# The Iraq War: Killing Dreams of a Unified EU?*

Raj S. Chari** and Francesco Cavatorta°

**Department of Political Science,
Trinity College Dublin,
Ireland
and
° Department of Politics,
University College Dublin,
Ireland.

*Introduction/Objectives*

For students of EU public policy, the EU's reaction during and after the Iraq War may represent the same story of impotence that has historically plagued the EU when trying to speak with a single voice and act with a united front during a major world crisis. Despite some achievements with the EU's Common and Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) of the early 1990s (Ginsberg 1997; Holland 1995), the Iraq War perhaps best reflects Cameron's concerns: "in handling serious political crises, especially those involving armed conflict, the Union has rarely acted as one", or acted effectively (Cameron, 1998, 66).

Seeking to better understand *why* the EU did not act effectively during the Iraq War and to consider what lessons can be taken from this experience, the paper has three main objectives. First, the paper considers the theoretical reasons that help explain why the EU has historically failed to create a common defence and security policy. The section thereafter analyses developments during the Iraq war and tests which theoretical explanations (or combinations thereof) are of most value to understand the EU's stance. The final section then considers the future of the EU as an international actor in light of the fundamental concepts introduced by Hill (1993) regarding 'capabilities' and 'expectations' of EU foreign policy.

*Three Theoretical Explanations*

Based on broader analyses offered by Peterson (1998, 11-13) and Hix (1999, 348-54) one may argue that the literature has offered at least three larger explanations for EU foreign policy failures, although one must note from the outset that there is some overlap in the theoretical issues raised in each.[1]

The *first explanation* highlights (as an independent variable) the *member states' (MSs') desire to maintain sovereignty* regarding foreign policy decisions (Hill, 1996). The argument here is that while MSs ceded sovereignty is issues such as monetary policy, they have maintained a strong-hold on external political and security issues which, in Hoffman's conceptualisation (1966), are representative of 'high politics.' This is coupled with other factors that have played a part of the states' calculation of foreign policy interests: states such as the UK have favoured 'Atlantic' ties; those such as France and Germany have sought to solidify links with each other in order to become leaders on the world stage within Europe; and smaller states such as Ireland remained ambivalent about the future of CFSP based on pure cost-benefit analysis and concerns regarding the loss of foreign policy 'neutrality' (Hoffman, 2000, 191-192). A corollary to this would be that the EU has been delegated with promoting the 'normative values' of the Union (Manners, 2001)[2] upon which it is relatively easy to find agreement by all MSs, while major crises have been the exclusive domain of national decision-making.

A *second explanation*, which focuses less on developments at the domestic level and more on those at the supranational one, *argues that the ineffectiveness of policies such as CFSP can be explained through the weak institutionalisation of the supranational decision-making structure* (Forster and Wallace, 1996). Given the importance of intergovernmentalism, inevitably requiring agreement of the MSs when decisions are to be made, coupled with the lack of leading role for the Commission and almost insignificant input of the European Parliament (EP), the EU institutional structure seems almost handcuffed, if not doomed, when seeking to find a unified

voice regarding foreign policy (Cameron, 1998, 66; Allen, 1998, 56). Although the new position of Mr. PESC - the Secretary General of the Council/High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy - was created in Amsterdam, to date the literature has not fully evaluated whether or not the position has remedied the institutional quagmire during a major crisis.

A *third explanation*, which goes beyond developments at both the domestic and supranational level and instead focuses on those at the international one, is that "the *EU's behaviour as international actor is conditioned by transatlantic relations*" (Peterson, 1998, 11). The argument here is not so much that different MSs may or may not have ties to the United States that subsequently influence their behaviour, as the first explanation suggests. Rather, the attitude taken by the USA towards the EU as a whole helps explain why the latter has been unsuccessful in attaining the position of significant international actor with clearly defined security and defence policies that are respected globally. Examples of this have been seen during the Arab-Israeli conflict when Europe had been "…pushed aside and told to be quiet in Washington" (Hoffman, 2000) as well as when America took the lead in the Bosnian conflict in the wake of EU confusion (Ullman, 1996).

*The EU and the Iraq War: Which Explanations are of Value?*

This section tests which of the theoretical explanations (or combinations thereof) are of most value in order to understand the EU's position during the Iraq crisis. Concretely, we will ask which of the three independent variables helps explain why the EU did not act effectively with one voice: the desires of MSs (seeking to preserve their sovereignty), the problems associated with the supranational decision-making (that prevented effective decisions being made), or the role of the United States (that sought to have the EU sidelined).

From the evidence, it emerges that the first variable is the one that helps best explain, as Commissioner Patten put it, "the miserable weeks" the EU went through during the crisis over Iraq. Within the Commission in particular, the blame for the lack of EU effectiveness is squarely put on MSs. Aside from very general statements on the necessity to give a central role to the United Nations or to struggle against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, while at the same time preserving the Atlantic Alliance, MSs failed to reach any agreement of substance on Iraq.

