



# THE STRUCTURE AND POLITICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE EUROPEAN UNION IN PERSPECTIVE

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Article history:	Abstract:
<b>Received:</b> July 1 <sup>st</sup> 2021 <b>Accepted:</b> August 1 <sup>st</sup> 2021 <b>Published:</b> September 14 <sup>th</sup> 2021	International institutions have become the central focus of research in the field of international relations. The paper starts by examining the European Union (EU) looking at its historical evolution, objectives and organs. It adopts the neo-functionalism theory of regional integration to explain the rationale behind the formation of the EU. It also looks at the role of the EU in international politics by looking at some standards which measure the level of impacts that an international institution has in the contemporary international system. It concludes that for the EU to continue to show its relevance it must give more aids to countries of the developing world.

**Keywords:** European union, international institution, international system, treaty

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of an international role signifies an organized and purposeful system of interactions exerted by one actor in her relation with other actors in the international system (Zièba, 2012). The fact that the international system is a product of an actor or actors' subjective assessment and the influence of the environment, each actor or groups of actors typically plays several international roles, and referring to a single role is synonymous with defining its international position (Zièba, 2012). International institutions have noble aspirations, in fact they see themselves as agents of development and peace (Zienlonka, 2011).

The subject of the international roles played by the participants in international relations is not frequently researched academically (Zièba, 2012). International institutions which act in the capacity of actors on the international stage do play political, military, economic, humanitarian and cultural roles among others (Zièba, 2012). Although the daily operations of most international institutions are managed by specialized bureaucracies, the member-states wield the ultimate authorities.

Over the years, international institutions have become the central focus of scholarship in the field of international relations. International institutions have been known to help set international agenda, setting political bargains and acting as catalysts for coalition formulation and promoting international initiatives, reducing inequalities amongst other roles. One of these international institutions is the European Union (EU) which is said to be a peculiar international institution if not a unique one so to say (Zienlonka, 2011). Since the European Union is an independent international actor, this paper focuses on the role of the EU in the politics of the contemporary international system.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Literature abounds on the role of international institutions in international politics. According to Abidun (2009), international institutions have state actors as its members. It has also helped shaped international politics. In recent time, international institutions have become the central of focus in the field of international relations.

Scholars like Hurd (2018) opines those international institutions are power players in the international system and helps national governments achieve their goals; it has also helped understood the dynamics among power, interests and actors. Mingst and Arreguin-Toft (2014) noted that international institutions are particularly useful for solving two sets of problems. International institutions exist in the conceptual and legal space between state sovereignty and legal obligations (Hurd, 2018).

Gabriela (2013) noted that it is rare to say international institutions are constituted in a way that they could effectively enforce actors against states who fails to live up to their obligations. International institutions help shape and constrain the option of individual member-states (Coleman and Porter, 2000). He further continued those international institutions are important actors in critical episodes of international politics. They also help manage the various key sectors of international concern (Abbot and Snidal, 1998).

According to Zohal (2011), international institutions over the last six decades have extended and reviewed their mandate and objectives reaching the international level through a number of processes related to globalization by providing framework for the negotiation and the formalization of trade agreement. International institutions in the words of Wouters and de Man (2009) can delegate authorities in matters that requires expertise, knowledge, information, time and resources which are often not available.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the Neo-functionalism Theory of Ernst B. Haas. The theory was propounded in the late 50s. Neo-functionalism is a theory of regional integration in which integration is considered to be inevitable process, rather than a desirable state of affairs that could be introduced by the political or technocratic elites of the involved states (Haas, 1970).

There are three main principles of neo-functionalism;

- (i) the principle of positive spillover effects states that integration between states in one sector, that is, economic sector will eventually ramify into integration or co-operation in other sectors such as political, socio-cultural, security, etc.
- (ii) (ii) the mechanism of a transfer in domestic allegiance which assumes that as the process of integration gathers momentum in an increasingly pluralistic domestic society of each state; interest groups and other associations will transfer their allegiance or loyalty away from national institutions towards the supranational institution(s) when they begin to realize that their material interests or well-being can be better pursued through supranational institution(s) than the pre-existing national institutions; and
- (iii) principle of technocratic automaticity which states that as integration hastens the supranational institution(s) will take the lead in fostering further integration as they become more powerful and more autonomous of the member states (Haas, 1970).

