



#IEE60

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En 2024, l'Institut d'études européennes de l'ULB (IEE-ULB) a soixante ans ! Pour scander cette année anniversaire et très « européenne », il convie ses membres à réfléchir à des questions fondatrices de l'intégration européenne en 1964 et toujours d'actualité en 2024. Dans une forme courte et accessible, nos chercheurs proposent un portrait en mosaïque de l'Europe, entre continuités et mutations. Les auteurs sont libres de leurs propos qui ne représentent pas une position officielle de l'IEE-ULB.

Global Europe Heal thyself, But Make Sure the Cure Isn't Worse Than the Disease

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Just as it faces a number of existential challenges on the international stage, the EU has appeared to some both riven with self-doubt, and unwilling to make the necessary changes to secure its place alongside the other powers of a multipolar world. However, before engaging on an ambitious set of taboo-busting reforms of the EU's foreign policy principals, leaders should carefully consider that in seeking to constitute a sovereign Europe they do not undermine that which has set the EU apart as a multilateral institutional actor, both within and beyond the European continent.

Alors qu'elle est confrontée à plusieurs défis existentiels sur la scène internationale, l'UE apparaît au regard de certains comme étant à la fois en proie au doute et incapable de procéder aux changements nécessaires pour s'assurer une place aux côtés des autres puissances d'un monde multipolaire. Toutefois, avant de s'engager dans une série ambitieuse de réformes des principes de la politique étrangère de l'UE, les dirigeants devraient s'assurer qu'en cherchant à constituer une Europe souveraine, ils ne portent pas atteinte à ce qui a fait la spécificité de l'UE en tant qu'acteur institutionnel multilatéral, tant en Europe qu'au-delà.

When discussing emerging powers, rarely is the European Union (EU) included on the list. This is understandable, as framing the EU as an emerging power within a still largely Western-centric global order can feel a bit factitious. Nevertheless, as a distinct international actor, the EU can make a reasonable claim to 'emerging' status. The EU's profile as a widely recognized international actor is fairly recent as it was largely set-up within a single generation. Its emerging global role has also shown many of the same 'growing pains' associated with other emerging actors. On the one hand, far from being linear its emergence has progressed with fits and starts. On the other hand, established players, including the EU's own Member States, have experienced its emergence as both an opportunity and a challenge.

An emerging global EU is a complex beast to grasp. The EU's institutional hybridity, unique historical antecedents, and peculiar normative underpinnings all make it a complicated actor to fathom on the international stage. Its international stance sways between asserting its unicity and mirroring the trappings of the Nation State. This elusiveness has seen the EU adopt a near Zelig-like quality where the paradox of its international significance is solved by projecting frameworks onto it which are informed by different national, sub-national or transnational realities. However, since the EU cannot be all things to all people, despite the EU's steady accretion of external action capacities, it seems it is destined to disappoint the varied expectations it is saddled with.



Listening to much of the mood music on Europe coming from other parts of the world, while bearing in mind the unfortunate jungle-based metaphors used by some in the EU, one can be forgiven for thinking of Aesop's parable about the frog and the fox. The short fable describes a frog leaving his swamp and proclaiming himself a wonder-working doctor. It is then asked by an unconvinced fox how it is that he cannot cure his own poorly complexion, leaving the batrachian dumbstruck. In this humbling analogy, Europe is cast in the role of the self-confident yet sickly amphibian seeking to escape its native quagmire, while many an outside observer of Europe has taken on the mantle of the sceptical and sharp-tongued woodland creature intoning the fable's central moral that one "should not set up for rectifying enormities in others, while one labours under the same oneself" (Croxall, 1792)

Prevailing environmental imperatives; accelerating demographic and technological evolutions; structural shifts in geo-politics and geo-economics since the end of the cold war; repeated and widely discussed crises roiling Europe since the late noughties; mounting political dissensus in most liberal democracies; and the return of war to the continent, have all conspired to paint a diminished image of Europe. These challenges, and in particular since 2022 another inter-state war in Europe, have proven a harsh test for the EU. It has led some to stop asking who 'the sick man of Europe' might be and start wondering whether the EU has become the sick man on the global stage.

