

The EU as a Global Actor: A new conceptualisation four decades after 'actorness'

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Abstract

In recent years, 'EU actorness', one of the more enduring concepts in EU studies, has received renewed scholarly attention. Attempts have been made to make it less static, less descriptive, and more capable of explaining the EU's influence over international outcomes. We applaud such efforts but argue that synthetic fixes to the existing approach fall short. A new way of capturing the EU's external behaviour is necessary, one that takes into account not only the EU's own characteristics but also those of the context in which it is acting, the kinds of political, economic and social transactions it undertakes, and the feedback processes engendered. We build a holistic model for understanding and predicting changes in the EU's 'actor capacity', in the generalising spirit of the original actorness approach but with a new set of dynamic and integrated components that emphasize a previously missing variable: EU performance.

Key words

European Union; foreign policy; actorness; actor capacity; international organisations; performance.



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Introduction¹

The debate over the EU's global 'actorness' is one of the longest running in the field of EU studies, rivalling even the debate over intergovernmental versus supranational drivers of European integration. For almost four decades, scholars have sought to identify the nature of the EU as a global actor, a task complicated by the treatment of the EU as an 'unidentified political object'. Not quite a state yet more than an international organization, the EU bears some but not all the resemblances of the kinds of actors – states – normally assumed to shape major global outcomes. As such, concepts drawn from traditional international relations theory, with their state-centred definitions and assumptions, proved a poor fit for use in understanding the EU's role in the world. In the 1970s, a pioneering group of scholars set out to reconceptualise the meaning of a 'global actor' from a broader perspective to include an emerging set of entities on the global stage – including the then-European Community (EC). To a great extent this effort reflected a return to first principles, undertaken to capture the basic qualities and characteristics an entity must possess to qualify as an independent and distinctive actor in its own right. This initiative, especially during those times, was not uncontroversial: it posed a direct challenge to mainstream (and state-centred) theories and perspectives on international relations.

The most theoretically elaborate and extensive study during those early days was that by Gunnar Sjöstedt in his 1977 work titled *The External Role of the European Community*. The book aimed to 'construct a model for the evaluation of the extent to which the EC is to be regarded as a genuine

actor in the international system' (1977: 6). Making the concept of 'actor capability' central to his model-building effort (the concept of 'actorness' was invented earlier, by Cosgrove and Twitchett in a 1970 piece on the UN and EEC), Sjöstedt identified three sets of necessary conditions for actor capability. These included (a) the ability to articulate interests and mobilize resources towards common goals, (b) capabilities for decision-making especially under urgent conditions, and (c) a network of implementation agents to carry forth the will of the entity. These categories were taken up by multiple generations of scholars to explore the EU's external actions in different fields. As the EU's external tasks expanded, from economic to environmental and security questions, so have scholars drawn upon Sjöstedt's model for explaining whether or not the EU has 'actor capability' in those different fields. This work set a 'very high theoretical standard for subsequent discussions and conceptualizations of the EU as an international actor to the present day' – almost all analysts of the EU's external relations 'either explicitly or implicitly relied or expanded upon this central work' (Koops 2011: 107).

More than four decades after Sjöstedt's seminal study, it is worth revisiting the EU's role as a global actor and how we study it. As that role expanded empirically, so did scholarly attempts to understand it, leading to a proliferation – and fragmentation – of theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches focused on various aspects of the EU's global role. Some scholars have made it a point to 'move on' from macro questions about EU actorness. They focus

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panel at the International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Conference in San Francisco, April 2018.



instead on specific deployments of EU influence in particular policy or geographic areas. Yet as empirical evidence accumulates and new insights come to light, we should consider how such insights can be aggregated to a broader level of theoretical abstraction (Stinchcombe, 1978; Tilly, 2008). More practically, the EU's role as a global actor continues to garner attention from scholars and practitioners: scholars concerned with questions of EU 'decline' in an inhospitable geopolitical landscape, and practitioners intent to arrest that decline. In his final State of the Union address, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker pointedly argued that Europe needs *Weltpolitikfähigkeit*, or 'the capability to do world politics' (European Commission, 2018). The more things change, we might say, the more they stay the same.

This paper proposes a new conceptual framework for considering the EU as an actor, based on the importance of studying not only what the EU *is* but also what it *does*. When scholars focused mainly on 'actor capability', they neglected Sjöstedt's complementary and interactive concept of 'actor behaviour'. The result was an emphasis on the EU's own features and enabling characteristics, rather than a generalization of what the EU is able to do externally and with what effect. We revive the behavioural aspects of EU actorness in this paper by introducing the concept of 'actor performance': *the kinds and quality of transactions originating from the EU system towards the external environment*. We also include insights from recent theorising on the importance of context, and we theorize how feedback loops between external

transactions (performance) or effect (impact), and internal enabling conditions (cohesion, for instance), shape not just the EU's global role but also its *internal character*. In this way we hope to contribute to debates beyond the specific question of EU external affairs, to include the state of European integration itself. In response to calls to move beyond actor studies of the EU *per se* (Drieskens, 2017), we might add that the variables contained in this model can be applied, in principle, to other actors in international affairs.

We build our new framework in the following steps. We first outline key developments in the 'EU actorness' literature before critiquing that literature on three points: for its over-emphasis on internal EU characteristics, for its lack of consideration of interactions between variables, and for its tendency to fall into what we call the 'closed system' trap (section two). We then introduce and define a new model by outlining the key elements that shape performance: *general conditions* that serve as general enablers for a global role and *specific conditions* that offer issue-specific resources and capabilities for acting globally. After discussing the importance of *context*, we focus on the introduction of a key variable – *performance* – before considering the aspect of *impact* – what the EU actually manages to accomplish (section three). Finally, we theorise the feedback loops in the model (section four). The conclusion discusses what this approach may tell us about related 'macro' questions, including the integration and disintegration of the EU and actor behaviour in world affairs.



The Literature on Actorness

The Early Days

The External Role of the European Community elucidated two aspects that Sjöstedt felt were key to understanding the EU's potential role in the world. The first was 'actor capability', which included mainly structural characteristics. The second was 'actor behaviour', which included a number of more dynamic features, including a brief mention of performance (1977: 6).

Sjöstedt argued that 'to be an actor is the same thing as to possess a quality, which is here called actor capability. The object equipped with this quality is a unit in the international system' which always meets two basic conditions:

it is discernible from its external environment – it has a minimal degree of separateness – and it has a minimal degree of internal cohesion. If these conditions are fulfilled, we could say that the unit has autonomy, which is...a necessary condition for the unit to be able to attain an actor capability (1977: 15).

Sjöstedt identified three further sets of necessary conditions for actor capability, as discussed above; namely, the ability to articulate interests and mobilize resources, take decisions under conditions of urgency, and to mobilize specific tools and related actors.

