Integrating under Threat: A Balance-of-threat Account of European Integration

In his 2011 article "Europe's Troubles," Sebastian Rosato posits a realist explanation of European integration. Building on the balance of power theory, he makes the case that, contrary to traditional explanations, the decision to establish common European institutions was largely a function of power distribution: given the material gap between Western Europe and the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, the former flocked together to increase their chances against the latter. Thus began the process of European integration that persisted, more or less unchanged, until the fall of the Soviet Union corrected the power imbalance. Since then, however, there have been fewer incentives to carry on with further integration. In fact, with Russia being nowhere near as powerful as the USSR, there seems to be a lack of motivation to even *maintain* the project. Therefore, Rosato predicts, unless the power distribution changes, the best the project can hope for is to muddle along; worst case, it progressively disintegrates.

Taken at face value, Rosato's argument is a compelling one – not least because it offers a plausible explanation of European integration, and the recent lack thereof, at a time when the traditional integration theories no longer seem to do (see Šenk, 2020). Yet the argument is not without its flaws either: Rosato largely ignores the varying dynamic of the integration process during the Cold War and, for most part, fails to account for why it is, contra his expectations, that integration has kept going even afterwards. Thus, although he posits an elegant and parsimonious account of European integration, a closer inspection reveals it to be, every so often, at odds with the reality. As such, while an improvement in itself, Rosato's theory can still be improved upon. Doing so is the objective of this paper: recognizing the potential of Rosato's explanation, it endeavors to build an account of European integration that can better explain the varying integration intensity, which Rosato glosses over, while keeping the same degree of parsimony. To that end it draws on Walt's balance of threat theory, formulating the following research question: How can European integration be explained by the balance of threat theory? Finding an answer to this question, and thus to the overall puzzle of this paper, entails beginning by reviewing, in greater, depth Rosato's theory.

Theoretical Overview

Rosato's Theory of Institutions

The balance of power theory has it that when faced with a would-be hegemon, less powerful states will attempt to balance against it – either externally (forming coalitions), internally (increasing own capabilities) or both – to improve their chances of survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 156-157; Waltz 1979, 118; Wohlforth et al 2007, 157). This simple, yet powerful idea forms the basis of Rosato's argument. As he notes, "[s]tates confronting a common, powerful adversary can cooperate or integrate" (Rosato 2011, 46). If they are reasonably powerful, cooperation might be enough to check the adversary; however, if they are "minor powers, then they realize they must organize their efforts as efficiently as possible, and they consider integration" (Rosato 2011, 46-50). To that end, they establish common institutions with a central authority tasked with facilitating their balancing efforts (Rosato 2011, 46). Thus, integration can be thought of as a thoroughgoing combination of external and internal balancing, as not only do the states come together, but they also establish mechanisms that help increase the power of each constituent balancer. Inevitably, doing so entails giving up certain sovereign prerogatives; thus, states are expected to be reluctant to integrate unless the power differential makes it absolutely necessary (Rosato 2011, 51-52). This logic, in Rosato's view explains both

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the origins of European integration in the 1950s and its apparent demise in the post-Cold War years.

As he makes clear, integration is "best understood as a response to…[highly unequal] distribution of power", and the ensuing institutions as a reflection of that distribution (Rosato 2011, 47). Therefore, "as long as the underlying distribution of power endures, so too do the institutions associated with it; and when the power architecture changes, the institutions do as well" (Rosato 2011, 47). Along these lines, Rosato (2011, 46-65) captures the integration story: after the World War II, the Soviet Union, as the "only great power in Europe", impelled weak Western European states to create what eventually became the European Community (EC). As the power distribution between the EC and the USSR remained without major alteration, the integration process looked, for most part, the same for the rest of the Cold War. This, however, changed dramatically in 1991, as the fall of the Soviet Union removed the very reason of European integration's existence (Rosato 2011, 47). As a result, the aftermath did not only see, what now was, the European Union (EU) fail to turn into a full-fledged political and military union, as had been expected, but also saw the commitment to maintaining even economic integration significantly weaken. This does not mean that the EU will come to an abrupt end, especially as long as it remains economically beneficial; however, further integration should not be expected as long as there are "no significant changes in [European] balance of power" (Rosato 2011, 48).

