Esther Barbé, (dir), La Unión Europea en las Relaciones Internacionales
(The EU in international relations)

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The volume 'la Unión Europea en las Relaciones Internacionales’ edited by Esther Barbé is an excellent introduction to EU foreign policy and essential reading for readers who approach the subject in Spanish. It explores the EU’s international relations in a changing global environment, marked by the emergence of new global Powers, a greater role for the global South, and globalisation. The volume’s particular focus on how the EU relates to substantial structural developments in international politics is both timely and of acute policy relevance. As such, it sets this edited volume apart from previous text books on EU foreign policy that provide well-informed discussions on the state of the art in this dynamic research domain.

The introduction guides the reader through prominent analytical perspectives on the EU’s international role, distinguishing between the ‘EU as a subsystem of the global system’, the ‘EU as a system of international relations’, as well as the ‘EU as an international actor’. Within these three macro-perspectives the introduction by Esther Barbé eloquently elaborates more specific concepts for the study of EU foreign policy, such as the classic notions of EU ‘actorness’, ‘civilian power’, ‘normative power’, and ‘market power’. This comprehensive, up-to-date and well informed overview sets the tone for the subsequent empirical chapters. Rather than aiming at a rigorous comparative framework that confines the analysis to a particular aspect of the EU’s international role, Esther Barbé and her collaborators explore the EU’s international relations through different analytical perspectives and address a variety of themes. While this imposes certain limitations with respect to a systematic comparison of findings it certainly adds to the richness of the individual contributions and fits well with the text-book approach of the book. This text book approach reflects the general state of the research field on the EU’s international relations, which continues to be marked by conceptual and theoretical pluralism and a diversity of perspectives.

The remainder of the book chapters are structured in three main parts. The chapters that make up the first part provide a well-informed overview of the EU’s architecture as a foreign policy actor in terms of its foreign policy institutions, processes, actors and instruments, with a particular focus on the reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. These chapters speak for the main part to the perspective of the EU as an emerging ‘system of international relations’, with individual contributions treating
in-depth individual domains such as the EU’s foreign, security and defence policies (CFSP/CSDP) and Justice and Home Affairs (JHA). The first part concludes with a chapter on the Europeanisation of EU foreign policy, which explores the interactions and linkages between the EU and its member states in European foreign policymaking. Interestingly, the chapter also covers the aspects of ‘de-Europeanisation’ and ‘re-nationalisation’, which thus far have received less attention in the academic literature but must be considered as timely matters, particularly as the EU is struggling with a conglomerate of financial, economic and external relations crises that represent a challenge for the relations between the EU and its member states.

The second part of the book is dedicated to specific geographical aspects of EU foreign policy. The contributions in this part cover large EU policy frameworks like its enlargement and neighbourhood policies, EU relations with the developing world, the EU’s relations with other regional integration schemes, as well as bilateral EU relations with key ‘strategic partners’ – the United States, China and Russia. The chapters highlight different facets of EU actorness and power, with the EU drawing on its market power and normative resources in its conditionality based enlargement and neighbourhood policies. At the same time, the chapters also testify to the EU’s growing struggle to deal with a European neighbourhood in which hard security challenges and violent conflicts increasingly challenge its traditional soft power and market based policy approach to the region. The chapter dealing with the EU’s strategic partners addresses most directly the dimension of geo-political change. Importantly, the EU needs to adjust its strategic partnerships to the new realities of the global distribution of power where the US still constitutes a hegemonic Power, China emerges as a major Power, and Russia re-emerges as a global Power. The EU’s transatlantic partnership is traditionally routed in a firm basis of shared values and interests, as exemplified by a broad participation of EU member states in NATO, the establishment of a series of bilateral fora for dialogue on key questions of international relations (e.g. climate change, sustainable development and energy) and close economic cooperation. This does not mean, however, that transatlantic relations are free of tensions, as illustrated by historic examples such as the disagreement of key EU member states with the 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq or the more recent NSA spying scandal. Still, the EU’s relations with China and Russia are considerably more complex and involve several tensions and contradictions. Here, the EU deals with powerful countries that are critical players in an emerging new global order and matter for the EU’s economic and security interests, whilst at the same time posing several challenges to the EU’s normative and political agenda and its coherence as an international actor.

The second part of the book concludes with a chapter on inter-regionalism. It delineates how the EU’s approach to various other regional integration schemes, such as ASEAN or Mercosur, has gradually developed from an approach based on commercial and development relations into EU efforts to transfer a specific model for regional governance.

Finally, the third part of the book moves from the level of bilateral and regional relations to the EU’s role in global governance. Most contributions cover individual EU policy areas and the corresponding international regimes, including trade, international finance, climate policy, energy, weapons of mass destruction, and human rights. The chapters generally take a long-term historical perspective that explores the EU’s role in the covered global policy regimes – which have themselves evolved over time – over several decades. The contributions show that important
characteristics of global governance arrangements and international regimes differ significantly across the policy domains covered. For instance, whilst the international trade regime is strongly institutionalised and has developed a system for dispute settlement, other regimes, particularly the global energy regime, are only weakly institutionalised and considerably fragmented. The EU thus does not simply deal with ‘one global environment’, but with diverse international regimes that are often marked by considerable complexity. Not only does the EU operate in different external environments, its own institutional set-up as a foreign policy actor also differs across policy domains. The individual chapters thus also deal with questions such as the division of EU competences and the internal process of decision-making, which is often illustrated by means of concrete empirical examples. Moreover, the individual contributors revisit the debate on EU power (market, normative, civilian, and traditional) in their discussions of the EU’s policy specific role in global governance. Overall, the individual chapters convey with great clarity and depth the historic evolution of the EU’s role in various aspects of global governance and the specific challenges it faces today. Despite facing significant challenges, the EU’s relevance in global governance in policy domains such as trade, the environment, and finance is generally assessed in positive terms, whilst the EU has also made some inroads in consolidating itself as an actor in the field of global energy governance.

The final chapter of the third section takes a somewhat different approach by focusing on the EU’s relations with private authorities, hence moving away from the EU’s role in traditional bi-lateral and multi-lateral diplomacy where it interacts with governmental representatives. Besides inter-governmental and trans-governmental regulatory cooperation, rule-making by private authorities has been identified as an increasingly prominent aspect of global governance, making this contribution particularly relevant and interesting.

In sum, the edited volume comprises a set of well-structured, empirically rich, and competently written chapters that give the reader an accessible status report on research in various areas of EU foreign policy. The individual chapters are authored by established experts in the policy domains covered and frequently illustrate specific matters through small ‘case studies’ in a text box, tables, and graphic illustrations. In addition to a comprehensive bibliography, each chapter also lists at the end a small number of ‘reference works’ for further reading. All this makes the material assessable and helps effectively to convey complex information. If there is something that the reviewer has missed during the lecture of this impressive volume then it was a concluding chapter that revisits important themes raised in the introduction, highlights common findings, discusses cross-cutting issues and points to gaps in existing research. This leaves the reader to wonder what we have learned - from such a rich collection of individual chapters – about the general state of EU foreign policy in a changing international order and to what pressing issues and questions future research should direct its attention. Reflecting on the current state of EU foreign policy provides an additional added value in the dynamic research field of European foreign policy that has become considerably compartmentalised and could make a welcome addition to a subsequent edition of this excellent volume. This said, the high quality of the contributions, the structured approach of the edited volume, and the accessible presentation of the material make for a valuable text book that will be of great value for introductory courses on EU foreign policy as well as for academics and practitioners that want to gain a competent, efficient overview of a complex field.