The Common Security and Defence Policy and IR Theory

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/20/the-common-security-and-defence-policy-and-ir-theory/

DANIEL FIOTT, AUG 20 2013

Since its inception over a decade ago, the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has seen the deployment of over 25 missions to various locations in the EU's near and wider neighbourhood. Working under an EU banner and policy mechanisms, a number of member states have cooperated in theatres of action on civil-military tasks ranging from peacekeeping to border patrol. While CSDP has emerged as an important component of EU foreign policy, however, it is not just about mission deployment because it has also encouraged cooperation between member states on military capability development and defence-industrial programmes (Fiott, 2012; Fiott 2013). While the CSDP does not account for all military policy in the EU – the individual member states (specifically France and the United Kingdom) have their own policies and there is also NATO – it is a test-bed for the member states' military cooperation. When one looks at the Policy through the prism of IR theory some interesting points also arise.

Not that an application of IR theory – or its sub-field European integration theory – to CSDP is an easy task. Indeed, some have argued that scholarship on the CSDP is 'fragmented in its theoretical inquiry', and that 'a loud normative debate dominates in the absence of systemic, empirically grounded theoretical inquiry' (Bickerton, Irondelle and Menon, 2011: p. 10). Some have stated that the CSDP is 'notoriously undertheorised' (Kurowska and Breuer, 2011: p. 1). On this basis a "second wave" of literature on the CSDP was called for in 2011 that was more focused on theory building, applied theory and theory expansion than on normative prescription or descriptive analyses (Bickerton, Irondelle and Menon, 2011). While there existed theoretical studies prior to this call (Howorth, 2004; Selden, 2010; Meyer and Strickmann, 2010), the task was met with general enthusiasm and there have been a number of relatively rich studies (see below) into the epistemology and ontology of the CSDP drawing on IR theory since 2011 (and some before this time).

Liberal Institutionalism and the CSDP

The "loud normative debate" is indeed palpable in past and current theoretical debates about the CSDP. For example, the liberal institutionalist approach argues that the CSDP is aimed at buttressing the EU's commitment to multilateralism, transnational dialogue and international fora, which are the deep-rooted causes that gave rise to the Policy in the first place (Howorth, 2004: p. 280). As Irondelle has stated, the research avenues with the most to offer explanations of the CSDP are theories borrowed from constructivism and liberal institutionalism, rather than say realist theories which he argues has produced *"un bilan insuffisant*" and accuses of a *'simplisme face à la complexité de la réalité sociale'* (Irondelle, 2002: p. 86).

Mérand further elaborates this theoretical perspective through his use of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach, which looks at processes of socialization within institutional settings. Mérand believes that the CSDP is a "social field" comprised of policy-makers seeking to make sense of the world which in turn leaves them 'open to new ways (rules, power structures, and symbolic representations) of structuring' the CSDP (2010: p. 372). Mérand calls into question the empirical reality of the theories of realism and he even criticizes constructivists for not proposing 'a compelling social mechanism to explain how the convergence of strategic cultures may or may not translate into specific institutional developments' under the CSDP (2010: pp. 372-373).

CSDP, Ideas and Materialism

Some constructivists are aware of the flaws of their theory (Meyer, 2011). Indeed, Meyer and Strickmann believe that it is incorrect to neglect an understanding of the role materialism plays in the development of the CSDP. In this regard, the authors put forward four propositions which are said to explain developments in the CSDP: i) inadequate material capabilities may explain why elites perceive a crisis in national defence policies; ii) asymmetries in material capabilities may cause frictions between allies, allowing domestic actors to question the relevance of the CSDP or to forward alternatives; iii) changing economic and budgetary situations may allow domestic actors to question the CSDP or allow supranational actors to enhance closer cooperation through efficiency; and iv) relative strength in military capabilities over non-CSDP members can soften threat perception and stabilize these perceptions (Meyer and Strickmann, 2010: pp. 73-77).

