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**‘THE CAPABILITIES-EXPECTATIONS GAP: EU’S FOREIGN POLICY 20 YEARS  
LATER’**

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## SUMMARY

Making sense out of the European Union's foreign policy has been an intriguing debate in the last decades. Among the others, looking at the vast literature on this topic, there is an article that in terms of impact emerged as one of the most influential: **'The Capability-Expectations gap or conceptualizing Europe's international role' by Christopher Hill, 1992**. From that moment on this concept became part of the typical analytical toolbox of any scholar whose object of study was the European Union, and in particular its external activity. In the eye of Hill, the then Community, proved unable to cope with the flood-tide of events that occurred in those years: from the Gulf drama, to the Uruguay Round and the Jugoslavia breaking-up. The Community failed spectacularly 'as an international actor, in terms both of its capacity to produce collective decisions and its impact on events' (Hill, 1992: 306). As a consequence, what Hill wanted to underline in his article was that the **lack of some prerogatives** that are typical of a fully-fledged foreign policy are the reason why a gap between what the Community has been talked to, and what the Community could actually achieve was opened.

Starting from this article, the aim of this thesis is **to look at the situation of today through Hill's criteria**. The research question that will be the backbone of the whole thesis is: **does the capability-expectations gap still characterize the EU foreign policy? If yes, in which areas? And, what are the possible explanations?** My opinion is that this question is relevant since the debate over this topic is not finished yet. In addition to that, it is in the spirit of its first theorization as a 'yardstick' that the capabilities-expectations gap fulfills its ultimate goal: being a dynamic paradigm for the assessment of the general trend behind the process of integration.

Chapter 1 will be focused on an **in depth analysis of Hill's article**. In particular, some of the concepts that in the article are just touched on, will be further discussed by the use of other relevant literature. Finally, the overall impact and influence of this article will be better highlighted.

The capability-expectations gap is the paradigm of the thesis; but what about the instruments used for its assessment? To answer this question, is to look at the basic idea of the whole thesis. In fact, contrary to the general use that has been made, **both capabilities and expectations, will be analysed in**

**separated contexts.** The variable geometry that is the key of Hill's answer, will become hereinafter the linchpin of this analysis. To answer these questions, therefore I will integrate the thesis with a two level analysis of today's situation: the first one will look at the capabilities (Chapter 2), the second one at the expectations (Chapter 3). Each chapter will be focused on the features that characterize each dimension.

**Chapter 2 will look at the major institutional changes that occurred in the last decades at the European level. To look at this process is important if the aim is to examine the capability side of this function, for this is the way in which capabilities were addressed.** It was, and probably still is, generally accepted the idea that the gap can only be closed through institutional adaptations; and so with an increase of capabilities. From Maastricht to Lisbon, it is possible to figure out this trend behind the process of Europeanization of practices and policies. The field of foreign policy was not immune to that. Lisbon in particular will be at the core of the chapter, with its historical context and its high-wording. Each institutions will be analysed in detail and in relations with the others. By the classic institutionalism, the role that an institutional reform has on a policy and on the future development of it will be discussed in detail.

**Chapter 3, on the other hand, will look at the side of expectations.** This part is important for, at least from an algebraic point of view, it is possible to define a lack in terms of capabilities only operant the relative level of expectations. To analyse expectations, I will take into consideration what I consider the missing element of an analysis that wants to be as comprehensive as possible: **the role of ideas.** Therefore, to understand the ideational debate in Europe about Europe itself is crucial. On the one hand, it is possible to see some member states that are just fine with the current level of capabilities (say X) given to the Union. And that is because their level of expectations is Y. On the other hand, however, there are states whose level of expectations is way above Y, say 2Y. In these cases, the gap, given the level of capabilities X, is open. Yet, the role of ideas will not to be pushed too far. To do that, the neo-institutionalism developed by Goldstein and Keohane, will be used as the theoretical framework. Ideas are seen here as independent variables. For this reason only in some cases, these are the bearers of an answer on their own terms. This theoretical caveat is fundamental, and its importance will be better

highlighted at the end of the thesis.

**Finally, chapter 4, the last, will represent the empirical switch of the thesis.** In this section, I will push the concept of the capabilities-expectation gap a little bit further from its original idea. Hill's work, in concrete, was made to describe a situation that in 1993 was typical of the EU: low capabilities-high expectations. However, as already said, **the variable that is at the core of this thesis is not the gap *per se*, but rather the configuration of both capabilities and expectations.** For this reason, I found four case study which in my opinion solidify the four possible configurations of capabilities and expectations. The rationale of this part is mainly descriptive. By doing so, I think I will better underline what are the policy area that need further development in terms of capabilities, of expectations, or both.