The structural, internal characteristics associated with actor capability were taken up with great gusto by EU scholars. By contrast, actor *behaviour* considerations were neglected. Actor behaviour explains how actor capacity is, in fact, translated and applied in practice. Sjöstedt stressed a general and basic condition for actor behaviour, that it 'should consist of some

sort of action emanating from the Community system and, second, that this action to a considerable degree is an expression of the identity of the European Community as a whole, not of one of its constituent parts' (1977: 20). He distinguished between two broad behavioural categories of the EC's interaction with the wider world: diplomatic interaction and exchange interaction, as we return to below (Sjöstedt 1977: 49). Thus, while Sjöstedt argued that 'the more of an actor capability the unit is in possession of, the more of an actor it is; the more certain it is that it will be able to behave as a single unit in any kind of situation in relating to any sort of partner opponent', actor capability was a *necessary but not sufficient measure* of the EU's external prowess. A focus on what the EU actually does must be part of the analysis (1977: 20).

Sjöstedt's proviso to explore the EU's actual behaviour and external impact presaged later work on the transformative power of the EU in international affairs (Grabbe, 2006; Manners, 2002), both in individual policy areas and as a result of international rule changes. These latter effects change the very nature, rules and structures of the international system, thus chiming with later efforts to characterize the EU's 'structural' foreign policy goals (Keukeleire & MacNaughtan, 2008). Sjöstedt's approach inspired multiple generations of scholars interested in exploring, understanding and explaining the EU's international role.

Subsequent Work on Actorness

Importantly, it was the structural, internal preconditions for actor capacity that gained the greatest traction in subsequent analyses on actorness. Scholars developed a variety



of categories for capacity (see Table 1 for a summary).

The most popular category concerned variables related, in one way or another, to the EU's internal coherence. A review of the literature by Brattberg and Rhinard (2012a, 2012b) shows four ways in which this variable has been used in actorness studies; namely, cohesion in either values, preferences, internal procedures, or policy outputs – and the extent to which they are compatible and clear in an EU context. Coherent values imply similarity of goals amongst EU members and EU institutions (Jupille and Caporaso 1998: 219) and shared commitment to a set of overarching principles (Bretherton and Vogler 2006: 30). Coherent preferences are singled out by Thomas as the crucial element in explaining actorness. He argues that 'the range of preferences amongst actors will be a major determinant of the Union's political cohesion. The more that EU member states and supranational institutions agree on what the EU's policy should be, the more cohesive the Union will be and vice-versa' (Thomas 2010: 7). Procedural coherence comes from Jupille and Caporaso, who focus on the importance of the 'rules and procedures used to process issues where conflict exists... Procedural cohesion implies some agreement on the basic rules by which policies are made' (Jupille and Caporaso 1998: 219). Coherence on the 'rules of the game' are essential, not least because a lack of agreement on rules, or a dysfunctional set of procedures for processing policies, is a major handicap to the EU's capacity to act externally. Bretherton and Vogler take a similar approach when they describe the importance of coherent internal coordination procedures (Bretherton and Vogler 2006). Finally, output cohesion concerns whether the EU can devise collective positions in the form of policy outputs. As Jupille and Caporaso put it, 'if member states succeed in formulating

policies...more cohesion is said to exist' (1998: 221). Thomas is more specific, adding that common policies alone are not enough to influence actorness; he writes that 'the simple adoption of a common policy is less important than its determinacy, meaning how clearly it articulates the Union's goal and how narrowly it specifies the behaviours incumbent upon EU member states and institutions in order to achieve those goals' (2010: 7-8).

Another category of variables used to depict actor capacity includes those related to practical 'capability'. Hill (1996: 13) argued that 'true actorness requires not only a clear identity and a self-contained decision-making system, but also the practical capabilities to have effective policies'. Similarly, Sjursen stated that 'actorness cannot and should not be viewed separately from actual capabilities, even though that is the common approach' (quoted in Toje 2008: 204). Although Jupille and Caporaso downplayed the importance of actual tools and resources to pursue policy goals, Bretherton and Vogler make it central to their definition of actorness. They called attention to 'the availability of, and capacity to utilise, policy instruments' (2006: 30), thus setting out a two-part definition of capability. The 'availability of instruments' sheds light upon the kinds of resources available, which could range from diplomatic tools to aid mechanisms, and from military missions to trade agreements. The 'capacity to utilise' those instruments is a slightly different question, not least in the EU context where complex decision procedures may hamper the deployment of missions or the disbursement of aid.

A third category can be called 'consistency' (Brattberg & Rhinard, 2012b). EU actorness depended partly on whether the EU can carry out its policies (and previous commitments) in a consistent fashion. This category includes variables such as whether



EU institutions 'stick to the common line' following decisions, especially when revisions and adaptations take place (Thomas, 2010). Similarly, issues related to implementation 'on the ground' affect actorness, such as whether the Commission (or EU member states) implement an agreement in-line with the legislation's original intent. One might say that the category of consistency has both horizontal (amongst EU institutions) and vertical (from Brussels to the field) dimensions.

The last category traditionally used to study actorness relates to larger, structural questions – some even beyond the EU. Allen and Smith suggested that the EU's structural presence in the international arena is premised on the notion that 'the EU is perceived to be important by other actors

within the global system' (1990: 20; see also Jupille & Caporaso, 1998). Others followed Sjöstedt's original emphasis on 'autonomy' – the EU acts to the extent that it is distinct from its member states. Even here, though, autonomy was derived from largely internal features, such as treaty provisions, internal policy implications, or the judicial principle of 'parallelism' (Jopp & Schlotter, 2007; Woolcock, 2010).² Bretherton and Vogler's (2006) inclusion of 'opportunity' for action, in their tripartite argument for actorness, is worth a positive note here. They argue that the current state of geopolitics and the nature of the political 'space' in which the EU attempts to exert influence matters. We take those arguments further in subsequent sections of this paper.

Table 1. *Traditional measures of EU internal actor characteristics (see also Brattberg & Rhinard, 2012a, 2012b).*

| Characteristic | Typical measure | Scholars |
|---|---|---|
| Coherence | Value coherence, preference coherence, procedural coherence, policy coherence | Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Jupille & Caporaso, 1998; Sjöstedt, 1977, 1998; Thomas, 2010 |
| Capabilities | Instruments, mechanisms, deployable resources | Hill, 1996; Koops, 2011; Sjöstedt, 1977; Toje, 2008 |
| Consistency | Commitment to agreed position; fealty to implementation | Brattberg & Rhinard, 2013; Delreux, 2014; Sjöstedt, 1977; Thomas, 2010 |
| Autonomy, Recognition, Opportunity | International perceptions; <i>de jure, de facto</i> authority of the EU; parallelism; political circumstances | Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Delreux, 2014; Jupille & Caporaso, 1998; Woolcock, 2010 |

² The principle of parallelism was confirmed in ECJ Case 22/1970 (AETR), which stated that when the then-EC has taken measures to realize a common policy, member states are no longer

allowed to conclude agreements with third states that (could) undermine these internal EC measures.



