

Interfacing the European Union with International Relations

Raffaella Del Sarto*

International relations and the European Union / edited by Christopher Hill and Michael Smith. - Oxford [etc.] : Oxford University Press, 2005. - xxiv, 469 p. - (The new European Union series). - ISBN [978-]0-19-927348-5

In spite of a growing scholarly interest, efforts to understand and explain the external actions of the European Union still face a number of formidable problems. First, comprising a variety of policies, actors, institutions and decision-making modes and levels, the Union's external relations are an extremely complex phenomenon. Second, the literature on the subject remains highly fragmented. Indeed, scholarly accounts tend either to focus on specific subfields of EU external

action, such as EU trade policy or the evolving European security and defence policy, or to concentrate on EU policy toward particular geographic areas or actors. Third, and more importantly, EU external relations continue to pose significant challenges to theory. Indeed, efforts to conceptualise the EU's external activities have been sitting uneasily between (European) integration studies and the discipline of International Relations (IR). Accordingly, the existing literature has produced far more descriptive than theory-informed studies of EU external relations so far.

With contributions from some of the most renowned European Union specialists and two distinguished IR scholars, this edited volume reflects the recent trend of seeking to bridge the gap between the EU's external actions

* Raffaella A. Del Sarto is Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Florence.

2 Interfacing the European Union with International Relations

and IR. The eighteen chapters of the textbook, which aims at a readership of undergraduate and graduate students, discuss various aspects of EU external relations, such as the theoretical and institutional frameworks, the decision-making processes, and the different activities and outcomes of EU foreign policy. Hence, this volume provides an encompassing, and therefore highly valuable, account of the key aspects and issue areas of EU external relations. Published within the "New European Union Series" of Oxford University Press, this textbook is undoubtedly a precious learning aid. All the chapters of the book follow a clear and consistent format, which includes an opening abstract, boxes that provide illustrations or summaries of specific arguments, as well as references to further reading and web sites. In light of the growing student interest in the role of the EU in world affairs, and the increasing number of university courses offered on the subject, this textbook meets a genuine demand, while closing an important lacuna in the existing body of literature.

In order to place the EU's external actions in an international relations context, the analytical framework by Christopher Hill and Michael Smith proposes three possible perspectives. First, the EU can be understood as a sub-system of international relations that permits the co-ordination of, and bargaining between, the interests of EU member states with the aim of collective action. Second, the Union can be analysed as a part of the process of international relations at a global scale, whereby the latter influence the EU's

external actions, and vice versa. Thirdly, the EU may be conceptualised as a power in world politics. It is intrinsic to edited volumes that the different contributions engage unevenly with the proposed analytical framework, and this book is no exception. Indeed, some chapters are predominantly descriptive, while others conduct their analysis according to at least one of the analytical propositions set out in the first chapter. Examples of the latter include the well-informed contribution of Jolyon Howorth on the CFSP/ESDP, the original discussion of the EU as a trade power by Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicoläidis, and the interesting analysis of the EU's relations with former European colonies by James Mayall. A similar observation applies, for instance, to the excellent chapter by Michael Smith and Rebecca Steffenson on the Union's relations with the US, as well as to Loukas Tsoulakis' discussion of the EU in the world economy. Still other contributions, such as the fascinating chapter on the European civilising process by Andrew Linklater, or Reuben Wong's excellent analysis of the concept of "Europeanization" in the context of foreign policy, offer theoretical perspectives that go beyond the proposed analytical framework.

The mix of descriptive accounts, theory-informed analyses, and predominantly conceptual contributions is not problematic *per se*. In fact, a good textbook on EU external relations needs to incorporate detailed accounts of its elements and structures, particularly considering the complex institutional setting of EU external relations and the impressive

developments in some of its subfields in recent years. The chapter by Geoffrey Edwards on the patterns of the EU's global activity, Sophie Vanhoonacker's detailed description of the complex institutional framework of EU foreign policy-making, and the overview of the EU's relations with different groups of states across geographic regions by Nicole Alecu de Flers and Elfriede Regelsberger (debatably termed "inter-regional co-operation") are extremely useful. What is a bit confusing, however, is the book's structure and the location of the single chapters within the four parts into which the book is subdivided. Indeed, the reader is left wondering why some of the rather descriptive chapters are located both within the part on "Frameworks" and under the headline of "Activities and Impact". Similarly, a number of contributions, which are far more conceptual than empirical, have been placed in the part on "Institutions and Process". Examples include Simon Nuttall's chapter on coherence and consistency within EU foreign policy, Christopher Lord's discussion of the accountability and legitimacy of the latter, or the above-mentioned chapter of Reuben Wong on "Europeanization". Hence, for future editions of the textbook, which will certainly follow, the editors may wish to rethink the book's logical structure. A similar observation applies to the considerable attention that most chapters pay to the likely impact of the European Constitutional Treaty on EU external relations. Alas, the textbook most certainly went to

press before the negative referenda in France and the Netherlands were held.

Altogether, informed scholars may criticise that the book engages rather weakly with a number of ongoing theoretical debates in International Relations, revolving, for instance, around the role and concept of rationalism, the conceptualisation of power, or the impact of institutions, identities, and socialisation processes on world politics. Certainly, many contributions, among them Karen Smith's interesting chapter on EU enlargement and European order, refer to some of these issues. Yet the chapters that explicitly deal with the nexus between the EU and IR, namely the survey provided by Filippo Andreatta as well as the introductory and concluding chapter of the editors, are sound, but remain somewhat focused on traditional IR theory and rather conventional themes. Hence, they tend to disregard the significant contributions that other approaches, most notably constructivism in its various variants, have provided to both the development of IR theory and the study of EU external relations in recent years. Indeed, from an IR perspective, there is much more to say on the international relations of the European Union. But then again, this book has a different scope. Indeed, if editors and contributors aimed at producing a comprehensive and solid textbook that prompts students to adopt an international relations perspective when thinking of the EU's external actions, they have done an excellent job.