Rosato's Theory: A Critique

The theory just reviewed explains European integration in a simple, two-variable logic: variation on the independent variable (distribution of power) leads to variation on the dependent variable (integration intensity). The larger the power gap between the weaker states and their powerful adversary, the higher the urge to integrate; conversely, the smaller the gap, the lesser the urge. The problem with this equation is, however, that it does not always hold true. For one thing, it cannot account for instances where there is variation in integration intensity despite no observable change to the independent variable. A good example is the so-called *Eurosclerosis* period of the 1970s: as Rosato (2011, 47) observes no variation in the distribution of power, he concludes that there was no "meaningful" change in the integration dynamic either. In reality, however, European integration during the period stalled to such an extent that many declared the project "moribund" (The Economist, 2021). Similarly, the theory is at sea when a decrease on the independent variable does not invariably lead to a corresponding change on the dependent one: since the end of the Cold War, there have been notable developments in both economic and political-military integration even in the face of Russia's material weakness. For this reason, Rosato has to resort to economic benefits as the primary reason for the EU's continued relevance, despite no *a priori* specification for this variable in his theory. This remedy, however, is not enough.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis clearly shows, as will be illustrated, that integration can take place even against the backdrop of the EU's failure to deliver major economic benefits (see Stiglitz 2016, 63-84). Thus, to rectify the theory, changes must be made rather to its explanatory variable: although the broad contours of balancing seem to fit the integration process, distribution of power proves too blunt an instrument for providing a comprehensive and empirically accurate account. With this goal, this paper now turns to Walt's balance of threat theory, as it offers the necessary guidance.

Walt's Balance of Threat Theory

In his 1985 article and, importantly, the 1987 book *The Origins of Alliances*, Stephen Walt proposes a theoretical "refinement of traditional balance of power theory" (1987, 263). He argues that states do not necessarily balance against the most powerful states, but rather against those that seem to "pose the greatest threat" (Walt 1987, 263). In other words, Walt replaces power distribution with threat level as the main explanatory variable of balancing. Power, to be sure, retains its place as an important source of balancing in the theory; however, it is subsumed, alongside geographic proximity, offensive capability, and aggressive intentions, as merely one of four factors that influence the intensity of threat (Walt 1985, 8-9; Walt 1987, 22, 263). As Walt (1987, 22-25) makes clear, a state is more likely to be a threat when it is materially superior, geographically closer rather than further, in possession of viable offensive capabilities, and when it is *perceived* as having aggressive intentions. It cannot be determined *a priori* (which of the four sources will prove the most important); however, Walt (1987, 22-26) notes that "perceptions

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of intent are likely to play an especially crucial role." In fact, even materially middling powers may incite balancing provided they are seen as "especially aggressive" (Walt 1987, 26). By acknowledging this, one endows the balance of power theory with greater explanatory power while retaining an equal amount of parsimony (Walt 1987, 263). Thus, the balance of threat theory provides an optimal lens for refining Rosato's theory.

A Balance of Threat Theory of Institutions

Whereas Rosato sets the basic parameters of a realist view of European integration, the sensitivity of Walt's theory offers a promising way of bringing it more in line with the reality. For this reason, this paper combines the two:

> *Hypothesis 1*: When threat level is high, integration intensity is high.

> *Hypothesis 2*: When threat level is low, integration intensity is low.

To address the research question, in the remainder of the paper, the two hypotheses will be tested. It will be done in five time periods, in which changes in integration intensity seem to have taken place. If the changes are found to correspond to with differences in threat level, the theory can be said to hold. That being said, however, a few caveats are in order. First, the period boundaries are meant to serve merely as rough delimitations for the analysis to capture the most important trends. Overlaps are, therefore, expected, not least because structural changes do not have an immediate effect (Rosato 2011, 73). Second, due to space constraints, the paper chooses to focus primarily on *perception of aggressive intentions* as an indicator of perceived threat level. Cursory references are, nevertheless, made to the other sources as well, as they are likely to influence the perception. Third, in line with Rosato and realism in general, the paper considers the perceptions of only the most important actors of European integration, that is, Germany, France, and (in relevant periods) Great Britain. Finally, the role of the United States, though pertinent to European integration, also falls outside the scope of the present paper.

Historical Analysis of European Integration

1945-1962

During the first analyzed period some of the most significant milestones of European integration took place. After a number of false starts, such as the Council of Europe, in 1952, France and Germany laid the foundations of European integration by launching the European Coal and Steel Community – an economic organization of six members and a central authority tasked with regulating the countries' coal and steel production (Simms 2014, 411). Six years later, the same countries came together to form the European Economic Community, an organization, designed to eventually bring about full economic integration among its members, that became the official precursor to the present-day European Union. Both developments, in a way unprecedented, signified high integration intensity. Rosato argues that it was the insurmountable power gap between Western Europe and the USSR that spawned integration in the 1950s. However, power was hardly the decisive factor: the US, for example, was equally powerful at the end of the war, yet did not incite an equivalent reaction (Karber and Combs 1998). Rather, it was the perception of Soviet intentions, underwritten by geography and offensive capabilities, that caused France and Germany to balance against it.