Looking back, looking forward

The majority of scholarship in the years following Sjöstedt's ground-breaking work followed a familiar pattern. First, it focused on the structural, internal determinants of the EU. Not only did such metrics correspond to traditional research on European integration – in which the formation of common, cohering rules and norms is a major focus of study – but so was such an analytical approach more straightforward, empirically. Measuring the development of the EU's common positions and common rules (usually in legal terms) is easier than gauging behaviour patterns and measuring international influence. Yet in his original formulation, Sjöstedt devoted an entire chapter to understanding how 'internal determinants of actor capability' relate to 'outward-directed behaviour' (1977: 20), precisely so that scholars did not stop their analysis at the EU's own characteristics. Sjöstedt thus predates recent calls to move away from 'EU navel-gazing' (Keuleers, Fonck, & Keukeleire, 2016) and to 'engage in a debate about what the EU does, why it does it, and with what effect, rather than about what it is' (da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Smith, 2010: 343).

Second, the analysis of actorness and its presumed effects was largely static and descriptive. Although some authors endeavoured to explain the EU's actual influence, influence was often assumed rather than shown. The typical study sets out variables for measuring actorness, offers evidence for assessing degrees of actorness in a particular policy area, and then discusses outcomes as if 'EU actorness' generated those outcomes. One need only to look at the literature on the EU as a global environmental actor to find arguments suggesting that development of an EU policy is a proxy for genuine external action. We call such perspectives the 'characterisation approach' – by which

actorness is equated implicitly to global influence. Furthermore, such approaches take a 'closed-system' approach to the EU's external action. The effects on actor capacity from factors or changes in the international environment were only occasionally considered (cf. Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Ginsberg, 2001). This problem reflects EU studies more generally, which since the 1950s has treated the EU mainly as a closed system of reinforcing (or non-reinforcing) mechanisms (Haas, 1958; Sjöstedt, 1998) rather than a dynamic system shaped by its larger context (Deutsch, 1957). One exception here is external context, which scholars such as Delreux have theorized (Delreux et al. 2012). They argue that the nature of a global negotiation forum matters in terms of shaping some of the EU's internal characteristics – a useful perspective on feedback that we take further below.

Third, the outcomes of EU actorness tended to be undertheorized. When analysis does include outcomes, it tends to be *ad hoc*, focused on particular cases and definitions of EU influence (Groenleer & Van Schaik, 2007; Thomas, 2010). Recently, two special issues attempted to rectify this problem (da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014 in *Journal of Common Market Studies*; Niemann & Bretherton, 2013 in *International Relations*). Broadly put, scholars in those volumes shifted the debate from 'actorness' to 'effectiveness', although they largely defined effectiveness in a narrow fashion, in terms of goal attainment: the EU is effective in so far as it achieves its own stated or implied goals. Such findings cannot be aggregated to a sufficiently high level of generalization to help us identify the effects of actorness outside of particular contexts. Moreover, a lack of focus on outcomes means it is difficult to see how certain outcomes or lessons-learned might change the EU's own essential features in terms of further integration (or disintegration). In



other words, feedback effects were rarely examined.

* * *

In short, actorness scholars' focus on the internal has come at the expense of understanding external dynamics, and an updated, generalized model for actorness has yet to emerge. As Drieskens (2017: 1542) powerfully wrote, the discipline still lacks a generalizable conceptual framework with 'mutually exclusive, yet inextricably linked criteria' to take actorness research to a systematic level and even beyond the EU. This paper takes a step in that direction, by

building a conceptual framework – which can be defined methodologically as a set of 'interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena' (Jabareen, 2009: 51). In line with Ostrom (1999), however, we choose to label it a model since it proposes a set of relationships between theoretically relevant variables which can be taken at various levels of abstraction. Indeed, while we speak generally here, in the service of aggregating decades of existing findings into a new perspective on the EU as a global actor, we hope future scholars will add precision to its assumptions.



A New Model

To understand the EU's evolving role as an actor in world politics, a renewed look at actor behaviour characteristics is required, along with a clarification of traditional 'actor capacity' variables and actual impact. This section outlines the model and highlights its contributions, namely:

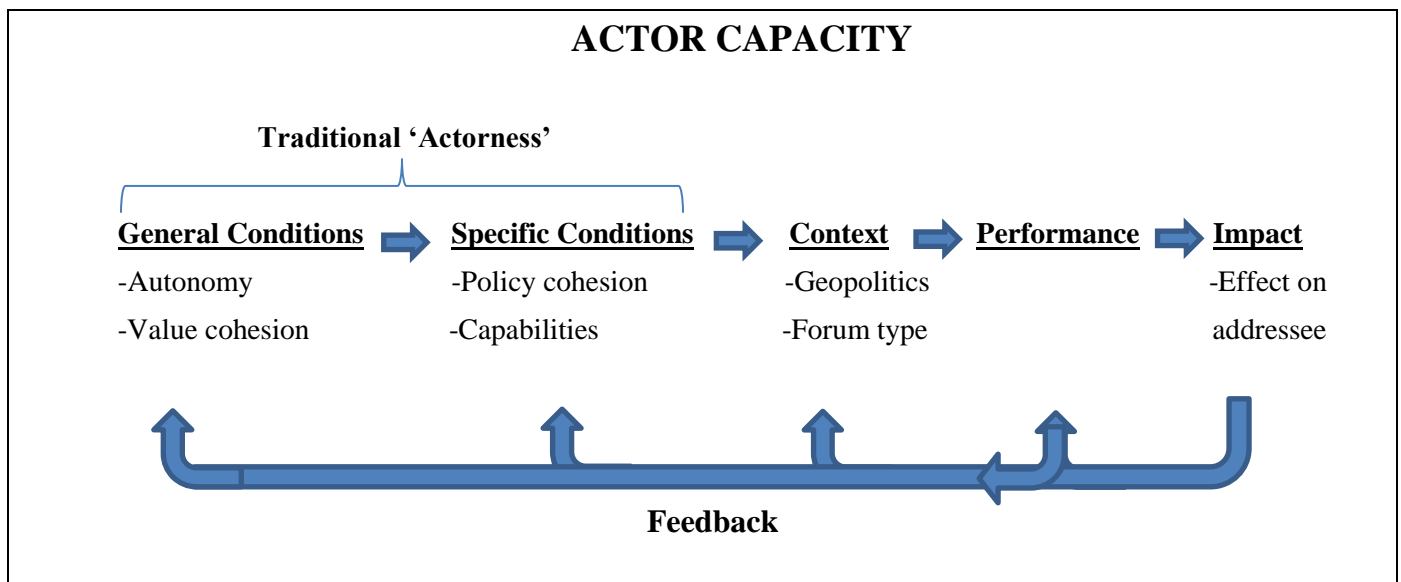
- We divide the traditional actorness variables – those focused on the EU itself – between general versus specific characteristics of the EU (essentially, conditions to act);
- We reintroduce the behavioural element by developing the 'performance' concept to explain the EU's actual action abroad; and,

- We develop feedback mechanisms that link performance and impact outcomes to changes to the EU itself, notably its general and specific characteristics.

