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Will the European Union Run the 21st Century?

At the start of the 20th century, you had the great powers of the world influenced by factors such as nationalism, imperialism, and bitter rivalries with one another. The balance of power then which consisted of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia devolved into conflict after decades of breakdown in diplomatic relations and rising tensions around the globe. In more ways than one, today's era of is a resemblance to that point in time. Rising authoritarian regimes in China and Russia, military conflicts sparking around the globe, and geopolitical rivalries in this current time period might make some rightfully wonder whether or not militarism and hard power is the way to go. The question of whether or not the European Union will run the 21st Century has been up for debate by many prominent scholars in political science. It is a source of contention for many in the European Union in this era of rising global tension, great international power conflicts and rivalries, and of course with the world at a point in time similar in circumstances to that of the early 1900s. I do not believe the European Union is attempting to usurp the United States as a global hegemon or try to rival China's economic power. The European Union seeks cooperation above all, using a system it has built based upon rules, norms, and interdependence on one another. The European Union is quietly influencing international politics by redefining the international order to reflect its own values which are rooted in rules, norms, regulations and multilateralism. Europe's strength as Bradford and many prominent political scientists argue, is setting rules for

others to follow. That is how I believe Europe will ‘run’ the 21st century. For that reason, I do not believe that the European Union is trying to ‘run’ the 21st century in the way the United States or China might. This paper is going to defend the assertion that Europe isn’t seeking global hegemony like Russia, China, or the United States, but rather subtly influencing it through liberal values around rules, regulation, and interdependence. It will not run the 21st century in the sense a hegemon would, but it is going to shape what those hegemons can or cannot do.

According to Mark Leonard and Anu Bradford, to ‘run’ the 21st century does not necessarily equate to traditional views of hard power. To them it doesn’t mean using military might for coercion or weaponizing the economy to gain an advantage over your geopolitical rivals. As Leonard succinctly points out, the European Union has what’s called ‘transformative’ power. According to him it’s the power to quietly influence and restructure how societies and states function without reliance on traditional views of military might. He states – “Europe’s power is a ‘transformative power’. And when we stop looking at the world through American eyes, we can see that each element of European ‘weakness’ is in fact a facet of its extraordinary ‘transformative power’”. For Leonard, Europe’s weakness is its greatest strength. It’s capacity to slowly and subtly shape the global order to fit its rules and system of doing things is what makes its power so extraordinary. The position Leonard takes is vastly different than traditional views of what power is. Most think of power as GDP, how many nukes a nation has, how much is their defense budget etc. Leonard disagrees with this notion because he makes the case that setting rules through institutional norms is too a form of power that is often overlooked. He coins the term ‘Eurosphere’. Paraphrasing, it is a network of nations which stretches from the Balkans, to North Africa, to Eastern Europe and it where EU standards set the norm for the way of doing things even if those nations are not in the EU in a formal sense. Anu Bradford also argues something along the lines of

what Leonard has said. To her, the European Union ‘exports’ its ideals to global markets. When non-EU global companies tailor their policy so that they can do business in the European Union, Bradford makes the case that this is already in effect laws and regulations like, data privacy for example already influence how companies act when in other nation’s borders and not necessarily within strictly the EU. As she writes, “...market forces alone are often sufficient to convert the EU standard into the global standard.” To Leonard and Bradford, running the 21st century doesn’t mean becoming a hegemon or to try to usurp the current world order. It is to create the norms, rules and regulations which can govern what those hegemonies and major actors can do. It’s in essence, the power behind the throne idea that the EU is attempting to create.

So with that in mind, can Europe run the 21st century? Prominent political scientists have detailed and laid out their case as to why or why not. Mark Leonard has argued that Europe is not trying to be a hegemon, but it is trying to be a superpower. His main argument is that the EU is trying to reshape the world in accordance with its own ideals of multilateralism. Through expansion of EU membership to various nations in Europe after World War 2 and leading into the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, it’s clear that the European Union is not trying build a world order revolved around itself as the US-led and dominated global order has been for the last seventy five years or so of human history. The conditionality of EU membership that the EU extends to nations is importantly voluntary and non-coercive. Nations can pick or choose to join the EU system, Leonard argues – and they join because the EU system just works. The European Union invites nations to join, so that they benefit from the expansive EU market and the only condition they have is to adhere to European norms and procedures. This is notable in countries which are a part of trying to join the EU like Ukraine, and it’s also seen in other non-EU states.