Neo-functionalism is not without defects and one of its major defects is that while assuming that regional integration is a gradual process its conception of integration as a linear process makes explanation of setbacks or shortcomings. It is even said to be outdated (Niemann, Lefkofridi and Schmitter, 2019).

### THE EUROPEAN UNION IN PERSPECTIVE

#### Historical Background

The EU is a political and economic partnership that represents a unique form of cooperation among sovereign states of the continent of Europe (Archick, 2021). By the end of WW II, Europe was devastated as a result of the horrors brought by the war and the continent had to seek for help from the US through her Marshal Plan at the same time that to French leaders namely Jean Monnet and Robert Schum were on the process of implementing the European functionalist ideology which was of the opinion that future occurrence of such war could be prevent by the creation of economic linkages that would politically bound states together (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2011).

In 1950, Schuman as the French foreign minister proposed a first modest step being the merger of the French and German Steel (Iron) and Coal Industries into a single framework that could efficiently use two states, coal resources and steel mills as coal and steel were essential to the recovery and growth of Europe (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2011). This arrangement gave birth in 1952 to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in which France and Germany joined by Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft, 2014), though the Treaty of Paris which established it was signed in 1951 (Faal and Gumbi, 2016). The ECSC was saddled with the task of responsibilities of reducing trade barriers in coal and steel policies. The ECSC also established a 'High Command' that could bypass government and deal directly with companies, labour unions and individuals. It is important to note that Britain was not a member of this arrangement as at this time (Archick, 2021).

There was an attempt to create the European Defence Community in 1954 but it failed because France rejected the idea (Archick, 2021). In 1957, same six countries signed the Treaty of Rome by and created two new organizations of which one extended the coal and steel idea into a new realm which borders on atomic energy, it was called the Atomic Energy Community (EUROTOM). EUROTOM was formed to coordinate nuclear power development by pooling research, investment and management; the second organization was the European Economic Community (ECC) which was later renamed the Economic Community (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft, 2014).

What is now known as the EU has its agreement signed in Maastricht in 1993 and it became known as the Maastricht Treaty though it was not until 2009 that the EU formally adopted the Lisbon Treaty (Faal and Gumbi, 2016). The EU consists of 27 member-states including most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and has helped promote peace, stability and promote economic prosperity throughout the continent of Europe (Archick, 2021). The EU as at today has nearly 500 million citizens and her economy surpasses that of the USA in GDP (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2011). It is headquartered in Brussel, the capital city of Belgium. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland left the union in early 2020 though the plan has been on since late 2019. The exit is referred to as BREXIT. It is important to note that security threats, economic incentives and a post war vision played vital roles towards the drive to the European integration (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft, 2014).

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the EU are as follows:

To:

- i. Promote peace,
- ii. Establish a unified economic and monetary system
- iii. Promote the inclusion and combat discrimination,
- iv. Breakdown barriers to trade and borders,
- v. Encourage technological and scientific developments,
- vi. Champion environmental protection etc (European Commission, n.d.)

## ORGANS

To achieve these objectives the EU has several organs of which are:

The:

- i. European Parliament: the directly elected law-making body of the EU,
  - ii. Council of the European Union: represents the government of member-states,
  - iii. European Commission: the executive of the EU, it is responsible for proposing new legislation and making sure member-states follows EU law,
  - iv. EU Court of Justice: interprets the law and settles legal disputes and its decisions are binding on member-states,
  - v. European Council: makes decision about the policy direction of the EU but has no power to pass laws,
- Others are the European Economic and Social Committee, European Committee of the Region, European Investment Bank and European Ombudsman (European Commission, n.d.).