Only a decade ago, when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the presidents of the Commission and Council at the time were still emboldened enough to give a lecture entitled 'From War to Peace: A European Tale'. It largely reflected the cosmopolitan and Kantian certainties that have shaped both the EU and its international stance. They provided the normative and narrative substrate of its civilian approach to international affairs, wedding, even if at times imperfectly, the EU and its Member States to the principles and practices of multilateralism. Thus echoing the concluding words of Jean Monnet's memoirs which cast the "[European] Community itself [as] only a stage on the way to the organised world of the future" (Monnet, 1976). While at times a tad pompous and singularly euro-centric, this cosmopolitan vision is the most distinctive and recognizable contribution of the EU to the cacophony of voices discussing a global order forever in the making.

The cosmopolitan and institutionalist remedies championed by Brussels have often come across as 'a lone voice in the wilderness' as few of the immediate interests and longer-term histories of the other players on the global stage predispose them to sing from the same bureaucratic and multilateralist hymn sheet. This dissonance between the EU's normative operating system and that of the global community means many aspects of the global EU agenda are 'lost in translation'. In the absence of an emulator of sorts it has at times proven complicated to see EU-bound institutional solutions or political compromises transposed to the global level. In just the last two years, painstakingly crafted intra-European regulatory compromises to recognized global challenges such as the deforestation-free regulation (EUDR), the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), or the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) all appeared to international audience as radical, even disruptive, unilateral impositions. The same holds true the other way around, with wider agreements not always meshing well with European strictures or political dynamics, with for example the EU unilaterally challenging previously accepted instruments of international law like the Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism or the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT).



As the EU's footprint on the international stage has grown, the number of disputes between its internal logics and preferences and those of third parties have also increased, thus feeding calls for the EU to become better at the traditional great power-games associated with sovereign states protecting their national interests. The diagnosis being that before deciding whether a more sovereign EU can beat other powers at their own game, the EU must be given the means to join the game. This has resulted in recent epochal shifts within the EU as longstanding taboos have fallen. The EU's 1 billion € support for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility is a symptomatic example of such a norm-busting evolution in its Foreign Policy as it marks the Union's first direct foray into defence procurement and weapons' delivery. The transformation of FRONTEX from a coordinating agency into a standing EU border force is another recent example. Looking forward, talk of a possible future Defence Commissioner, an ongoing Commission consultation on whether to cover defence-related research under its civilian research program, or the growing calls to abandon the Council's unanimity rule in foreign policy are all potentially revolutionary steps towards moving the EU closer to the norms and practices of other global powers in today's multipolar world.

As such, 10 years after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, the EU's founding principles remain central to its international profile, but they have been warped by conflict and crises. This raises the question whether, as the EU adapts to meet the challenges of the day and respond to its critics, will it allow something essential to be lost? To return to Aesop's fable about the fox and the frog, as the little amphibian seeks to meet the expectations of its landlocked challenger, how can it make sure it does not lose those traits that allowed it to thrive in its original watery marsh? While the EU's singular institutional constraints, political complexities, bureaucratic procedures, and diffuse reciprocities are diagnosed as some of the causes of its relative international sluggishness, those same traits helped drive Europe's peaceful convergence. So, it is important to also bear in mind the fable's second, often overlooked, cautionary message warning the frog against criticism of its efforts motivated solely by misunderstandings or prejudice. As EU leaders and citizens contemplate how to foster a more sovereign Europe in response to "the fact that our Europe today is mortal" (Macron, 2024), they should be careful not to throw the 'baby out with the bathwater' and lose those norms and practices upon which the European project was built in the first place.

