be no internal winning coalition. In contrast, speeches at the Munich Security Conference of February 2024 and news reports on those same dates over concerns on European preparedness to tackle security threats with or without US assistance,⁴ as well as proposals

³ Not only the TTC has been critical as a crucible of solutions that can bend Atlanticist and Europeanist approaches. The G7 has played that role too, for instance as regards the Global Gateway and the establishment of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), or the way in which it has served as a platform to put infrastructure, investment and connectivity in the agenda of the transatlantic conversation (Soler i Lecha, this volume).

⁴ See for instance *Is world war looming? Europe's policy pivot reveals leaders' fears*, 15 February 2024, Politico, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/is-world-war-looming-europe-policy-pivot-reveal-leader-fear/>; Gady, Franz-Stefan (2023), "NATO's Confusion Over the Russia Threat", *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2024, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/27/russia-ukraine-nato-europe-war-scenarios-baltics-poland-suwalki-gap/>; *EU plans to create defense-industrial complex ready for war*, 27 February 2024, Politico, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-plan-war-ready-complex-european-defence-industrial-strategy/>.

to appoint a Defense Commissioner for the 2024–2029 term⁵ seem to indicate a more recent wager in the other direction taking place as we write these lines, in a context overshadowed by uncertainty over the outcome of the November 2024 election in the US.

However, the lack of complete alignment between the views of the EU and those of an Atlanticist US administration is also obvious to all parties concerned. In the field of security policies, the so-called pivot to Asia has been felt by Europeans since the 2010s (Michaels and Sus, this volume). Similarly, in both the field of trade and critical raw materials, the Inflation Reduction Act created “a lot of bad blood” (Vlaskamp, this volume) between the US and the EU. Thus, also with an Atlanticist President in the White House, the precise composition of combinations of Europeanism and Atlanticism is in the balance. When it comes to trade, for instance, it depends on whether the US and the EU can agree, at a minimum, “to treat each other as trusted partners whose products are not a threat to national security, and to not weaponize trade against one another”. Although language to this effect has been pushed by the EU into TTC conclusions, the future of transatlantic trade relations seems uncertain, both because of the possibility of a second Trump presidency and the willingness of the Biden administration to retain all options as regards trade, including straining relationships with the EU (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume).

The introduction to this volume argues that current discourses on EU foreign policy in a fragmenting LIO have often revolved around the different uses of the term strategic autonomy. This book reads this interest in strategic autonomy through the lens of the debate between Europeanism and Atlanticism. More to the point, it reads it as a “bundle of different projects” that includes different understandings of the term—as responsibility, hedging or emancipation (Fiott, 2018)—with each of these versions being associated with Europeanism or Atlanticism (Costa, Soler i Lecha and Vlaskamp, this volume).

It is the first two of such versions (strategic autonomy as responsibility and hedging) that contributions to this volume have frequently

⁵ Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on strengthening European defence in a volatile geopolitical landscape, 28 February 2024, available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-strengthening-european-defence-volatile-2024-02-28_en.

found in their case studies. Strategic autonomy as responsibility has to do with the construction of autonomous capacities to enable the EU and its member states to make a greater contribution to the Western alliance. Strategic autonomy as hedging adds an autonomous industrial base into the mix, under the acknowledgement that this is a requirement to autonomously produce the capacities mentioned above—and hence to continue producing them even if relationships with other great powers deteriorate (Fiott, 2018). To be sure, Europeanists would rather choose autonomy as emancipation (see Table 1.2 in the introduction to this volume), the result of layering autonomous decision-making on top of capacities and their own industry to reproduce them. But the latter two (capacities and industrial base) would in any case be necessary steps in a ladder leading to a more complete understanding of strategic autonomy as emancipation. Hence chapters of this book find that strategic autonomy as responsibility and hedging can also be endorsed by Europeanists or presented under Europeanist themes. We claim that this inner structure of the concept of strategic autonomy helps shed light on the ease with which the compatibility between Atlanticism and Europeanism occurs.