This latter contribution allows us to analyse how the EU's actions abroad can impact upon the EU itself as a polity.

It is our hope that this model can be used not only as a heuristic device to identify key variables shaping the EU's actor capacity, but also as a way for both academics and practitioners to diagnose the current actor capacity of the EU – in terms of both strengths and weaknesses – which in turn suggest possible reforms and strategies to influence actor capacity.

Figure 1. Key components of our approach



Turning now to the model, we distinguish between general conditions that relate to the general characteristics of the EU and specific properties linked to the issue at hand. Both are familiar to EU studies

scholars since they represent a simple reorganisation of traditional actorness variables reflecting the EU's own characteristics.



General Conditions

General conditions are manifestations of the EU's general degree of internal integration, particularly autonomy and value cohesion. They are 'general' in the sense they reflect structural features of the EU that condition external action and are best understood as changing over longer rather than shorter periods of time. They can be seen as a legacy of theorising about the drivers of regional integration, including neofunctionalism's emphasis on supranational institution building (Haas, 1958) and transactionalism's focus on community building (Deutsch, 1957).

Autonomy is one of the more obvious preconditions for the EU's external role, and one that has grown more important over time. In the early days, when the EC/EEC's role was just emerging, autonomy was hard to come by. Supranational actors worked hard to establish the EC/EEC has an actor distinct from its member states, which happened in tandem with other external actors' recognition of the EU (Allen & Smith, 1990). Thus, autonomy stems partly from informal dynamics, such as general impressions that the EU is capable of acting, or perceptions of political authority, diplomatic skill, technical expertise, or general experience. More formally, the EU's internal legal 'authority' to act can be used to measure autonomy (Jupille & Caporaso, 1998). One need only look towards legal authorizations for action based on the EU's laws and treaties. Autonomy thus tends to be a general characteristic of the EU (for example, reflected in the growth of external authority in one broad sector after another, usually over time). As we argue in the feedback section below, autonomy can rise or fall depending on variation in external variables.

Cohesion, as discussed in the literature review above, can take several meanings, ranging from alignment of member states

on general values to very specific policy preferences. We use cohesion here in the sense of broad-ranging alignment on basic values regarding European integration and the EU's general role in the world. Our definition of coherence here is thus akin to the **Value Coherence** meaning described by Jupille and Caporaso (1998: 219) as well as Bretherton and Vogler's arguments regarding a shared commitment to a set of overarching principles (2006: 30). Unlike more specific aspects of cohesion discussed below, this variable covers the general orientation of EU member states towards international cooperation, generally, and to acting in a 'community spirit' in world affairs. Periods of dissention amongst EU member states, such as deep divisions following the US invasion of Iraq (Brattberg & Rhinard, 2012b) or, more recently, when internal divisions like 'a difficult renegotiation of UK membership' can have 'deleterious' consequences on the EU's external role, both in terms of perception and reality (Bretherton and Vogler 2013: 387).

Specific Conditions

Specific conditions relate to the policy area in which the EU seeks global influence. In the words of public policy scholars, these conditions concern specific 'domains' of acting and the characteristics surrounding that domain. We begin with the degree of coherence surrounding member states' policy preferences on a certain issue, as well as the actual capabilities to act: resources that can be wielded and the actual tools to make it so. From a temporal perspective, as we shall see in the feedback section below, changes here may take place during shorter periods.

The importance of cohesion again plays a role here, but in a more specific variant. Here we are interested in cohesion regarding preferences around particular policy questions. Thus, **policy preference**



cohesion is the degree to which EU actors (namely, member states and EU institutions) share preferences regarding the goals of external action in a particular area. As mentioned above, many scholars view preference cohesion as the most important factor shaping the EU's influence abroad. Indeed, it makes intuitive sense, in line with Thomas' argument, that the range of preferences amongst actors will be a major determinant of the Union's political cohesion... The more that EU member states and supranational institutions agree on what the EU's policy should be, the more cohesive the Union will be [abroad]' (Thomas 2010, p. 5-5). Preference cohesion over policies is linked to more general cohesion on values, of course, but are likely to be more easily shaped by EU behaviour abroad.

Capabilities concern the ability of the EU to translate intent into action. It is a two-part variable. First, it concerns the kinds of *resources* available to mobilise capacity. Resources represent critical material conditions for the EU's external performance in a particular issue area or context. Resources are mainly monetary (aid or disaster relief funds) but may also be human resources: the number of persons who are part of the EU's delegation to a climate negotiation, the amount of knowledge or expertise in an issue area, or the availability of a military intervention force. Resources are often particular to a context, such as West Africa or the Balkans.

³ In this respect, 'tools to act' bears a resemblance to the notion of procedural coherence in Jupille and Caporaso, who focus on the importance of the 'rules and procedures used to process issues where conflict exists ... Procedural cohesion implies some agreement on the basic rules by which policies are made' (Jupille and Caporaso 1998, p. 219). Coherence on the 'rules of the decision game' is seen as essential, not least because a lack of agreement on rules, or a dysfunctional set of procedures for processing policies, is a major handicap to the EU's capacity to act externally.

Second, capabilities concern the *practical tools* to act, as were originally spelled out in Sjöstedt (1977) and which remain relevant. Sjörsen states that actor capacity cannot and should not be viewed separately from actual capabilities (quoted in Toje 2008, 204). Bretherton and Vogler make this aspect central to their definition of actorness. They call for attention to the 'availability of, and capacity to utilise, policy instruments' (2006, 30), thus setting out a two-part definition of capability.

The 'availability of instruments' sheds light upon the kinds of resources available, which could range from diplomatic tools to aid mechanisms, and from military missions to trade agreements. They can also include decision-making and monitoring facilities, action performance instruments, or crisis management systems.³ A system for the management of interdependence, external agents, and external channels of communication offer other examples of resources (Sjöstedt, 1977). The 'capacity to utilise' those instruments is a slightly different question, not least in the EU context where complex decision procedures may hamper the deployment of missions or the disbursement of aid. This latter element of capability focuses attention onto whether existing resources can be brought to bear on a particular problem in a reasonably direct, adaptive and swift way.⁴ Importantly, resources and tools to deploy those resources are interdependent: one cannot be used effectively without the other.

Bretherton and Vogler take a similar approach when they describe the importance of coherent internal coordination procedures (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, p. 30).