Although historians still debate whether there was a real Soviet threat in the post-war period or not (Lundestad 2005, 6-29), a number of developments cemented the perception in Bonn and Paris that there, indeed, was one (Gaddis, 2007, 30). Important in this regard was the systematic takeover of Eastern European states by the Soviet Union in the late 1940s (Deighton 2002, 191; Flynn 1990, 5; Heuser 1997, 1). Not only did the installation of puppet regimes in the region effectively moved Soviet borders closer to the West (Gaddis 2007, 21), the move also led to fears that "a similar fate could befall the states of Western Europe" (Flynn 1990, 5). With the retention of large military presence of the Red Army in Europe (Gaddis 2007, 9; Lundestad 2005, 24; Karber and Combs 1998, 309), the 1948 Berlin blockade, and finally the Korean War (Simms 2014, 409), apprehensions about Soviet intentions even intensified. German Chancellor Adenauer, for example, believed Soviet maneuvers portended "a broader assault on the west" (Simms 2014, 409) and saw the USSR as an "expansionist threat" (Kaiser 1990, 94). In France, prominent members

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of the foreign policy elite deemed it "very possible that Russia will take over the entire continent of Europe in due course (Crosswell 2003, 7).

Thus, in this climate, the idea came to be that to deter potential Soviet aggression, regional integration had to be undertaken (Crosswell 2003, 9; Simms 2014, 411). This was to be done mostly along economic lines (Flynn 1990, 5), as France's wariness of Germany precluded military or political integration (Dinan 2014, 6). However, even so, in the immediate postwar period, there was a confluence of high integration intensity and high threat perception.

1962-1979

In contrast, by the mid-1960s, European integration began to lose its momentum. Although the Customs Union, a major step in the process, was finished by 1966, the subsequent decade did not see major integration progress (Dinan 2014, 123). With the rejection of closer monetary integration in 1970, the 1973 accession of Great Britain, was perhaps the "only major advance during this period" (Simms 2014, 454). In fact, in this period, usually referred to as *Eurosclerosis*, the integration process even seemed to be moving in reverse: the launch of European Political Cooperation in 1970, a purported step towards foreign policy integration, ended up outside of the European Community framework and remained largely a mechanism for coordination (Peterson and Helwig 2018, 195). By the same token, the establishment in 1975 of the European Council – an intergovernmental body of the member state leaders – can be read as a further shift from integration toward cooperation and coordination. Since Rosato observes no change on his explanatory variable in this period, he largely discards these developments. However, when taking the balance-of-threat into account, it can be seen that this lesser integration intensity had to do with a lower threat level at the time.

The starting point of this period is not chosen haphazardly: after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the hitherto fierce Cold War dynamic saw a progressive thaw of the East-West relations under the policy of *détente* (Flynn 1990, 9). This policy, best associated with Nixon and Kissinger, had its reflection also in the European context, with both Germany and France softening their approach to the Soviet Union (Best et al, 282; Gaddis 2007, 198). In Germany, under Willy Brandt, this took the form of *Ostpolitik* – a policy tailored to ease "tensions within Berlin, with East Germany, with…Eastern Europe, and [eventually] with the Soviet Union" that entailed a series of treaties, state visits or financial assistance (Deighton 2002, 198). France followed suit, with, first President De Gaulle visiting Moscow, and then, under President Pompidou, by holding annual summits between the two countries in the 1970s (Moïsi and Flynn 1990, 54-64). To be certain, the two countries continued to see the USSR as an adversary (Flynn 1990, 10; Kaiser 1990, 94); however, taken together, these developments demonstrate that there was a significant "downgrading of the Soviet threat" at the time (Laird and Williams 1990, 228).

That said, it becomes evident why there was an apparent decline in the integration intensity throughout the period of détente: France and Germany began to view Soviet intentions in much more favorable terms. Crucially, this happened despite little major changes in power and geography (Flynn 1990, 11-13). This comes to show the relative importance of perception in assessing the level of Soviet threat, which, as the next section demonstrates, rose again in the following decade.

