Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction in an Age of Global Contestation

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First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-032-91271-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-91272-1 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-56230-6 (ebk)

Chapter 4

The European Union's Evolving Vision for the International Order

From Liberal Beacon to Competitive Pole

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003562306-6

Open Access was funded by the Finnish National Defence University; European Union's Horizon Europe coordination and support action 101079069 – EUVIP – HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ACCESS−03; Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation part of research carried out at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (US-SARANA); Nordic Africa Institute; Tampere University Library.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

4 The European Union's Evolving Vision for the International Order

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Introduction

The European Union's (EU's) vision of the international order strongly follows its own experience and self-perception as a regional peace project in Europe, which is founded on rules-based cooperation, economic integration and liberal values. During a moment of optimism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the EU sought to turn its experience into a model for the international order as it started to focus on "effective multilateralism" and "strategic partnerships", breeding discussions about the Union as a "normative power". It goes without saying, therefore, that the EU's outward facing policies have had a substantial visionary, even utopian element. But what has become of this vision in recent years, defined as they are by considerable turmoil in the EU's neighbourhood and further afield?

Based on the analysis of the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), the 2022 Strategic Compass, key communications and conclusions of EU institutions, along with speeches and writings of relevant policy protagonists on the EU and member state levels, this chapter examines the substantive adaptation of the EU's ordering vision in the ten-year period from 2014 to 2024. Alongside charting *temporal* change, the paper zeroes in on three relevant dimensions of the EU's ordering vision that also inform the framework of the edited volume: *distributional*, *institutional* and *normative*.

To tackle the EU's conception of international order, this chapter first briefly introduces a perspective on international order as a social construct, drawing on insights from role theory. It then illustrates how the EU's vision of international order has undergone changes in the distributional dimension (from beacon to pole), the institutional dimension (from formal to strategic multilateralism) and the normative dimension (from normative to geopolitical actor). We then conclude with reflections on the EU's ordering vision and its future prospects.

Constructing a Vision through Interaction

In keeping with the theoretical framework laid out for the volume (see Chapter 1), this chapter explores the EU's ordering vision through four different analytical dimensions: distributional, normative, institutional and temporal. At its most simple,

This chapter has received funding from the Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation as part of a research project carried out at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs entitled "The US at a Crossroads: The Future of Foreign and Domestic Policy in an Era of Confrontation" (US-SARANA).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003562306-6

an international order entails a "stable distribution of power and broad acceptance of the rules that govern the conduct of international relations" (Haass 2019, 22). In our understanding, it is vital to appreciate that an international order is not only a description of the state of the world. It is also a social construct purposely built to achieve certain ends (Reus-Smit 2017, 854–55), one that consists of relationships and manifold fora on which those relationships unfold (Cooley and Nexon 2020).

It follows that in this contribution we approach the EU's ordering vision from a role theoretical perspective in order to explore the interactions, tensions and dynamics in the construction of Europe's global engagement (Holsti 1970; Harnisch 2011). From this perspective, the EU's international ordering vision forms a part of its constructed identity as a global actor and is not pregiven or fixed. Instead, it develops as a social construct in the interaction with member states and third countries (Aggestam 2006).

The EU holds a certain role conception as an international actor, which includes specific views on its position and engagement in the international order. However, faced with often contradicting role expectations internally and externally about how to engage internationally, the EU faces a mismatch between its self-conception and outside demands. In its role performance, the EU attempts to strike an equilibrium that aims to bridge the gap between its role conception and the role expectations that it faces (Koenig 2014). We apply the analytical lens in this chapter in order to shed light on the gaps between the "words" and "actions" of the EU's ordering vision and to explain the shifts in ordering visions over the years.

In terms of research data, we explore the construction of the EU's ordering vision in the time period from 2014 to 2024, a ten-year period that encompasses pivotal events including Russia's first invasion of Ukraine (2014), Brexit (2016), the first election of Donald Trump to the White House (2016) and the resultant harrowing years in the transatlantic relationship, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–), as well as Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine starting on 24 February 2022. The focus of our analysis is upon key policy documents of the Union as well as relevant speeches and writings of EU and member state leaderships.