⁴ The distinction between resources and tools is important because the two types of specific conditions for actor capacity can be improved in different ways. As we shall see below, learning from actor performance can be expected to have a stronger impact on tools than on resources.



Context

Contextual conditions were initially neglected in studies of actorness but have recently come into focus, and none too soon: much of the criticism of actorness research stems from its neglect of changes in forums – and broader geo-political context – in which the EU attempts to act. Starting with the latter, scholars have generally failed to recognize how ‘politics matters’ for the EU’s global influence. Drieskens calls for more attention to the global conditions which enable or undermine EU influence abroad (2017: 1540). Bretherton and Vogler, in their original ground-breaking study, identified ‘opportunity’ as a key variable shaping the EU’s global role – an consideration that took into account the wider political context (Bretherton & Vogler, 1999). They returned to that theme more recently, arguing that while the Lisbon Treaty may have increased the EU’s presence and capability, changes in the external political context undermine the EU’s actorness (Bretherton & Vogler, 2013). Here, classical ‘geopolitics’ considerations come into play, such as the nature of international power constellations, the position of the US vis-à-vis Europe, or the reassertion of military power in international diplomacy – all of which clearly affect the EU’s ability to wield influence. We encourage scholars to take into account such broader, yet critical, considerations when analysing EU actor capacity.

A narrower consideration here concerns the specific forum in which the EU seeks influence, mainly conceived in terms of: the nature of the bargaining environment, the number of issues under consideration, and the nature of the issues under discussion. To

begin with, context matters in terms of the nature of the bargaining environment (or ‘level of engagement’), either *bilaterally* or *multilaterally*. In bilateral settings, the spotlight is likely to be placed on certain characteristics of the EU vis-à-vis its opponent, such as the EU’s relative cohesion and the strength of the opponent’s bargaining power. As Conceição-Heldt & Meunier (2014) show, by way of example, whether negotiating with a strong or a weak opponent, the EU’s cohesion matters as to whether the opponent can walk away from negotiations in bilateral situations. In multilateral settings, the EU’s characteristics manifest themselves in different ways, not only because of coalitions that may form but also because of the presence of pre-existing, behaviour-shaping international rules that condition interactions amongst participants (an international secretariat, for instance).⁵

A related consideration is the number of issues under discussion in a negotiation. As McKibben (2010) shows, when a single issue is under discussion, especially if all parties have strong preferences one way or the other, failed negotiations may be more likely and relative power may play a strong role. However, if different issues are on the bargaining table, participants can trade across these issues (e.g. log-rolling, package deals) and an agreement is thus more likely to be reached. Understanding the number of actors with which the EU is engaging, whether in a single-point-in-time or over long periods, is critical to understanding the full extent of EU performance.

A further contextual condition concerns the kind of issue on which the EU is working. One dimension here is redistributive versus regulatory issues. The latter consists of setting standards and norms that establish

⁵ For the way that international organizational processes work to shape the EU’s strategies, see Delreux et al., 2012.



long-term 'rules of the game', which brings to the fore certain characteristics of the EU that might help or hurt is performance. Another dimension of issues that can vary is complexity. Trade negotiations tend to be considered rather straightforward regarding their complexity, while environmental and other issues may come with considerable scientific complexity (da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014: 975). When paired with the consideration of how many issues are on an agenda, some issues can be excluded, or perhaps linked, to improve chances not only of agreement and shape the EU's behaviour accordingly (McKibben, 2010).

Performance

The main innovation of this paper is the concept of actor performance. When scholars study the EU's actorness, they usually examine some aspect of how the EU *performs* – carries out a transaction – vis-à-vis external parties in the international system. These studies, which analyse EU actions ranging from sending military units to a peace operation, instructing climate policy diplomats, discussing security treaties in the UN, or negotiating bilaterally with the US, are rich in detail and show interesting variation in how actorness actually manifests. But they assume some kind of transaction based on the strength of internal characteristics (e.g. cohesion) or develop case-specific indicators for what we would call performance. Studies cannot be aggregated to a sufficiently high level of generalisation to develop – using positivist terminology – a general dependent variable (March & Sutton, 1997). The situation requires new theoretical concepts which can systematize the understanding of EU external performance into categories above the level of particular cases, as useful as those may be.

Sjöstedt's original concept of 'actor behaviour' provides the starting point for a discussion of performance. Behaviour

included an element of action, the ultimate test of what kind of international actor the EU is. Very little work has been done to theoretically develop the behaviour concept. With the hindsight of decades of findings, we argue the concept of 'performance' is more suited for future research. Performance is defined as *the kinds and quality of transactions originating from the EU system carrying a potential to shape addressees in the external environment*. Before unpacking this definition, we might note several advantages. The original behaviour approach included the important assumption of action; performance goes further to suggest both action and an element of intention. Intention should not be narrowly defined, however, since performance need not be linked to an influence strategy (the EU may not have intended to shape global environmental norms in the 1970s; nevertheless, its internal policies had that effect). Performance is shaped by both internal conditions and external factors in our model. How general and specific conditions influence performance is fairly straightforward to conceptualise and hypothesise. And the extent to which different performances lead to certain outcomes also come easily into analytical view. Finally, different kinds of 'competent' performance (or not) can change general and specific conditions, thus shaping the EU itself. All of these changes can be assessed over time.

Our performance concept needs both unpacking and operationalization. Starting with the former, a *transaction* can take various forms, and is not limited to economic exchange (such as the sale of a weapons system or the offer of development aid) but could include the transfer of scientific knowledge, agenda-setting efforts, the promise of military assistance, or threats to sanction a third



country on civil rights grounds. The *EU system* includes actors operating within a legal, institutional, social and/or normative framework associated with the EU system as a whole. Easy cases include the European Commission acting legally and solely on behalf of EU member states in a trade negotiation. Less clear, but still relevant, cases include a coalition of European IT companies promoting a global platform to facilitate compliance with the EU's General Directive on Data Protection (GDPR). In that case, performance is EU in character because the performer's actions are clearly steered and constrained by EU objectives and regulations. An EU member state acting independently to negotiate bilaterally on a non-EU issue would not be covered by this definition. *Addressees in the international system* is left intentionally broad. It concerns actors (both national and supranational, governmental and non-governmental) and related structures and processes (self-sustaining regimes) such as the UN biodiversity protocol.⁶

Beyond definitions, we need a general set of categories for studying performance – to improve comparability in research and, as we explain below, to understand interactive effects between different parts of the model.⁷ First, we should distinguish between different areas of performance. There are performances in the sphere of economic relations, diplomatic activities,

and military missions. Within those areas, types of performances include deployment of resources, mediation between third parties, negotiation over agreements, control over the flows of resources, and public relations activities. These types of performances clearly involve physical acts involving material transactions, along with discursive acts deploying social and intellectual resources. To characterize the kind of role being performed, we might turn to negotiation theory, which identifies eight roles in international negotiations: leader, driver, 'robber', donor, mediator, drifter, laggard, brakeman, or observer (Sjöstedt & Penetrante, 2013).⁸