1979-1991

The 1980s was a significant period for European integration that saw a number of breakthroughs and accelerated developments that climaxed just as the Cold War came to an end. In 1986, the Single European Act – first treaty revision in decades – streamlined decision making in the Community, paving the way for the finalization of the Single Market that had been sidelined since the late 1960s (Dinan 2018, 36-37). Similarly, the Community further expanded, assuming Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Finally, a number of provisions were planted that resulted in the landmark 1992 Maastricht Treaty that turned the EC into the European Union, launched integration in economic and monetary affairs, initiated closer cooperation on internal security, and laid the foundations of a common foreign and security policy. Such intensification of the integration efforts took place, expectedly, as the fear of the Soviet threat in Western Europe resurfaced.

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After years of rapprochement, the departure of Nixon, Moscow's interventions in Angola and Afghanistan, and acceleration in Soviet military buildup, towards the end of the 1970s, the two superpowers began to grow apart again, giving rise to the so-called 'Second Cold War' of the 1980s (Simms 2014, 459-477; Westad 2017, 586). This shift was, albeit to a lesser degree, reflected also in Europe, leading the Western powers to once again perceive the USSR as a threat (Freedman 1990, 12-14). British PM Thatcher (in Gaddis 2007, 216), for example believed that even if exact Soviet motives were unclear, in light of its military buildup, it was "simple prudence for the West to respond." After all, she let it be known, the USSR constituted "a fundamental challenge to the West" (in Clarke 1990, 31). Germany and France took a less dramatic, nevertheless similar, view of the USSR, with French President Mitterrand, for example, cancelling the annual summit meetings (Moïsi and Flynn 1990, 55). Thus, although it never reached the levels of the 1950s, in the early 1980s, Western Europe's concern about the Soviet intentions was the most anxious in decades (Laird and Williams 1990, 248; Westad 2017, 575). Accordingly, as Dinan (2014, 188) notes, this made European integration appear "more necessary than ever."

This attitude was explicitly expressed in the 1983 Stuttgart declaration on European Union, signed then by all EC members, in which they pledged to "create a united Europe, which is more than ever necessary in order to meet the dangers of the world situation" (in Westad 2014, 586). Clearly, it was felt that to balance the resurgent Soviet threat, further integration was necessary – a sentiment most evident in the fact that Thatcher, a harsh critic of the project, in 1984 actively proposed "deeper market integration and better foreign policy coordination" (Dinan 2014, 189). In this light, it is little wonder that the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the most intensive integration in decades.

1991-2014

The previous three sections demonstrate that, contrary to Rosato, European integration was a dynamic process even after the 1950s, with its intensity co-varying with changes in the level of the Soviet threat perceived in the West. When it comes to the aftermath of the Cold War, however, this paper agrees with Rosato that the integration dynamic generally abated. In fact, already the 1992 Maastricht Treaty was criticized for falling short of expectations, mostly in relation to the allegedly toothless Common Foreign and Security Policy (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014 47-49). And, indeed, subsequent treaty revisions and institutional innovations have not turned the European Union into a regional superpower as had been expected (Dinan 2018, 38-44; Rosato 2011, 68-77). Yet it does not mean, as Rosato suggests, that European integration has since then entered a steady decline. On the contrary, the post-Cold War period saw moderate progress in, especially political-military integration, that although invisible to a power-based theory, can be readily explained in terms of threat perception.

The fall of the USSR dramatically changed Europe's security environment, as there "no longer existed a substantial military threat" (Kissinger 2014, 91). In fact, reduction in the perceived Soviet threat level had already begun in the second half of the 1980s (Flynn 1990, 15), meaning that by the time the EU originated, the Soviet Union (now Russia) was no longer seen in adversarial terms. This perception remained in place for some time: throughout the 1990s and early 2000s it was generally "assumed that Russia wanted to work in a cooperative manner with…Europe and, if not integrate into, develop cooperative relations with [it]" (Pifer 2017). Germany, especially, took keen interest in developing strong relations with Russia, positioning itself "as Russia's major advocate within the European Union" (Stent 2019, 97). However, Britain and France were equally bent on fostering EU-Russia ties, playing key role in launching policies such as the 1994 Partnership for Peace and the 2003 Four Common Spaces initiative that were meant to bring the two closer together (Schmidt-Felzmann 2014, 44). Setting aside the questionable results of these attempts, it still becomes evident that following the end of the Cold War, Western Europe's major powers did not perceive Russia as harboring aggressive intentions.