The EU's Evolving Vision of International Order

The EU's history as an extremely successful peace project has led its political elites to construct the Union's identity as a "civilian", "normative" or "ethical" power (Duchêne 1973; Manners 2002; Aggestam 2008), whose influence is founded not on traditional hard forms of power but on the soft power of attraction, the art of diplomatic persuasion and ability to set agendas of cooperative international settings (Nye 2011; Forsberg 2011, 1195–98). In its most utopian formulation, the world would eventually become like the EU. The Union would then have acted as a "vanishing mediator", effectively losing its distinctiveness and, by implication, its power as an agent of change: becoming "normal in the multi-layered processes of post-national politics" (Manners 2006, 119–20).

This role conception as a normative power was particularly prominent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the EU was triumphantly heading from one success

to another with deepening integration, an achieved monetary union and successive rounds of enlargement. It was reflected in the official communication of the EU as well, which highlighted effective multilateralism and strategic partnerships as its approaches to engage in the international order with the vision of putting great power politics aside.

For a moment, it seemed as if the EU could implement its role conception as the unipolar moment created space for civilian actorness, while questions of deterrence were outsourced to the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, eventually the narrative of the EU as a *sui generis* post-national actor lost traction and made way for a less appealing one that had coexisted all along: the EU was perceived again as an actor with a capabilities-expectations gap, one who could never harness sufficient endowments to meet its lofty visions (Larsen 2020). As the disappointments of the EU's response to the Arab Spring revolutions, Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and Brexit mounted, the EU's role conception and its attendant ordering vision were bound to undergo a reconfiguration in all the three dimensions we are interested in.

The Distributional Dimension: From Beacon to Pole

For the EU, as a *sui generis* entity or multi-perspectival polity (Ruggie 1993, 172), the question of polarity has always posed a conundrum. On the one hand, the Union has had a formidable run during the post-Cold War years defined by American ascendancy and unipolarity. This included four rounds of enlargement, the establishment of monetary union, deepening integration across the board and, particularly notable for our purposes, the development of foreign and security policy agency through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Paradoxically, it could be argued that without US hegemony, the Union's decades-long desire to act as a beacon for those wishing to escape from the traditional trappings of power politics to a different, dare we say "post-polar", future would not have been possible in the first place. On the other hand, while the Union is one of the great success stories of the US-backed liberal international order, a considerable chunk of the EU's identity-building in the post-Cold War era had been done vis-à-vis the United States (Diez 2005).

In this context, the contrast between the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) and the 2016 EUGS proves instructive. The 2003 strategy was crafted in response to the excesses of American unipolarity in the Global War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq. Trying to dissociate the Union from the United States meant stressing notions like "preventive engagement" and "effective multilateralism" and pointing out – in a not-so-subtle rebuke of the United States – that while "[t]he end of the Cold War has left the United States in a dominant position . . . no single country is able to tackle today's complex problems on its own" (European Union 2003; see also Toje 2010; Mälksoo 2016). The EU's search for an international role, at times complementary to but also separable from that of the United States, underlined the Union's "normative difference" vis-à-vis the leading power in the system (Diez and Manners 2007, 187–88; Sinkkonen 2015, 264–65). In the aftermath of the invasion

of Iraq, this was unfolding to the extent that some argued the EU was trying to engage in "soft balancing" by non-military means towards the United States (Art 2006). As Mälksoo (2016, 378, emphasis added) argues, the ESS portrayed "the EU's explicitly *transformative zeal*, putting an emphasis on spreading good governance, especially rule of law and protecting human rights as well as democracy promotion more generally".

Fast forward to 2016, and the EUGS was calling for "principled pragmatism" in "a more complex world of global power shifts and power diffusion" and emphasising "resilience" (EEAS 2016, 16). This has even been interpreted as a newfound "stable identity status" and as a sign of maturation of EU global role (Riddervold and Rieker 2024, 511). This shift in tone must be put in context: the Union's entire *raison d'etre* was being questioned from the inside and outside in the aftermath of Brexit and Russia's annexation of Crimea. While neither the ESS nor EUGS evoked the descriptors "unipolarity" or "multipolarity" explicitly, it is evident that the Union's more sober assessment of its own international role has been undergirded by a shift in the material foundations of the international system, and there is little indication that the EU expects to achieve a transformation of the world in its own image through the power of its example as it did in the early 2000s (although the EUGS does continue to stress the Union's "soft power" [EEAS 2016, 4]).