Materialist explanations of the CSDP are also well-established and largely draw upon economic and market necessities as the main drivers. Many under this perspective claim that the CSDP is a response to the problem of increasing costs to personnel, equipment, and maintenance outpacing defence budgets (Alexander and Garden, 2001). This situation is of major concern to the EU member states especially when one considers that increased defence budgets, increased industrial productivity and increased efficiency in procurement can only delay rather than remedy such rising costs. Consequently, scholars such as Hartley are dissatisfied with most studies of the CSDP because they are overwhelmingly 'dominated by politics', and so he has attempted to show that economic principles can help derive guidelines for the formulation of European defence policy (Hartley, 2003: p. 108).

Realism and the CSDP

From a structural realist perspective Posen argues that the continued evolution of the CSDP is an attempt by Europeans to balance against the United States (US). Assuming the EU to be a unified – state-like – actor, Posen questions why the EU should want its own defence policy at all given the end of the Cold War and the protection afforded by NATO if not to balance against US hegemony. The argument, while criticised by some (Howorth and Menon, 2009), was based on a number of inter-related assumptions including the CSDP: i) as a logical representation of an aspiring global power; ii) as a means of maintaining the prestige of states such as the UK and France; and iii) as a means of dealing with regional crises such as Bosnia. Posen takes his structural assessment to its logical conclusion by claiming that the CSDP 'is likely to complicate U.S.-EU relations' and ensure the EU is a less docile ally of the US over the coming decades (Posen, 2006: pp. 185-186 and Posen, 2004: p. 17).

Within the internal conversation between structuralists there has been a tension between Posen's argument of "hard balancing" (i.e. through a military build-up against the US) and the idea of "soft balancing", as forwarded by scholars such as Pape. Advocates of "soft balancing" take exception, and indeed fail to see any empirical proof of, an EU military build-up against the US. Pape instead argues that the Europeans, dissatisfied with past US unilateralist foreign policy and military action, are more likely to balance against the US through 'international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality' rather than through a military build-up (Pape, 2005: p. 17). According to Pape the aim of such "soft balancing" is not to challenge the hegemon's position in the international system, but to delay and complicate the costs of utilizing this power preponderantly.

There is, however, strength to a structuralist account of the CSDP's *genesis* and *being*. For example, Jones has explained how past attempts at European security cooperation through the European Defence Community (1950-1954), the Fouchet Plan (1958-1963) and European political cooperation (1969-1991) failed because there was too much of an American military presence in Europe and because Germany was politically divided. Jones thus believes that a subsequent reduction in US forces in Europe and German reunification explains the rise in European security cooperation after 1991 (2007: pp. 57-59).

However, the classical realist approach to the CSDP outlined by Rynning takes issue with structural realism for seeing the Policy as either a way of re-balancing against the US, as a vehicle for keeping America engaged in the Euro-Atlantic region and as a means of balancing internally against Germany. Rynning draws on classical realism in order to undermine these views, stating that the CSDP has no discernable teleology or rationale and that it will *evolve*

on the basis of the internal realities of EU integration – i.e. in reaction to the withering away of the nation-state in Europe – rather than systemic forces. The CSDP is, as he states, 'an open and dynamic framework for understanding the intersection between power and purpose' (Rynning, 2011: p. 37).

Conclusion

It is this author's opinion that realism still provides the most compelling IR theory when analyzing the CSDP. Ideas and institutions indeed play a role in the development of the CSDP but they are set against the state, and it is the state that maintains the military capabilities and the political interests for which such capabilities are required. Yet realism takes us one step further. Liberal intuitionalists assume among other things that CSDP grants a degree of sovereign equality to member states, and highlight unanimity in decision-making as evidence of this. Constructivists may point to how CSDP is about re-formulating Europe's relationship with military affairs, and point to how multilateral defence cooperation is a novel way of thinking.

Realist theory shows us why both liberal theory and constructivism are not entirely correct in the assumptions they postulate. Unanimity in decision-making indeed highlights the need for wide-ranging sovereign consent, yet a huge power balance in favour of states such as the UK, France and Germany marks the CSDP – the Policy is not about equality but one dependent on Europe's two or three military powers for capabilities and strategic direction. Realism also shows us that the CSDP is not such a novel enterprise – NATO has been around for longer and arguably symbolizes a deeper degree of defence policy cooperation.