Divisions among them due to perceived different 'national interests' are at the heart of the conscious marginalisation of CFSP. In particular, the crisis witnessed how "the UK and France do not see any advantage in sharing their 'diplomacies'" (Robert, 2002, 25) and collapsing them into one European voice when their world-views and interests appear so diverging. While the UK was willing to pursue at all costs its perceived special relationship with the US, France and Germany attempted to reaffirm their political grip on the Union by presenting themselves as the true spokespersons of the citizens of Europe. Both Patten and Prodi quite frankly pointed the finger at the MSs and Patten noted with some frustration that despite some good CFSP achievements: "MSs do not accept that Europe has 'occupied the space' [and that] foreign policy remains primarily a matter for democratically elected MSs governments."[3] These accusations to MSs for failing to pursue a common objective may seem biased in order not to have to shoulder the blame for their ineffectiveness, but it remains true that most MSs and even the applicant states did their best to sideline the EU. A stark example of this was the letter drafted by eight European leaders, which, taking the other European governments by surprise, uncritically

supported the US position (*El Pais*, 1/2/2003). It is beyond doubt that MSs have conflicting positions regarding where Europe should stand internationally. Some states have an almost "pavlovian reflex" (Robert, 2002, 24) when it comes to follow the US, while others refuse to be sycophantic to the US. These differences are not simply the function of the type of government in charge at a particular moment, but the function of positioning in the system and interests. Nevertheless, these differences impeded the formation of a united front.

Concerning the second variable, there is little doubt that the institutional procedures governing CFSP are cumbersome and that the Commission is not fully relevant in this policy area. It is also true that Mr. PESC, Javier Solana, is perceived as being controversial (given his previous U-Turn on joining NATO in Spain in the 1980s) and being biased (in light of his Atalticist ties as General Secretary of NATO in the 1990s). Yet, the real issue seems not to be the decision-making structure of CFSP itself, or Solana's role in it**,** but the political will of the domestic actors, pointing to the idea that the EU's foreign policy institutional design is not of prime importance (Stavridis and Hill, 1996). For example, during the crisis Prodi acknowledged that "better instruments and improved decision-making mechanisms are needed to create a real political Union", but he also strongly pointed out that the MSs failed to decide if they wanted the project crystallised.[4] He had earlier argued that: "Europe can make an effective contribution to peace in the world only if its nations pull together within the European Union."[5] Indeed, a stark reminder of the failure of the EU to speak with one voice is the absence (bar a very general statement) of any strong CFSP statements during the crisis. Its presence could have allowed Solana to pursue concrete measures, but the lack of agreement between the MSs made his position irrelevant. Cassen (2003, 15) argues convincingly that "deciding how and by whom EU policies are implemented before deciding what should be implemented" is not an innocent choice, as it allows MSs to deflect attention from themselves and their retention of sovereignty in foreign affairs while blaming the supranational actor for its inability to make decisions.

Regarding the third explanation, there is a history of ambivalence in Washington's attitude to a united Europe. On the one hand, the US always hoped that Europe would become a more relevant actor in international politics in order to share the burden of global management. On the other, the US never really desired the emergence of an autonomous political actor that would potentially represent a serious competitor. The recent crisis re-affirmed the second of these views. The White House's 2002 National Security Strategy never makes reference to the EU as an independent actor on the international stage and one may argue that President Bush was smug about having 'broken up' the EU on the Iraq issue (*The Economist*, 26 April, 2003). Despite this, it would be misleading to suggest that the US is to blame for the EU's ineffectiveness. It is not the US's responsibility to find a credible interlocutor and while Washington may have an interest in pursuing a policy of *'divide et impera'* towards European countries, one would have thought that the MSs should make an effort to build a unified CFSP, to which the US would be forced to adapt. The reason for this lack of European unity regarding the transatlantic relation is the result of the failure by the MSs to realise that in many respects the US needs Europe just as much as Europe needs the US.

Finally, it is worth concluding with Patten's words to illustrate how crucial the first variable is: "CFSP […] suffered a severe setback because MSs on both sides of the debate have chosen to take firm national policy positions as if they spoke for the European Union as a whole."[6] Regardless of either weak supranational decision-

making structures, or how the US views Europe on the world stage, as long as any MS attempts to 'highjack' the EU to advance narrow national positions, or even worse ignore the EU altogether, CFSP is unlikely to be credible and effective.

*Lessons and The Future of the EU*

This study highlighted the salience of the first explanation in understanding the reasons behind the EU's ineffective stance during the Iraq War. In fact, it strongly emerges that without a commitment on the part of MSs to redefine their strategic priorities and their interests in European terms, "rhetorical declarations of common foreign and defence policies will remain an illusion" (Wallace, 2003).