In a gradual process starting from the financial crisis that triggered the rise of alternative formats such as the G20 (Laatikainen 2012), the EU started to accept multipolarity as an apt *description* of the international arena. By 2016, there was an explicit expectation that the Union would constitute one of the poles in this novel global constellation. Per former HR/VP Federica Mogherini in the foreword to the EUGS, the EU possessed the necessary attributes of latent power necessary to constitute a pole: "[A]s a Union of almost half a billion citizens, our potential is unparalleled. Our diplomatic network runs wide and deep in all corners of the globe. Economically, we are in the world's G3" (EEAS 2016, 3). Moreover, it is as one of these poles that the Union envisages a role for itself as a "responsible global stakeholder" (EEAS 2016, 8).

However, this descriptive realisation begs a key question: What kind of multipolarity would the Union prefer? After all, the EU remains wedded in self-conception, word and (oftentimes) deed to the norms, values and principles of the liberal international order that burgeoned under US unipolarity (Ikenberry 2018). As Amitav Acharya (2004, 2) points out, there is a difference between a strategic and normative reading of multipolarity, where the former connotes a material definition of power, a focus on balancing and great-power spheres of influence, whereas the latter entails cooperation, rules and equality. Therefore, a multipolar world is not by definition normatively superior to a unipolar or bipolar world (Laïdi 2014): instead, multipolarity is what states (and other actors) make of it. This paradox has been acknowledged by the EU's former HR/VP Josep Borrell (2023). For him, the "new multipolarity" of recent years is not driving a more equitable and cooperative international order based on mutual-gains-based cooperation, but a retreat from multilateralism. Curiously, the antidote Borrell (2023) offers is similar to that envisaged in the ESS and EUGS, namely an EU that has the requisite capacities

in the domains where it wants to impact the future of global governance, because "regulation ever reflects the balance of power". The way to garner influence in a multipolar world, therefore, appears to necessitate becoming a pole that is willing to play the games that a multipolar world requires: balancing, bandwagoning and hedging (Ringsmose 2013; Toje 2010; Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). This logic is also reflected in the prioritisation of "competitiveness" of the second von der Leyen Commission, whereby economic growth is seen as the only way for the EU to stay relevant as an "independent player on the world stage" (Draghi 2024, 1).

The Institutional Dimension: From Formal to Strategic Multilateralist

The EU's official vision for the international order has always had a very strong institutional dimension. The institutional outlook on the international order is reflected in its constant calls for a "rules-based international order" and "multilateral solutions" (European Commission 2021). One of the main reasons for the EU's focus on rules and structures in international politics is that the EU itself is based on institutional integration and cooperation. The EU's defence of multilateral and rules-based cooperation is ultimately a defence of its organising principles (Schuette and Dijkstra 2023). It is therefore only logical that the threat analysis of the 2022 Strategic Compass puts the "return of power politics" (EEAS 2022, 17), as demonstrated in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, at the top of the list of EU's security challenges.

The use of institutions in the global order is seen through a much more instrumental lens compared to the early 2000s, when the EU still had more lofty goals of forging an "international society" through its multilateral engagement (European Union 2003). The EU's communication on multilateralism is explicit in its "interests-based approach" and "more stringent and strategic approach" to global politics (European Commission 2021). A prime example of the instrumental approach were the EU's efforts to collect votes for the United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolution condemning Russia actions in Ukraine (Gowan 2023). The EU's efforts to get countries from the Global South behind its interest in isolation partly paid off with a long list of countries voting in favour of the resolution. Yet more concrete sanctioning of Russia's aggression remained largely a Western-led enterprise. The more instrumental outlook on international norms of the EU also became blatantly obvious in its response to the Israel-Hamas war. While the violation of human rights in Ukraine was a key normative base to argue for Russia's isolation, the human suffering in Gaza was initially not met with similar calls for restraint, opening the EU up to criticism for the selective deployment of international norms (Brender 2024).