In stark contrast to Leonard, Kagan says that this system that the EU creates on norms, customs and regulatory power is weak. He makes the reference that the Europeans and Americans live on entirely different planets. He criticizes the European Union for outsourcing most if not all its military to the United States via treaty organizations like NATO. He makes the argument this outsourcing of hard power leaves the European Union comparatively weak to nations like Russia or China. While Kagan does acknowledge that the EU's rule-based system of power does hold water figuratively in a world where you have powers like Russia and China willing to use hard power to achieve their goal, primarily using this method is to him, not feasible nor is it sustainable.

Going back to Bradford, she primarily supports Leonard's argument of the EU's system of regulatory power is its primary way of attempting to 'run' the 21st century. Her primary argument is that the EU's vast market economy and commercial enterprises allow it to 'export' its ideals to those around the globe. The fact that foreign business comply with EU standards to Bradford, it's an indicator of how much soft power the EU really has when it comes to influencing the way other countries do things. Bradford makes the case that while the European Union may not have the military or economic might like the other great powers, its ability to regulate markets in the manner that it does is an indicator of its influence globally around the world. In business sectors such as antitrust, technology regulation and data privacy the EU rules are the gold standard that every nation seems to appear to follow, United States included. Finally, Alesina and Giavazzi focus on the internal structural weaknesses of the European Union. They detail Europe's internal weaknesses need to modernize and adapt to the 21st century or else it might risk falling behind. The Eurozone crisis as they argue is a key example of that. Both authors argue that while perhaps Europe can still lead, its systems and internal structure is outdated for the 21st century that it is in, within world at the moment.

With the brief arguments concluded, let us examine how realistic they are in the context of current EU politics. By in large, the EU's economic scale and size is the most potent weapon the European Union has at its disposal. Given that the EU shares a single market system, it is a strong incentive for regulatory alignment that businesses of other nations seem to comply with. Bradford notes that no firm of global scale can afford to be excluded from the EU market which is why companies calibrate their global operations to comply with the EU regulation in place. The most prominent area that this is found is in the technological business sector like Google, Amazon Facebook etc. The EU's Digital Market Act and Digital Services Acts have forced the aforementioned companies to revise their business in areas like transparency and data privacy protection. Those laws have eventually reached the United States and influence the US Congress to eventually pass laws and start a conversation around those topics. Hix and Hoyland detail that the EU's multilevel governance is a challenge and a boon. All the entities which make up the European Union such as the European Commission, Parliament, Council etc all operate under a legal framework which expands authority into member states. They both noted the EU has become a regulatory state and has influenced its neighbors and various trading partners to adopt the same regulatory standards that it has for ease of access to EU markets. Schmidt meanwhile makes a comparison that the EU is a regional state rather than a national one, that has shared sovereignty and compound governance. With this system, it allows for more flexibility to face challenges. As Schmidt noted, the EU is quite slow to react to international relations and events around the world. Its system is very bureaucratic, and slow. The need for complete unity has led to challenges still facing the European Union today and in the past. Most people in the world as of current writing view the EU more favorably to lead the world than the United States. A recent Gallup poll detailed that most international people viewed Germany and France as reliable world leaders with the United States

coming in close second and Russia/China trailing far behind. Recent trends and data too suggest that EU support for membership among nation states is on the rise. 74% of Europeans support EU membership and 81% back stronger higher-level EU crisis management in the aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The EU has also similarly pushed back against Russian aggression in Ukraine, starting the EDF or European Defense Fund, to break away from the United States' nuclear umbrella and develop its own defense technologies in a changing world.

So with everything that has been said can the European Union effectively run the 21st century? I do not believe the European Union is trying to become the next Russia, or the next China or trying to upsurp the current hegemon, the United States. I believe that the European Union simply is trying to reshape the international order not to revolve around it in the way that world great powers in the past have tried, but instead based on rules, regulation, and interdependence as mentioned in the readings. As Bradford sufficiently argues, the European Union's influence is not really economic or hard military power, but rather -- its influence lies in its ability to influence markets in a soft way. As Bradford states "...most of the world's markets are, in effect, covered by a version of EU competition law." So in effect, the EU doesn't really need a large army or economic dominance like the US does, but it instead uses the idea of global trade, commerce, and international systems to leverage its power. In a way, it's a way of 'weaponizing' an institution to benefit itself. This allows the EU to drastically shape policies in areas such as antitrust, privacy, and environmental regulation without coercing anyone with a military or economic sanctions. The EU simply uses the rules and systems already in place to benefit itself. Hence, I do not believe Europe will 'run' the 21st century in the traditional sense nor do I believe it will be a hegemon, but I do strongly believe that through the process above it will be one of the key players in *defining* the rules for the hegemons to play by.

Sources and References

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