Why study EU foreign policy at all?
A response to Keuleers, Fonck, and Keukeleire

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Abstract

In an important article on the state of EU foreign policy research, Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire show that academics prefer the study of the EU foreign policy system and EU implementation over the consequences of EU foreign policy for recipient countries. While the article is empirical, based on a dataset of 451 published articles on EU foreign policy, the normative message is that it is time to stop with “navel-gazing” and pay more attention to those on the receiving end of EU foreign policy. We welcome this contribution, but wonder why certain research questions have been privileged over others. We argue that this has primarily to do with the predominant puzzles of the time. We also invite Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire to make a theoretical case for a research agenda with more attention for outside-in approaches. We conclude by briefly reflecting on future research agendas in EU foreign policy.

Keywords

European Union, foreign policy, research agenda, theory

Introduction

It is regularly observed that more academics study EU foreign policy than there are civil servants which make it work.1 In their contribution to Cooperation and Conflict, Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire (2016) now show that a large proportion of these academics primarily examine what those civil servants do.

Based on a dataset of 451 articles on EU foreign policy, published in key journals between 2010 and 2014, they identify three research approaches. First, the ‘inward-looking’ approach which focuses on the EU foreign policy system itself. Second, the ‘inside-out’ approach which assesses the implementation of EU foreign policy. Third, the ‘outside-in’ approach which analyses the consequences of EU foreign policy for recipient countries. They find that academic work is “rife with EU-centric research questions” (ibid.: abstract) and that the

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1 Robert Cooper (2005), a former advisor of Javier Solana used, for example, a variation in a speech.
outside-in approach accounts for less than 20 per cent of publications (ibid.: figure 2). While their article is empirical, the normative message is that it is time to stop with “navel-gazing” (ibid.: title) and pay more attention to those on the receiving end of EU foreign policy.

We are the (co-)authors of 8/192 articles classified in their dataset as inward-looking. Our purpose here is not to defend our own perspective. We would like to build on the findings of Keuleers et al. (2016) to discuss why certain research questions have been privileged over others. In other words, why is it that so many scholars have decided to focus on “agenda setting, policy-formulation and decision-making” (Keuleers et al., p.5). We argue that this has primarily to do with the predominant puzzles of the time. Secondly, we invite Keuleers et al. (2016) to make a theoretical case for a research agenda with more attention for outside-in approaches. We conclude by briefly reflecting on future research agendas in EU foreign policy.

**Why all the navel-gazing?**

Academic debates are generally driven by puzzles which inform research questions. To answer these questions, scholars develop and make use of theories. It is worth to explore what the puzzles and theories have been in EU foreign policy research. In order to understand research choices, particularly in the period 2010-2014, it is helpful to look at the broader scholarly debate since the 1960s.

In an article where they reflect on ‘the end of International Relations theory’, Dunne, Hansen and Wight (2013: 412-413) identify three key drivers behind theoretical development and academic research. First, they note that new theories get invented “in light of a general perception on the part of the academic community that a new historical context requires new conceptual tools of analysis” (ibid.: 412). Looking at the academic debate since the establishment of European Political Cooperation (EPC) in 1970, it is indeed the case that EU foreign policy research cannot be understood independently from the international context. The discussions on Civilian Power Europe were prominent during a period of détente in the 1970s (Duchêne 1973). The actorness debate was critical in the 1990s when the EU launched the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and made an attempt to develop its own international voice (Allen and Smith 1990; Jupille and Caporaso 1998). The Normative Power Europe debate emerged when it became increasingly clear that the role of the EU’s crisis management role would mainly be civilian rather military in nature (Manners 2002).

A second driver for “theoretical proliferation”, identified by Dunne et al. (2013: 413), is “the practice of ‘importing’ a theory from a cognate discipline”. Once again, EU foreign policy is no exception. In the early years of European foreign policy cooperation scholars used IR theory to explain why foreign policy integration did not occur (Hoffmann 1966; Waltz 1979: 152; Bull 1982). When it did appear that EU foreign policy was becoming increasingly significant, scholars started using meso-level theories from cognate fields. By the late-1990s and early-2000s, Europeanisation and governance theories, building on institutionalist theories and imported from EU public policy, gradually found their way to foreign policy scholars (Manners and Whitman 2000; Tonra 2001; Smith 2004; Wong 2005; Duke and Vanhoonacker 2006; Juncos and Pomorska 2006; Dijkstra 2008).

Finally, as Dunne et al. (ibid.: 413) note, “theoretical proliferation can be located in the developments within the discipline itself”. This also seems relevant for EU foreign policy.

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2 Jørgensen (2015) also finds imbalances.
One only needs to point at the 'Europe as a power' debate. Following the keynote article by Manners (2002), scholars have proposed a wide range of adjectives: from realist to ethical and market power Europe (Hyde-Price 2006, Aggestam 2008, Damro 2012). This has been a theoretical debate within the EU foreign policy research. The finding that the EU as a non-state actor has a degree of actorness has likewise triggered extensive theoretical debate (Hill 1993; Jupille and Caporaso 1998; Bretherton and Vogler 1999; Groenleer and Van Schaik 2007).