With the tools for characterizing performance in place, we turn now to the main advantage of the performance concept: its evaluative potential. The performance approach affords an opportunity to assess performance *quality*. There are two ways for researchers to go about this. The first is perhaps most familiar: a 'performance characterisation' approach encourages the researcher to make a straightforward assessment of whether the EU actor performed well within the criteria suggested by the categories above. Did the EU perform well, for instance, by playing the role of brakeman in a diplomatic negotiation over the size of a climate-change adaptation fund? The second way to assess quality sets our model

⁶ Trade represents actor performance of a complex pluri-dimensional character. In market economies the actual trans-border exchange of goods or services is usually carried out by private companies that have adopted the role of exporter or importer with regard to a particular trade transaction or set of. International trade exchange is also guided and constrained by national and EU policy makers. International trade is hence a good illustration of the difficulty of coping with the problem of composite actorness in analysis and assessment of the EU's actor performance.

⁷ Indeed, a performance approach requires that patterns of actor behavior are identified and

assessed. For this purpose, individual activities need to be aggregated to a higher level of generalization than that represented by situation-specific activities.

⁸ Ginsberg's discussion of outputs is akin to performance. According to him, outputs produced by the EU's foreign policy system (i.e., generated by the EU institutions on behalf of the member states) range from mere discourse (common declarations) and 'common positions' to actual 'economic and political actions' (Ginsberg 2001: 10-11, 38-42, 48-55).



into play: a 'performance effectiveness' approach looks at the extent to which a particular performance had an impact externally (thus relating to our 'impact' variable below). The performance effectiveness approach does not aspire to describe the mechanics of the performance of these or other types of EU activities in detail. The purpose is instead to make assessments of to what extent the EU's performance with regard to these tasks lead to the achievement of EU goals in these contexts. This record can in turn be used as a basis for a quality evaluation of the EU's external performance at a given point of time – or in a process development over time. The feedback discussion below returns to this point.

Performance acknowledges the fact that international actors can engage in a wide variety of activities, but to different degrees, in different ways, and with different enabling qualities. This hardly leaves them powerless. Small countries 'perform' what is possible in a given moment in order to exert the most influence they can. Performance thus touches upon the diffuse and subtle nature of power in the international system, too. As early as 1973, Johan Galtung asked the extent to which the EU was a super-power in the making, while much of the debate related to EU actorness changed the focus to 'what kind of power' the EU represented: civilian (Bull, 1982), market (Damro, 2012), or normative (Manners, 2002). This paper speaks to the apparatus and actions that enables such forms of power, perhaps closer to Joseph Nye's discussion of soft versus hard power (Nye, 1990).

In short, actor performance gives us a way to characterise and evaluate what the EU actually does in the international setting, with a view towards understanding how that 'performance' is shaped by enabling conditions and whether it has an impact on

outcomes. Performance thus serves as an intervening variable of sorts. It also allows for the study of greater degree of variation in EU activities in the international sphere, including those affected by shifting power constellations and geo-political realities (Drieskins 2016). Finally, it has an evaluative aspect to help assess performance 'quality' and encourages us to review feedback effects over time.

Impact

Much research examines internal, structural conditions for EU external action. With this article we encourage greater attention to what the EU manages to do in practice. The final step is to look at actual impact: has anything changed as a result? To what extent do general and specific conditions, along with contextual factors and performance, make any difference at all to the international system? This hotly contested question embodies the 'so what' question exhorted by scholars of the EU's external action (Smith, 2010). The answer is critical not only for its own sake, but also to assess, as we do later in this paper, how impact may have feedback effects. The existing literature addresses this question in one of three main ways.

One approach is to treat EU *policy outputs* as impact. The more collective policies generated from the EU, the more its impact on the international stage. This 'output approach' was common in the early days of EU actorness research because the EU's adoption of *any* collective policy internally was seen as potentially meaningful abroad. This was true, for instance, in environmental policy, where the adoption of an internal policy to limit climate emissions had a major impact on the world – without the EU taking



instrumental action to make it so (Sjöstedt, 1998).⁹

Another approach to impact is to generalize the discussion to one of 'effectiveness' of EU actions. The effectiveness agenda, set out most clearly in a special issue of *International Relations* (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013), usually narrows to a discussion of goal attainment: has the EU achieved its goals in a particular situation? This approach has its shortcomings; mainly, that it reverts to a focus on the EU itself, and that it is inherently modest: if the EU has modest ambitions and meets them, does that demonstrate global impact?

A third way is to eschew generalisations and treat each analysis of impact as case-specific. The definition of impact is thus taken as *ad hoc*: it can mean setting the agenda of international labour policy (Kissack, 2008), shaping a section of a treaty (Groen & Niemann, 2013), serving as an 'honest broker' (Engelbrekt & Hallenberg, 2008), deploying certain disaster management resources (Brattberg & Rhinard, 2013), or ensuring its aims are included in an environmental agreement (Groenleer & Van Schaik, 2007). These approaches, while limiting our ability to abstract findings to a more general level, get closer to the question of 'effect', rather than 'effectiveness': has the EU has an effect, and if so, what is it?

All three discussions of impact struggle with identifying the relationship between, put bluntly, potential and impact. These two concepts remain under-specified and systematic empirical analyses of EU effectiveness are still relatively rare (cf. Da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Koops, 2011; Laatikainen & Smith, 2006). We counsel against looking at 'effects' in purely linear terms. The drive to uncover the 'outcome of actorness' is reifying a central problem outlined in the start of this paper: seeing matters as closed system, focused mainly on the EU side and viewing 'effectiveness' or 'impact' (Allen & Smith, 1990) as a one-time, easy-to-measure event. The challenge facing scholars is arriving at theoretically informed hypotheses regarding the link between different aspects of actorness and practical effects on outcomes.¹⁰

The best intellectual touchstones for this discussion comes from Roy Ginsberg, who eschewed structural preconditions for actorness and focused primarily on what the EU might accomplish (2001). Presaging subsequent work on effectiveness in IOs (Gutner & Thompson, 2010), Ginsberg distinguished between outputs, outcomes and impact.¹¹ For Ginsberg, EU outputs became outcomes when 'they have external political impact – or effect' (2001: 10). Ginsberg introduced the notion of 'external political impact', which he defines as the 'ability to affect what others do' (2001: 2).

⁹ The output approach has been taken in recent research on international organisations (IOs), in which IO performance is defined as policy output (Tallberg, et al. 2016).