Still, Europe's perception at the time was not completely threat-free, with the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, international terrorism, and various regional conflicts being but a few examples (Simms 2014, 494-513). Consequently, integration did not come to a complete halt during the period either. For instance, Yugoslavia gave rise to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), a tool aimed at helping Europe cope with similar threats (Howorth 2014, 5-11; Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, 172-181). For similar reasons, the EU also underwent its hitherto largest enlargements, assuming the total of 16 countries (Sedelmeier and Avery 2018). Both these developments, nevertheless, were not indicative of somewhat high integration intensity: the CSDP contained provisions for military

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integration that came to fruition only much later and the series of enlargements is said to have been undertaken at the expense of the EU's capacity to act (Howorth 2014, 1-20; Sedelmeier and Avery 2018, 167-192). Thus, they were rather moderate developments, corresponding to a rather moderate threat perception at the time. As Simms (2014, 512) offers, although threats sprang up in the 1990s and early 2000s, none seems to have been potent enough to stimulate deeper integration.

2014-Present

This later somewhat changed in 2010s. Most notably, political-military integration began to gather steam. For example, the 2016 EU Global Strategy declared the goal of "strategic autonomy" and even if the EU remains a far cry from the aspiration, a number of developments – such as the European Defence Fund or the voluntary integration tool Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – have been taken in the direction (Howorth 2017, 193). Crucially, these developments have been happening against the backdrop of France and Germany after Brexit. The EU's power duo thus intensified their calls for further integration. Since his arrival in 2017, French President Macron has called for Europe to become "autonomous in terms of military strategy and capability" (The Economist 2019). Similarly, in 2018, German Chancellor Merkel noted that the EU should consider "one day establishing a real European army" (Lough 2018). Most recently, these calls were reflected in the 2020 proposals on establishing a European Defense Union (Janjevic 2020).

What gave rise to these developments that, albeit still in their infancy, seem to indicate heightened integration intensity? A resurgent Russian threat seems the obvious answer: with its military modernization and increasingly hostile rhetoric, Russia – now, owing to the enlargements, again at Europe's doorstep – could once again prove an impetus enough for European integration (Pifer 2017; Simms 2014, 411-412). Yet the question is why it is only since 2014 that integration has accelerated: after all, Russia's aggressiveness had been discernable already by the 2008 invasion of Georgia (Kaplan 2013, 181). Aside from the possible effect of the 2008 financial crisis and the fact that structural changes rarely happen overnight, a plausible reason is offered by Orenstein (2019). As he argues, for a long time, Western European leaders simply refused to believe that Russia would, after flirting with the West, reassume its hostile posture (Orenstein 2019, 9-15). Thus, Western countries chose to ignore the many suggestive indices – a position that became untenable only with the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Orenstein 2019, 48-54). And even afterwards, there was no automatic unanimity on the level of the "Russian threat" (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 282). Rather, only recently did European leaders begin to converge on a consensual threat perception, with Germany calling Russia a "direct and specific" threat (Nia 2021) and French President Macron, after a series of overtures, calling for "clear red lines" in dealing with Russia (Amiel, 2021; France 24, 2019). Thus, after a short delay, the developments since 2014 increasingly seem to confirm that higher threat levels result in higher integration intensity.

Conclusion

To address the question of how the balance of threat theory can explain European integration, this paper, borrowing from Rosato (2011), drew up two hypotheses – that higher threat level would lead to more integration, and vice versa – which were subsequently tested in five time periods generally known for variation in the integration process. In all five, the hypotheses could not be falsified: in the postwar period, the major Soviet threat gave the impetus to launch the unprecedented integration project that, however, lost its momentum in the context of better East-West relations in the 1960s and 70s. Nevertheless, with a renewal of perceived Soviet aggressiveness, the European project was back on track in the 1980s, leading to the most integration since late 1950s. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, integration lost some its intensity, as the newly formed Russia did not seem to pose a threat to Western Europe. Still, the project did not come to the near halt of the 1970s, as the volatile post-Cold War environment kept the EU members at the edge of their seats. Finally, after two periods of low-key progress, European integration seems to have regained its momentum after 2014, especially in political-military terms, as the perception of Russian threat began to feature more prominently.

Thus, it can be concluded that the way in which Walt's balance of threat theory explains European integration marks a significant improvement on Rosato's balance of power theory: by taking threat level as its main variable, the theory

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can better account for the varying dynamic of the integration process, which Rosato unduly distorts. European integration, as this paper has shown, is not a simple process; rather, it is a convoluted mixture of ebbs and flows. Seeing it as a function of threat is a more accurate way of understanding this reality.

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