With these three drivers in mind, it should not come as a surprise that so many scholars have focused on institutional questions (inward-looking approach) and implementation questions (inside-out approach) during the 2010-2014 timeframe analysed by Keuleers et al. (2016). The Treaty of Lisbon of 2009 was a historic leap forward in terms of the EU-level diplomatic system with the High-Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU delegations. It posed a major research puzzle: never before did we witness such a centralisation of diplomatic resources in a non-state actor. It is thus hardly surprising that many scholars jumped on these new developments (Dijkstra 2013; Vanhoonacker and Pomorska 2013; Juncos and Pomorska 2013; Spence and Batora 2015). The development of a European-level diplomatic system furthermore gave a new impulse to the use of concepts and insights of public administration (Vanhoonacker, Dijkstra and Maurer 2010; Henockl 2014).

During the 2010-2014 period, scholars furthermore systematically tested – including through cross-case comparisons – theoretical approaches developed during earlier periods. Among others, at least two special issues were published on actorness with a view of driving this concept forward (Niemann and Bretherthon 2013; da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier 2014). Normative power was also critically analysed in a special issue in these pages (Nicolaïdis and Whitman 2013). The 2010-2014 period also included an authoritative volume on the Europeanization of national foreign policy (Wong and Hill 2011). In other words, while scholars generated theories of EU foreign policy during the 2000s, they tested them during the early-2010s.

The academic relevance of foreign policy analysis

Our argument thus far has been that puzzles and theories drive academic research in the area of EU foreign policy. This helps us to explain why scholars have privileged inward-looking and inside-out approaches. The big question is how the outside-in perspectives fit in. In this section, we suggest that if Keuleers et al. (2016) want to encourage the development of such an alternative outside-in approach, it would be important to link this perspective to a well-defined research puzzle and relevant theoretical frames.

In their article, Keuleers et al. (2016) rely on the model of the policy cycle to make a distinction between the three approaches (pp. 349-352). Journal articles about agenda-setting, policy-formulation and decision-making are coded as inward-looking. The articles dealing with the implementation of EU foreign policy fit into the inside-out approach. Finally, articles on impact and evaluation of EU foreign policy are all about outside-in perspectives. Keuleers et al. (2016) therefore use the policy cycle as a structuring devise to provide a snapshot of the EU foreign policy discipline. Yet this presents several challenges.

First, research agendas on EU foreign policy do not necessarily have much to do with the policy cycle. Research on actorness, normative power, Europeanization and governance, for
instance, concerns mostly the *structure and institutions* of EU foreign policy; not the *actual policy* made within the system. While structure and institutions often impact on policy and behaviour, they are traditionally seen as different loci of academic research. We would actually argue that the policy cycle – and foreign policy analysis more generally – is a distinct approach in itself, which has also been imported from a cognate field (White 2001). It is thus unclear why the policy cycle would be a useful structuring devise for an academic literature which goes beyond policy-making.

Second, the policy cycle is mainly a heuristic device, as the authors recognise themselves, “limited by its descriptive character and lack of explanatory power, which means it can never be the sole conceptual foundation for a research project” (Keuleers et al. 2016: 348). The 17 example research questions, which Keuleers et al. (2016: 349-350) identify on the basis of the policy cycle, indeed primarily deal with the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ rather than the ‘why’. Such research questions lack explanatory power and are not a solid basis for a full-fledged new research agenda.

We embrace academic pluralism and value the exchange between the worlds of academia and policy. It is, however, doubtful whether academic research on EU foreign policy is best served by descriptive policy questions on impact and evaluation. As research and journal articles are (and should be) largely about building and testing theories, a theoretically-informed case for the outside-in perspective – next to empirical and normative considerations (Keuleers et al. 2016: 360) – is indispensable for the outside-in approach to become an attractive driver for new research projects.

**Towards future research agendas**

Through their empirical analysis of a dataset of 451 articles, Keuleers et al. (2016) provide an interesting snapshot of the research agenda between 2010 and 2014. Against the background of the earlier mentioned three key drivers for academic research, the emphasis on inward-looking and inside-out questions is not surprising. By way of conclusion, we would like to briefly explore likely future research agendas.

Making predictions about the future is always risky business. Still if we continue to reason along the lines of Dunne et al. (2013), with their emphasis on the importance of the historical context for the academic research agenda, it is quite likely that the rapidly changing geopolitical environment and the new tensions in Europe will result in new puzzles. At a moment of increased international uncertainty, scholars may turn their attention to the implications of this evolving global environment, conceptualised as a multi-polar, multi-partner, multi-culture or even multi-order world (High Representative 2015; Flockhart 2016; Petito 2016). This changing context may also give rise to renewed attention for grand theories, more appropriate to deal with macro-level questions.

Second, scholars will likely continue to import theories from cognate disciplines. The so-called practice turn (Adler and Pouliot 2011), for instance, shows considerable promise (e.g. Bicchi and Bremerberg). The debate on the EU democratic deficit has been broadened to research on the legitimacy of EU foreign policy (Sjursen 2011). A further significant development is the increasing embedding of academic research on EU foreign policy in other related areas such as security studies, conflict studies, international political economy, and area studies. This points in a direction whereby EU foreign policy is less seen as *sui generis* and more mainstream.
Finally, as a field grows more mature, we see a more systematic empirical testing of theories, new variables introduced, and scope conditions defined. Following Mearsheimer and Walt (2013), we are cautious about the promise of this development. As noted above, there is a risk that empirical analyses become detached from theories.

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