## THE ROLE OF THE EU IN THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Archer (1993) distinguishes three basic types of roles played by international institutions in the international system:

The:

- (i) role of the instruments of foreign policy member-states used for the purpose of solving matters that are significant to them;
- (ii) role of an arena or forum where states conduct consultations, agree on common interests, or conclude agreements; and
- (iii) role of sovereign actors in international relations.

When the criteria of intensity and dynamics are considered, the EU's international roles can be hierarchized as follows: economic roles, political and security roles, and a cultural-and-civilizational role (Zieba, 2012).

In terms of economy, trade, commerce and investments, the EU has played many active roles and has recorded success on some number of instances. It arguably has the largest assets in the globe (Vuskane, 2011). Owing to the successful implementation of a common commercial policy, the European Union has become the largest trading power in the world. According to World Trade Organization data, in 2011, the EU ranked first in the global trade in goods (excluding internal trade) with a share in exports at a level of 14.9% (<https://data.wto.org>). The position of the EU is even stronger on the global services market. Its share in the export of commercial services in 2011 amounted to 24.7%, while that of the US was 18.3% and of China – 5.8%. It has built a single market for goods and services that spans 27 countries with 500 million citizens free to move and settle where they wish. It created the single currency — the euro — now a major world currency, and which makes the single market more efficient. It is also the largest supplier of development and humanitarian aid programme in the world (European Commission, n.d.).

The EU plays an important role in diplomatic relations and works to foster stability, security and prosperity, democratization, fundamental human rights and rule of law at the global level (Brljavac, 2011). Moravcsik (2002) opines that the EU has maintained quite effective power in the promotion of democracy and development through trade, foreign aids and development. The EU has led and supported peace talks around the world in conflict-related cases. It has helped brook peace arrangement alongside the USA and Iran towards seeing that Iran abandons its nuclear arms race and has helped facilitated peace talk between the Columbian government and armed groups (European Commission, n.d.). It has co-mediated in the Mali conflict; it has helped built peace in the Western Balkans during the Yugoslav Wars (<https://www.eeas.europa.eu/headquarters>). It has also established the Schengen area as a stride towards more integration where people and goods can move across national boundaries (European Commission, n.d.). Without doubts, the EU has become an important actor when it comes to political, economic and legal questions in the international stage (Brljavac, 2011). This is due to her wide-ranging global involvement and its increasing capabilities it seems to be established that indeed, the EU has a foreign policy (Sjurgsen, 2000). The EU is a vital international actor and shapes her environment through her policies (Maull, 2005). Moravcsik (2002) asserts that the EU is a kind of 'Quiet Super-Power'. The EU has made easy approach to global governance as her leaders are more ready to work together and share information and even infrastructure among other actors notably state entities in the international system (Brljavac, 2011).

The EU is also at the forefront of the global fight against climate change as a result of dangerous emissions and its consequences (Brljavac, 2011); it plans to keep growing; helps neighbouring countries prepare themselves for EU membership; and it is building a common foreign policy which will do much to extend (European Commission, n.d). Despite the fact that the EU has been criticized for being ineffective and non-transparent in its placement of aids programme, it has given out large sum of money in foreign aids to countries of the developing world and it has also provided funds for reconstruction and humanitarian aids in troubled countries (Brljavac, 2011).

### CONCLUSION

The EU has projected itself as a leading actor in the international system over the years and will continue owing to the caliber of member-states it parades among it folds. This is evident in her activities over time and the fact that it has always been the model for other forms of integration in other continents, regions or sub-regions of the world. This paper shows that her activities in socio-economic and political activities has made it a solid international institution though there are still more to achieve as the world is emerging, dynamic and not static this means there will be added roles every time as far as the world is changing on a daily basis. One way forward for the EU for to show herself as vital actor in the international system is to re-strategies in her developmental plans by offering more aids and supports for countries of the developing worlds.

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