In the context of the future developments of CFSP, it is significant to recall Hill's (1993, 1998) conceptualisation of 'capability-expectations' gap, which has been evoked as a means to evaluate the role of the EU on the international stage. There seems to be today a widespread sentiment within the Commission and within Solana's Secretariat that a stronger CFSP can be built after this abysmal performance. There is still a demand for the EU to have an international role, particularly to promote innovative solutions to conflict-plagued regions such as the Middle East. To do this, not only should more resources be placed into CFSP's construction, but also MSs must start to realise that the EU has to offer an alternative to the US. This, for many countries, requires a reconfiguration of their national security strategies and demands that they stop going their separate ways hoping either to be rewarded by the 'master' for good behaviour, or to use Europe to promote a national 'world-view.'

In spite of significant structural changes to cope with the external demands put on the Community such as the launch of CFSP and the creation of Mr. PESC, the gap between capabilities and expectations recognised by Hill (1993) seems to be still very wide. The danger that this gap poses to the solidity and credibility of the Union should be addressed if the EU wants to play an effective role in the international system. However, until the different MSs spend more time attempting to patch-up the transatlantic relationship instead of working out a common EU position, an effective CSFP is likely to remain illusory. One can only hope that it will not be another case of 'divided we stand, together we fall.'

*Bibliography*


Allen, D. "Who Speaks for Europe" in J. Peterson and H. Sjursen (eds.), *A Common Foreign Policy for Europe?* (London: Routledge), pp. 41-58.

Cameron, F. 1998, "Building a common foreign policy: do institutions matter?" in J. Peterson and H. Sjursen (eds.), *A Common Foreign Policy for Europe?* (London: Routledge), 59-76.

Cassen, B., 2003 "L'Union Européenne Malade de l'Atlantisme", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, No. 590, 14-15.

Forster, A. and W. Wallace, 1996, "Common Foreign and Security Policy: A New Policy or Just a New Name?" in H. Wallace and W. Wallace (eds.) *Policy-Making in the EU* (Oxford: OUP).

Ginsberg 1997, "The EU's CFSP: The Politics of Procedure" in M. Holland (ed.) *Common Foreign and Security Policy: The Record and Reform* (London: Pinter).

Hill C. 1993, "The Capability-Expectation Gap, or Conceptualising Europe's International Role," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 305-28.

Hill C. 1998, "Closing the capabilities-expectations gap?" in J. Peterson and H. Sjursen (eds.), *A Common Foreign Policy for Europe?* (London: Routledge), 18-38.

Hix, S. 1999, *The Political System of the EU* (London: MacMillan)

Holland 1995. "Bridging the Capabilities-Expectation Gap: A case study of the CFSP Joint Action on South Africa", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 33, No.4, 555-72.

Hoffmann S., 1966, "Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation State and the Case of Western Europe" *Daedalus*, 95, 862-915.

Hoffmann S., 2000, "Towards a Common European Foreign and Security Policy", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 38, No.2, 189-98.

Howorth, J. 2001 "European Defence and the Changing Politics of the EU: Hanging Together or Hanging Separately", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 765-89.

Manners, I. 2001, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms", http://www.ukc.ac.uk/politics/englishschool/manners00.doc

Peterson, J. 1998, "Introduction: The European Union as a Global Actor" in J. Peterson and H. Sjursen (eds.), *A Common Foreign Policy for Europe?* (London: Routledge), 3-17.

Robert, A.C., 2002, "L'Etrange Politique Etrangère de l' Union Européenne", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, No. 585, 24-25.

Stavridis S. and C. Hill (eds), 1996, *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policies* (Oxford: Berg)

Ullman, R.H., 1996, *The World and Yugoslavia's Wars* (NY: Council on Foreign Relations).

Wallace, W. "Hard Decisions are Needed to Defend Europe", *Financial Times*, 27 June, 2003.

www.europa.eu.int (Accessed July 2003)

*Notes*

* RSC and FC thank Martin Rhodes for comments on intial ideas and Sylvia Kritzinger for insights during the final writing phase. As always, RSC is indebted to Marth Peach for providing a 'home-base' at the Juan March Institute, Madrid.

[1] Despite the recent creation of the Common European Security and Defence Policy (CESDP) in 2000, explanations are based on the literature that analyses CFSP developments.

[2] Manners identified five 'norms' within the corpus of EU treaties, foreign policy declarations, policies and practices. These norms (peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights) presumably underpin the Union's *acquis communautaire* and *acquis poltique* and their promotion through statements, declarations and co-operation makes the EU unable to 'impose' them by other means. Not having clear sovereignty, the EU is also unable to have clear interests.

[3] Speech to the EP delivered in Strasbourg, March 12, 2003.

[4] Report on the Spring European Council delivered to the EP in Strasbourg, March 26, 2003.

[5] Statement on Iraq released to the press in Brussels, March 20, 2003.

[6] Speech to the EP delivered in Strasbourg, March 12, 2003.