Given how widespread this argument is in contributions to this volume, one example will suffice here. When it comes to security and defence, positions span from the French vision of strategic autonomy as “independence from the US” to the stance defended by Polish governments (and others), which oppose such an aim but “have supported the development of EU defence capabilities” if it occurs “in a complementary manner to NATO” (Michaels and Sus, this volume). But the Russian war against Ukraine, an all-important accelerator of the fragmentation of the LIO, seems to have narrowed the range of positions in the debate and perhaps made the agreement easier. On one hand, it has shown how far the EU is from being able to put the most ambitious understandings of strategic autonomy into practice, hence “confirm[ing] the beliefs of [Atlanticist] that ESA must not imply a disengagement from the US” (Michaels and Sus, this volume). On the other, it has made the consequences of dependency on the US starker, providing “a strong argument for the Europeanist camp to increase the EU’s defence capabilities, especially in light of the uncertainty around the upcoming US elections”. Even Denmark, now a participant in CSDP, has come closer to the latter ranks. Although “sceptical towards ESA [European Strategic Autonomy], seeing no credible alternative to the US collective defense guarantee”, it nevertheless “supports the enhancement of the EU’s operational capabilities”

(Michaels and Sus, this volume). Atlanticists and Europeanists arguments can practically coalesce around specific measures aligned with strategic autonomy as responsibility and to a more limited extent as hedging (Michaels and Sus, this volume).

Deciding on a New Foreign Policy

We turn now to our last argument, which deals with the ease or lack thereof with which the EU can change its foreign policy in response to a fragmenting LIO. Adjusting or more thoroughly transforming the EU's international role involves taking decisions. Policies and sometimes entire policy paradigms need to change for that to happen. Given the nature of the EU as an integration-through-law project, with rules and norms at its core, including its self-conception as an international actor, such change can have broad-based implications. We should not expect it to be an easy undertaking. In addition, it requires following through with such policy decisions all the way from the adoption of new language in, say, European Council conclusions or Commission strategy documents, to sustained implementation. All of this would be hard for any political system, but it is even more so for the EU—a strongly decentralized polity with multiple veto points to overcome (Peterson & Boonberg, 1999: 31).

We advance here the hypothesis that how the EU responds to a fragmenting LIO will vary with the extent to which states have delegated competences to the EU across different policy domains. The more the issue remains in the realm of intergovernmental decision-making, i.e. the more veto players there are, the more complicated it should be for the EU to change tack on its foreign policy. On the contrary, the more the issue is supranationalized, the easier it should be for the EU to do so. In other words, areas dominated by consensus-based decision-making might show less ability to adopt new policies aligned with (any version of) the concept of Strategic Autonomy; while areas in which EU institutions have been delegated more powers in decision-making should be swifter and more agile.

Although this volume is not designed to test this hypothesis, its chapters do seem to broadly align with it. The polar opposite cases of non-proliferation and trade fit this pattern. The former, a strongly nationalized policy area, shows a great deal of continuity in EU foreign policy (Kienzle, this volume). On the contrary, the latter, at the core of EU

competences, showcases the adoption of what amounts to a new policy paradigm in which strategic foreign policy considerations are introduced in trade policy (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume). Larger degrees of adjustment to a fragmenting LIO in the field of Artificial Intelligence (Briganti Dini, this volume) and critical raw materials (where a good deal of the adjustment takes place by anticipation—Vlaskamp, this volume) than in security and defence (where “lack of an EU-wide persuasive consensus about the direction and applicability of ESA rendered this an impracticable tool”—Michaels and Sus, this volume) are also congruent with this hypothesis.

At the same time, we want to point at a paradox raised by our contributions on trade (Eliasson and García-Durán, this volume) and infrastructures (Soler i Lecha, this volume). On some of the policy areas in which the EU has embraced a more openly geopolitical reading of its interests, the debate seems to periodically drift away from the most muscular versions of such interpretation. In the field of trade, Strategic Autonomy soon became Open Strategic Autonomy (Schmitz & Seidl, 2023); and de-risking was promoted to avoid the language of decoupling⁶ (Farrell & Newman, 2023: 108). To be sure, there is more than one possible explanation for this drift. To begin with, it is related to the sheer interdependence that any realistic proposal must engage with when responding to the fragmentation of the trade regime. We also advance the hypothesis that bureaucratic culture might play a role. Actors dealing with trade in the EU (including DG Trade) have traditionally been strongly committed to the version of the LIO that is now fragmenting, and tend to resist conceding to the logic of fragmentation. When they do, their justification often includes the need to more forcefully protect the LIO. Elsewhere, Eliasson and García-Durán have analysed the language used to articulate the European Commission’s “Open, Sustainable and Assertive” (OSA) trade strategy of 2021 and have concluded that it represents a paradigmatic “rebalancing” between the doctrine of managed globalization (embedded liberalism and fair trade), and a “realist trade-as-foreign-policy paradigm” that seeks to increase the EU’s capabilities to both “defend its values and interests” *and* promote “the return to a

⁶ Speech by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre, 30 March 2023, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPE_ECH_23_2063.

rules-based liberal international trading order” (Eliasson & García-Durán, 2023: 16). In other words, according to OSA it is in defence of the LIO that the EU accepts the logic of its fragmentation.