¹⁰ According to the logic of our model, the *impact* of the EU on an external situation depends on its performance, its negotiation skill and the power resources that it can mobilize and wield for strategic or tactical purposes. However, in many situations, including in a multilateral context, a relative power like the EU can have an influence on a negotiation and its outcome without doing

anything at all. The misused metaphor of 'Finlandization' may help to illustrate this contingency. The essence of this scenario is that another international actor, be it a national government or an international organization, anticipates an EU position and adapts its own policy to it.

¹¹ As Koops (Koops, 2011) identified, Ginsburg actually distinguished between outputs, actions, outcomes, impacts, and effects, with several terms used interchangeably.



Impact ranges from insignificant (having a presence) to significant (effecting material change, changing the behaviour of third actors, or altering the external environment). Ginsberg defined 'actor significance' as having a significant impact on other actors and the external environment.

Our definition of impact follows that of Ginsburg, with some specifications to allow for comparability. The external impact of the EU should be measured in terms of the degree to which the behaviour of others was changed, either directly and indirectly (the latter taking place through structural change in a global policy regime, for example). This definition not only draws on the many findings of *ad hoc* actorness research, but is also consistent with Ginsberg and more recent scholarship on IO effectiveness, which defines impact, in at least in one sense, as *effecting behavioural change* (Gutner & Thompson, 2010; see also Young, 2001). We counsel scholars to make a distinction in terms of what Koops (2011, building on Ginsburg) calls the difference between *geltung* (pseudo significance) and 'real' significance in the EU's external military role:

In this context, a key distinction needs to be made between external 'actor significance' and 'real effectiveness', on the one hand, and what could be termed the EU's strive towards *geltung* on the other, i.e., the urge to be seen and accepted as an active military actor, and hence, the move towards self-promotion and towards seeking out opportunities for *demonstrating* the military dimension of the EU (Koops 2011: 138).

We are not as hostile as Koops to *geltung* elements, since self-promotion may have feedback effects (as was the case in the early years of CSDP) that shape internal characteristics of the EU (increased morale, leading to greater cohesion). But we do encourage a focus on 'actual significance' in terms of leading to real and documented behavioural and structural change in the EU's external environment.



Feedback Loops

We now turn to the most neglected aspect of EU actorness research in recent years: the ways in which the EU's external performances and impact may, in turn, shape its general and specific characteristics. Some scholars previewed this discussion, such as Ginsburg's recognition that not only could internal conditions have external effects, but also vice-versa: EU successes abroad brought 'positive' changes internally (2001). Koops explored whether largely symbolic external CSDP missions under Javier Solana's leadership boosted the willingness of member states to grant new resources and agree to new policies (2010: 117-119). But very little theorising has further fleshed out those feedback dynamics.

Space constraints prevent us from outlining all possible feedback pathways between variables in this model. Notably, we mark for future attention the importance of feedback loops between performance *per se* and conditions, as well as with context. This section offers just a few hypothetical expectations, substantiated by earlier studies, as a way to inspire further thinking on feedback. Specifically, we explore four likely feedback processes:

- (i) How impacts shape subsequent *general conditions* (namely, value cohesion).
- (ii) How impacts shape subsequent *specific conditions*.
- (iii) How impacts shape subsequent *contexts* (namely, negotiation forum).
- (iv) How impacts affect subsequent *performance*.

We assume that the mechanisms underpinning feedback include learning processes (Siebenhuener, 2008), persuasion practices (Checkel, 2001), and crisis-induced action (Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier, 2016). Importantly, we see feedback loops as operating not only in two directions – internal to external, and vice-versa – but also in terms of positive and negative dynamics. Positive dynamics include greater cohesion, leading to improved performance and impact. Negative dynamics include the undermining of coherence, leading to ineffective performance and little-to-no impact. As we revisit in the conclusion, this model may also thus speak to general trends of integration and disintegration of the European project.

How *impacts* shape subsequent *general conditions*

Although most literature on actorness treats the effects of the EU's internal characteristics on outcomes as unidirectional, in practice we see the latter influences the former, too. For example, Ginsberg (2001) argued that the EU's internal *cohesion* may rise as the result of successful external impact. But we should distinguish between coherence of a general nature and concrete measures towards greater coherence. Ginsberg speaks of general coherence when he argues that 'successful external impact is a source for EU self-confidence-building and a motivation for new policy initiatives' (Ginsberg 2001: 11). This is akin to our definition of 'value coherence', since member state positions may shift as the result of social construction of a 'values-based community' (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005). As Koops argues 'when the



international system recognizes the capability of the EU to produce foreign policy' (beyond the simply 'recognition' of the EU as actor as argued by Jupille and Caporaso, 1998), the EU may acquire a new identity both externally and internally to underpin greater coherence. By the same token, 'when the EU fails to act with purpose and/or effect in international politics, the EU develops an international reputation for weakness and ineffectiveness. That critical external stimulus also generates internal EU reforms' (Ginsberg 2001: 277).

Even more fundamentally, we know from history that the EU's successful incursions into foreign policy might even keep the momentum of integration (specifically, the EU's authority to act, and cohesive properties) moving in times of doldrums. Such feedback loops were working in the early 1970s when internal regional integration in Western Europe slowed, while at the same time the EU's external policy was growing to become a new driver in the regional integration process (Ginsberg, 1989; Sjöstedt, 1977). Specifically, on the point of autonomy, it stands to reason that consistently positive performances and demonstrated impact may convince member states to grant additional autonomy to the EU. We know from integration theory that treaty-making moments, when new EU competences are decided and expanded, are often codifications of changes of daily practice – such as regular, small successes in international negotiations by the European Commission (Peterson & Bomberg, 1999). And we know from legal scholarship that the general application of legal principles in EU negotiations can lead to subsequent 'competence creep' (Prechal, 2010).

The mechanism underpinning these feedback loops resemble a form of learning. Repetitive preparation and consultation

meetings for UN climate talks or the negotiations on trade liberalization in the WTO bring new lessons. Institutional learning may take the form of individual learning of persons with a key role in the negotiation concerned; for example, chairs of plenary meetings or of particular negotiation groups. These, and other, global multilateral negotiations have represented a continual political process for decades. Continual EU engagement allows not only for learning 'what works' abroad but also enables persuasion processes between the Commission and the Council.

How *impacts* shape subsequent *specific conditions*

The successful (or unsuccessful) impact of the EU on external effects also feeds back into specific conditions shaping the EU's potential as a global actor. Dynamics surrounding the two specific conditions – policy preference cohesion and capabilities – are not entirely different from those discussed above.