Whether one should opt for structural or classical accounts, however, is a matter of further debate. CSDP is clearly not just about responding to US military and political power as the structuralists postulate, yet it is not simply a matter of internal integration processes as the classical realists contend. But classical realism does have the advantage of allowing for an "open and dynamic" reading of the CSDP, especially given how the Policy is a continuous historical process. Classical realism also allows one to not entirely overlook the importance of ideas and institutions in the development of the CSDP – especially as they relate to power – yet it stops one from partaking in the "normative din" surrounding debates about the CSDP and maintains the importance of (certain) states in the evolution of the Policy.

—

Daniel Fiott *is a researcher at the Institute for European Studies – Vrije Universiteit Brussel where his research focuses on European defence-industrial cooperation, the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy and IR theory. His forthcoming publications include "The 'TTIP-ing Point': How the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Could Impact European Defence" with The International Spectator and "Realist Thought and Humanitarian Intervention" with The International History Review. Fiott is also a Senior Editor of European Geostrategy.*

References

Alexander, M. and Garden, T. (2001) "The Arithmetic of Defence Policy", *International Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 3: pp. 509-529.

Bickerton, C., Irondelle, B. and Menon, A. (2011) "Security Co-operation Beyond the Nation-State: The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy", *Journal for Common Market Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1: pp. 1-21.

Fiott, D. (2013) "Improving Common Security and Defence Policy Planning and Capability Development: Could there be a 'Frontex Formula'?", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 18, no. 1: pp. 47-62.

Fiott, D. (2012) "The Importance of Critical Defence Infrastructure", *European Geostrategy Long Post*, no. 3.

Hartley, K. (2003) "The Future of European Defence Policy: An Economic Perspective", *Defence and Peace Economics*, vol. 14, no. 2: pp. 107-155.

Howorth, J. (2004) "Discourse, Ideas, and Epistemic Communities in European Security and Defence Policy",*West European Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2: pp. 211-234.

Howorth, J. and Menon, A. (2009) "Still Not Pushing Back: Why the European Union is Not Balancing the United States", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 53, no. 5: pp. 727-744.

Irondelle, B. (2002) "Défense Européenne et sciences sociales: où en est le débat théorique?",*Revue internationale et stratégique*, vol. 4, no. 48: pp. 79-88.

Jones, S. (2007) *The Rise of European Security Cooperation* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Kurowska, X. and Breuer, F. (eds.) (2011) *Explaining the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy: Theory in Action* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Mérand, F. (2010) "Pierre Bourdieu and the Birth of European Defence", *Security Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2: pp. 342-374.

Meyer, C. (2011) "The Purpose and Pitfalls of Constructivist Forecasting: Insights from Strategic Culture Research for the European Union's Evolution as a Military Power", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 55: pp. 669-690.

Meyer, C. & Strickmann, E. (2010) "Solidifying Constructivism: How material and Ideational Factors Interact in European Defence", *Journal for Common Market Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1: pp. 61-81.

Pape, R. (2005) "Soft Balancing Against the United States", *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 1: pp. 7-45.

Posen, B. (2006) "European Union Security and Defence Policy: Response to Unipolarity?", *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2: pp. 149-186.

Posen, B. (2004) "ESDP and the Structure of World Power", *The International Spectator*, Vol. XXXIX: pp. 5-17.

Rynning, S. (2011) "Realism and the Common Security and Defence Policy", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1: pp. 23-42.

Selden, Z. (2010) "Power is Always in Fashion: State-Centric Realism and the European Security and Defence Policy", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2: pp. 397-416.

About the author:

Daniel Fiott is a researcher at the Institute for European Studies – Vrije Universiteit Brussel where his research focuses on European defence-industrial cooperation, the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy and IR theory. His forthcoming publications include "The 'TTIP-ing Point': How the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Could Impact European Defence" with The International Spectator and "Realist Thought and Humanitarian Intervention" with The International History Review. Fiott is also a Senior Editor of European Geostrategy.