Another change in the institutional dimension of the EU's vision for the international order concerns the kinds of institutions that the EU focuses on. Instead of the formal institutional UN framework, the EU has been increasingly looking towards informal and ad-hoc frameworks that focus on specific issues, as they provide better opportunities to reach initial results. New and informal constellations often emerge when the EU and other players attempt to expand multilateralism to yet

ungoverned areas (Schuette and Dijkstra 2023). The EU was, for example, the driving force behind the Global Compact for Migration that was set on track by the UN in 2016, but due to criticism from United States and Hungary among others ended up as a non-binding, intergovernmental agreement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU played a pivotal role in setting up the COVAX programme, a multilateral framework for vaccine donations, after the Trump administration became embroiled in a blame game with China and did not show signs of leadership on the issue. Emerging and previously ungoverned technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) and cybersecurity are a prominent field in which the EU is active in pushing for unconventional institutional governance frameworks. A host of initiatives to regulate the ethical, sustainable and security aspects of AI have been put forward in the form of bilateral proposals or as part of the informal G7. The bottom line of these various multilateral engagements is that the form and membership is becoming less of a concern and instead more focus is put on practicalities.

A major part of contention relates to the geographical inclusiveness of institutional arrangements. The EU, alongside the United States (until very recently at least), remains a status quo power in the international order and focuses on the defence of existing institutional frameworks and the role of West-led institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Many of the proposals and activities of the EU and its member states are geared towards increasing the representation of the Global South in existing organisations and fora. For example, the G4 grouping for the reform of the UN Security Council – Brazil, Germany, India and Japan – lobbies for a permanent seat of these countries as well as for two seats for Africa (Patrick et al. 2023). The continued efforts by the G7 (which includes the EU as a member) to reach out to and partly include countries of the Global South in their deliberations is another example. Mostly due to the low level of institutionalisation of formats such as the BRICS+, the EU's outreach to countries in the Global South is often on a bilateral level through strategic partnerships (Brazil, India and South Africa) and trade agreements negotiations, for example with India (Hooijmaaijers and Keukeleire 2020). As far as the Global South is concerned, visions of inclusiveness of international order are based on the multilateral status quo rather than addressing more fundamental grievances of the Global South directed at the rules-based order, which is seen as dominated by the West.

Normative Dimension: The EU's Geopolitical Turn

As argued earlier, the EU has for decades framed itself as an international actor with a "normative difference" that has sought to escape the traditional realm of power politics. The EU treaties explicitly highlight its fundamental values, such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights, as the basis of international engagement (Art. 21 (1) Treaty on European Union [TEU]). On the economic side, the EU's trade policies were for a long time marked by the attempts to liberalise global trade and to export European norms to other regions of the world (Damro 2021; Meunier and Nicolaidis 2019). In the vision of the EU, the quest for upholding

what it considered universal norms and market-based economic activities should have stayed largely insulated from geopolitical developments.

However, in her first press conference as European Commission President in November 2019, Ursula von der Leyen stated that she would lead a "geopolitical Commission" (European Commission 2019). At the most basic level, geopolitics refers to the interaction between geographical factors and foreign policy. A geopolitical analysis highlights the importance of natural endowments and economic resources in shaping the foreign policy of a state. According to von der Leyen, however, a "geopolitical Commission" meant making the EU "a champion of multilateralism". At the same time, she argued, the EU should "invest in alliances and coalitions to advance [its] values", "promote and protect Europe's interests through open and fair trade" and "strengthen [its] partners through cooperation". Von der Leyen's geopolitical agenda was a response to what she described as "an unsettled world, where too many powers only speak the language of confrontation and unilateralism" (European Commission 2019).

However, during von der Leyen's mandate, EU policy priorities progressively shifted from a focus on broad multilateral cooperation and open strategic autonomy to more narrowly defined strategic partnerships with "like-minded" Western and neighbouring countries. The 2022 war in Ukraine was a strong catalyst for this shift. Geopolitical logic became central in the Commission's policy documents, but in a narrower sense than in von der Leyen's 2019 definition. Reducing reliance on especially non-Western trade partners became more prominent in the documents than some of the concepts stressed by von der Leyen in her 2019 speech, such as multilateralism, trade openness and value-driven cooperation. This trend was further complicated by growing internal contestation within the EU regarding its ordering vision, as member states, including France and Germany (see Chapters 5 and 6, respectively) held divergent views on how to balance interdependencies with China and Russia.