Developments in the field of infrastructures (Global Gateway) point in this direction as well. As argued by Eduard Soler, the Global Gateway has been shaped by a multitude of actors with different priorities and backgrounds, having to do with infrastructures and connectivity, but also partnerships with third countries and development policies, both within the European Commission (different Directorates General) and among member states. Critically, the Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), responsible for development policy, has become the key actor in the implementation of the project. INTPA has “sought visibility” and appropriated the Global Gateway, with the result that “a project that was initially crafted as a geostrategic endeavor, has become less of a foreign policy tool and more a developmental one”, an initiative to “scale-up developmental plans and international cooperation with other regions [...] where INTPA has more expertise and budget” (Soler i Lecha, this volume).

In other words, as concerns trade and infrastructures, contributions to this book suggest that the bureaucratic units that deal with policy areas in which delegation of competence to the EU is stronger are also tightly associated with an ethos that is globalist and/or cosmopolitan. And henceforth they are both able and willing to course-correct the more openly geopolitical moves in their respective areas.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Findings in this volume are an invitation to develop a nuanced view on both the fragmentation of the LIO, and on the politics and policies of the EU’s response to it. As argued above, fragmentation is taking place with different intensities and under the action of different drivers in different policy areas. We suggest that international institutions designed to be universal might fragment differently from institutions that became aspirationally universal only with the end of the Cold War—although they are all exposed to the effects of great power competition. We also find that pre-existing fragmentation patterns are sometimes the consequence of the success of the LIO, and hence that the equivalence between LIO and a unified order is misplaced. As regards the ways the EU engages with a fragmenting LIO, we claim that the contours of the EU response are

starting to emerge. According to contributions to this volume, there is a broad acceptance of the logic of fragmentation, little exclusive nationalism, frequent and differently balanced combinations of Atlanticism and Europeanism, and probably a stronger response in those issue areas in which states have delegated more powers to the EU (although with the possibility of paradoxical, counter-balancing effects).

However, this book is a small exercise that leaves important matters unaddressed. Here we raise three wide avenues for further research. First, we need to more systematically explain variation in EU responses to fragmentation. Both the intensity of the response (the magnitude of the departure from the *status quo ante* in EU foreign policy) and the type of response (the precise direction in which departure takes place) varies between policy areas. Accounting for this variation deserves a thorough consideration of a range of hypotheses, something we have not undertaken. Theorizing and testing alternative explanations will imply the collective effort of the broad network of scholars dedicated to conducting research on EU foreign policy.

Secondly, the EU's geopolitical turn, to the extent that it takes place, will reshape relationships with other international actors—states and international organizations alike. Becoming strategic—i.e. operating on the assumption that more often than not your interests collide with those of others, and that your decisions should take their strategies into account—will influence perceptions of the EU's international role. It will also foster changes in the behaviour of others vis-à-vis the EU. In other words, an EU foreign policy geared to more effectively partake in a world marked by great power competition is liable to reciprocation by others. Changes in perceptions *of* and relations *with* the EU are another important area for further research. Thirdly and finally, the democratic and normative implications of this geopolitical turn deserve close attention too, as the EU re-frames the discourse it promotes about itself, and hence the basis of its legitimation.

As competition between great powers intensifies and the erosion of the institutions and norms associated with the LIO builds up, the challenges identified in previous chapters are bound to become more acute. In addition, we do not think that a more advanced process of fragmentation will necessarily translate into a clearer, more straightforward debate in the EU. On the contrary, it might lead to more fraught dilemmas. The higher the stakes, the higher the risks attached to all versions of strategic autonomy might seem. More ambitious forms of strategic autonomy

(such as hedging or emancipation) could look both more urgent and more dangerous—as they would imperil unity within the West in the face of ever more trying circumstances; on the contrary, a “transatlantically sustainable” version of strategic autonomy (Michaels and Sus, this volume) could be seen as a wager on an increasingly unreliable Atlantic alliance.

To conclude, Ikenberry, always relatively bullish on the prospects of the LIO, has described two scenarios for its future: it will either be “small but thick”, centred around Western liberal democracies, or “large and thin”. The former would sacrifice universality to retain normative thickness, and the latter would do the opposite (Ikenberry, 2018: 10). Both options would be less US-centric, but the order would remain liberal, as “the more general organizing ideas and impulses of liberal internationalism run deep in world politics” (Ikenberry, 2018: 8). Importantly, none of these options involves reversing fragmentation. It is unlikely that the debates addressed in this book will disappear anytime soon. Understanding how they shape the international role of the EU is of critical importance for the literature on EU foreign policy. The challenges tackled in this book are not going anywhere—neither the policy challenges for the EU nor the analytical ones for scholars.

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