Policy preference cohesion, for instance, is likely to rise based on 'competent performance' – both actual and perceived by the EU and its negotiating partners. When its own member states observe EU negotiators successfully manoeuvring through decision structures and achieving significant gains for the EU, cohering effects are likely to take place. International trade negotiations, especially in the 1990s, display just a dynamic. EU member states perceived their collective strength in GATT/WTO negotiations, with concrete impacts, which had a strengthening effect on policy cohesion in subsequent negotiations (Meunier, 1998). The domain of environmental policy serves as another example. A number of successful episodes of 'uploading' EU environmental regulations to the global level fortified and bolstered the policy cohesion on issues ranging from climate change (Sjöstedt, 1998) to GMOs



(Rhinar, 2010). Of course, perceptions of failure may have the opposite effect, confirming member states' new or pre-existing instincts to 'go it alone'. Capabilities – which include resources and practical tools for implementing those resources – will no doubt also be shaped via feedback processes. Resources devoted to security and defence missions can be increased, not only owing to external events such as September 11, but also following evidence of the EU's positive impact abroad – as suggested by increased EU resources of counter-terrorism following EU-US agreements (Brattberg & Rhinar, 2012b). Resources for operating extraction sorties (as happened during the Libya crisis) may expand as the result of apparent success and/or lessons learned (von Ondarza & Overhaus, 2014). Capabilities for assisting in war-torn countries – the specific Instrument for Stability – may be enhanced with additional funding tools for more security related goals (as happened after September 11, too). Internal procedures for quick decision-making, which represent another kind of 'capability' for turning resources into action (or 'procedural coherence' according to Jupille and Caporaso, 1998), may be streamlined following episodes of successful external action – owing to member state willingness to 'build on success'.

How *impacts* shape subsequent *contextual conditions*

How might EU performance and impact shape – in favourable or unfavourable ways – the context in which the EU aims to have an impact? Feedback effects within the EU system may be reinforced if the EU's repeated participation in international fora contributes to alter contextual elements in a direction that is favourable to the EU. One example here is the procedural rules in international organizations that may change to make it easier for the EU to perform a leadership role. For example, the

historical evolution of trade negotiations, from the GATT to the WTO, has led to incremental modification of the global trade regime in such a way that the forms and procedures of trade negotiations have, in turn, changed. The EU's strong autonomy and historically competent performance has led to negotiation forum changes – a role for experts, a place for other IOs at the table, or the creation of NGO bodies – that benefit the EU in negotiations (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006).

The relationships between different aspects of EU actor capacity become quite complicated. An example here is climate change negotiations, in which the EU's internal policies (policy cohesion and capabilities) have shaped the international context in which treaties are set, largely as the result of successful performances over time. If the Conference of the Parties (COP) process of climate change adjustment is seen as an example of a long-term regime building process, the EU has had a significant impact in shaping the context, which in turn led to additional resources and capabilities. The specific example of COP21 and the Paris Agreement in December 2015 might lead one to a different conclusion: at the negotiation, despite a coherent backing from states and considerable resources (European Commission, 2015), the EU's performance was sub-par owing to resistance from powerful partners. Subsequently, the EU has struggled to reassert its interests in global climate talks (Parker & Karlsson, 2018). This shows that the EU's role as a global actor depends on the combination – and close scrutiny over – the elements of the model present here.

How *impacts* shape subsequent *performance*

Our model of the EU's actor capacity emphasised the lost element of behaviour, operationalised here as 'actor performance'. Performance concerns transactions



employed by the EU vis-à-vis international addresses, and refines the relationship between the structural and behavioural parts of the model. The mechanism of learning suggests that a successful impact – for instance, the reduction of piracy in the Horn of Africa as the direct result of a well-deployed EU mission – will lead to enhanced future performance. Having deployed troops and equipment successfully (a performance) once will allow for further refinement and improvement subsequently (Riddervold, 2011). By contrast, just as Koops (2010) argued that a botched CSDP mission can lead to internal retrenchment, for instance a disinvestment by EU states in EU military capabilities, so can poor outcomes abroad affect the kinds of performance exhibited by the EU. Thus, launching an EU military operation with limited external impact may lead not only to lower credibility or alienation of partners, but also to a shift in the kinds of external missions launched. Such was the case in Haiti, when the aftermath of a natural disaster in 2010 prompted internal debate of the kind of mission to launch: a military CSDP mission (echoing the US response to Haiti) or a disaster relief mission employing humanitarian aid and first-responder tactics. After a phase of ‘CSDP fatigue’, and frequent criticism of missions, the inaugural High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, led a different kind of international action than might be expected considering the original drive to expand CSDP (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2013). As for all the feedback loops discussed above, further hypothesising is needed to understand how, when, why, and with what effect the EU’s external impact shapes its capacity for effective performance.



Conclusion

This paper outlined a new model for studying the EU's external role, in the hope of correcting several weaknesses typically found in research on EU actorness. We returned to the concept of Actor Capacity, introduced by Sjöstedt (1977), as the overall description of a revised model taking into account not only the prerequisites for action (the EU's internal characteristics) but also its actual performance in a certain context – and towards making an impact. This approach offers several advantages over current approaches concerning actorness.

The first is to signal the importance of moving away from a primary focus on the structural prerequisites for external action. Issues like autonomy, coherence, and capabilities are better conceptualized as conditions rather than determinates of actorness. Simply because the EU displays characteristics on each front does not give it capacity to shape international affairs. We must take into account issues like context, which are a specific condition for actor capacity, and performance, to understand not only external influence but also how performance feeds back into, and changes, condition variables. This also serves to correct a historical wrong, opening up models of EU actor capacity to factors related to its broader environment. As the geo-political environment in which the EU acts becomes increasingly hostile, understanding the interaction of the EU's own capacities and wider constraints becomes crucial.

The second advantage of our approach is the feedback aspect: previous models of actorness have been rather static, capable of measuring the EU's external capacities at

a particular moment but not over time.

They set out a series of categories related to external action, but do not explore how those categories inter-relate, nor how they are affected by co-constitution. We offered some initial ideas as to how variables relate, and how they work to weaken or strengthen one another *over time*. This helps to tighten the approach and allow for a degree of hypothesizing. It also speaks to a broader question of integration and disintegration of Europe, since it theorises a series of processes by which external success or failure may strengthen or weaken the cohesion of the EU itself (Rosamond, 2019; Vollaard, 2018)

One final advantage is to draw research on EU actorness out of its *sui generis* character and towards a higher level of generalization. When Cosgrove and Twitchett (1970) and Sjöstedt (1974, 1977) started theorizing the EEC's external role, as mentioned above, theories linked to foreign policy action more generally simply did not fit. Today, however, the EU has accumulated enough of the key traits of a generic foreign policy actor that it is time to reintegrate thinking about the EU with thinking more generally about actors in foreign affairs. Our approach not only fits the EU but can also help to refine broader understandings of how actors 'act' in international affairs, whether states or international organizations. In turn, a focus on actor performance allows for comparison amongst international actors of different types, allowing for cumulative findings and a mainstreaming of EU research in the wider fields of international relations and comparative politics.



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