In energy policy, for example, a geopolitical approach focuses on securing access to primary resources and technologies and on controlling their supply chain. It entails the adoption of foreign policy strategies that are functional to attaining these goals. Security of supply is the main objective and overshadows other traditional aspects of energy policy, such as sustainability and competitiveness. A geopolitical actor tends to focus on the pursuit of a political agenda, even if this involves sacrificing market or liberal principles; optimum market outcomes and economic considerations are subordinated to political calculations. Governments that follow a geopolitical logic treat energy as a strategic good and play a central role in planning external energy policy, as opposed to allowing private companies and market forces to determine its outcome. This involves the political, regulatory and diplomatic backing of strategies aimed at controlling energy resources, usually to the detriment of other international actors (Siddi and Kustova 2021, 1078).

For example, a geopolitical actor can support, diplomatically and financially, the construction of a pipeline that has limited economic rationale because it sees the project as advancing its geopolitical interests and countering those of its adversaries. Moreover, in order to advance its agenda and justify exceptional procedures

or anti-economic energy projects, a geopolitical actor often relies on arguments focusing on security, which leads to the securitisation of energy policy (Heinrich and Szulecki 2018). On the other hand, geopolitical actorness can be invoked in response to rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances, when conflict suddenly trumps market logic and mutual economic benefits. In such a situation, a state is called upon to intervene and minimise risks by enabling access to alternative and reliable energy suppliers, or by implementing exceptional measures to curb energy consumption.

This is arguably the context in which the EU found itself after Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. In these circumstances, the shift to a geopolitical approach in the EU's external action accelerated. For instance, the EU's traditionally conditions-based enlargement policy is currently facing tensions in responding to the geopolitical imperative of integrating Ukraine and Moldova into the EU (Lippert 2024). The EU's ordering vision for the Eastern neighbourhood is now increasingly influenced by geopolitical priorities, which carries the risk of significant contestation if Russia achieves its war aims.

Another example is the EU policymakers' attempt to square the perceived need for greater EU autonomy and sovereignty in the international arena with the export-driven (and import-dependent, in many areas) nature of the EU's economy. This attempt is reflected in the adoption of the term "open strategic autonomy" by the Commission's liberal actors, where the adjective "open" is meant to reiterate the EU's credentials as a free trader and open economy and thus relativise the more protectionist-sounding "autonomy" (Gehrke 2022, 62). However, understandings of "strategic autonomy" have remained very diverse within the Union (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022, 17).

Conclusion: A More Sober Vision for a Troubled World

The above discussion paints a picture of an EU that has had a rude awakening to a more competitive international arena that is less conducive to the Union's values and interests than at the height of the "unipolar moment" of the 1990s and early 2000s. This has had implications for the Union's role conception and its attendant ordering vision. Temporally this shift has unfolded throughout the period under scrutiny and has been a reactive rather than proactive process. The EU has had to adjust its vision in line with the gradual shift in system polarity, the attendant crisis of the liberal international order, external shocks and internal challenges. The disruptions to the international economic and security order from 2025 onwards – triggered by the second Trump administration in the United States – have only accelerated this shift. As a result, the EU increasingly finds itself having to defend its more principled stance in global politics not only without but at times even against its traditionally closest ally.

Overall, the changes identified in the distributional, institutional and normative dimensions point to a less triumphalist more introspective foreign policy actor. The Union sees itself as a pole in a new multilateral constellation, but its role within that constellation hinges on the ability and willingness to play the game that other

poles – all of them states – have played for decades if not centuries. This is not the vision of a post-national paradise, but a sobering realisation that the "jungle has grown back" (Kagan 2018). At the same time, the Union envisages a more "flexilateral" approach to institutions (Haugevik and Svendsen 2022), one where institutions are less objectives in themselves, but constitute a means to achieve certain (instrumental) ends. This means that informal and ad-hoc frameworks are increasingly relevant, while the EU is also trying to strike a balance between deepening cooperation among like-minded partners and a multipronged opening to the Global South. In the normative realm, the EU started to shift its rhetoric from a focus on the promotion of its constitutive values and market-liberal principles to a broad acceptance of geopolitical realities. While the EU continued to highlight normative principles in its international engagement, it also became more aware of the risks of its interdependencies and started to re-evaluate and alter its economic and political partnerships from a geopolitical angle (Laïdi 2023). Visions of global order are now less determined by questions of global representation, formal arrangements and the spread of human rights and market-liberal principles but aimed at an effective response to the challenges of geopolitical competition.

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