Now, moving on the results obtained. **The aim of this thesis was trying to asses the situation of today's EU's foreign policy twenty years after the seminal article by Christopher Hill of 1993.**

The capability-expectations gap theorized in that occasion was used here in accordance with the spirit by which it was postulated: as a 'yard-stick' for the evaluation of the general trajectory of the European project in the many fields related to the external action of the Union. *Activities* are the object of this analysis, and they are considered in the context of a lasting compromise between national interests and a long-run equilibrium in the system.

In the light of the first chapter, which had as its ultimate goal to operationalize Hill's argument by using its own criteria, it emerged which are the basic constitutional powers that a fully-fledged foreign policy should have. They are namely: waging war and peace; raising of armed force; treaty making and border control/immigration. Each of these were described in their European trajectory; and the emerging picture was that, at least in the surface, the Union tried to find viable solutions. Concrete progresses were made mainly in two sectors: treaty making and border control/immigration. That being said, however, there are still two issues of great relevance whose solution is far from being reached: waging war and raising of an European armed force. It is important to note here that Hill, as a pragmatic thinker, considered deficiency in these field unacceptable. Europe will never be taken seriously without military capabilities. Finally, Hill's come up with some advices on how to solve the issue: variability. In a way that is the typical answer that one could possibly imagine from an English thinker with Hill's

background. **In concrete, as long as a new political impetus will not catch in a further process of integration in these security-related fields, a variable geometry approach is the only possible solution to the capability-expectations gap.** In a word, increase capabilities whenever it is possible, while decreasing expectations where needed.

Chapter 2, takes a closer look to the side of capabilities. **This institutional chapter was based on the analysis of the EU's foreign policy structure before and after Lisbon,** since I believe this to be the best way to understand the general trajectory behind the integration of policies. In line with the classic institutionalism, the idea is that institutional reforms should go hand-in-hand with changes in the EU foreign policy-making. Especially in terms of actual capabilities conferred to the Union. Moreover, initial policy choices have an impact on further evolutions. However, as already said, institutional reforms were not able to solve the gap in many policy areas. Lisbon in particular, proved to be as the apex of a contradictory and inefficient process of institutionalisation. 'Turf wars' among institutions with different constituencies are more and more a problem to the integration of relevant policies in the EU context. In concrete, **the general setting of the Union, based on a not-resolved dichotomy between supranational and intergovernmental institutions, is still a problem;** and in many policy area, the gap between capabilities and expectations is an issue precisely for this reason. As for other elements of inconsistency, the lack of authoritative mechanisms for the decision-making, together with the unanimity voting system in a majority of field are the biggest obstacles in the pursuing of a common foreign policy.

The conclusion of this chapter leads me, as a consequence, to the third one. In fact, **it was necessary to look at the capability-expectations gap also from the other side of the function.** To do so, I needed to move in a pre-institutional context. The choice I made was to look at the level of ideas. Chapter 3, therefore, is based on an ideational approach to the issue of expectations. To say that ideas matter in politics is, to some extent, an almost self-evident truth but it can also be a risk, since it is often very difficult to prove beyond any reasonable doubt the direct effect of ideas on real life, instead of, let's say, interests. For this reason, I wanted to do so through the use of what is called **neo-institutionalism**, that is nothing more than an integration of the classic institutionalism, with the



inclusion of ideas as independent variables. As such, **ideas can be treated as different from interests, at least in those cases where interests are not pre-given to explain ultimate policy outputs.** The conclusions found in this chapter are that, to date, at the European level there is the coexistence of four clusters of ideas - **national, integrationist, cosmopolitan and multilateral.** Each of these approaches sees the Union under a different light, and in some cases, as a different actor. As a consequence the capability-expectations gap, in this perspective, is the result of this continuous conflict of ideas at the European level. **To find a consensus in such an environment is complicated, and the capability-expectations gap will be a permanent feature of the whole EU's foreign policy as long as there will be the resilience of these four clusters, rather than a common strategic identity.** The other result of this chapter, which in a way is an authentic description of the typical output of the Union, is that the Union itself can find a consensus only in cases of moderate actions - diplomacy, sanctions, peacekeeping and so forth - since these are the missions that work as gravity center, or focal points, for different ideas and interests. This conclusion will be better understood in the last chapter, since it will characterize the difference between missions that can succeed and those that are doomed to fail.

Finally, the empirical switch of thesis. By the use of four case study, chapter 4, aimed to the description of the four possible configurations: 1) high capabilities-high expectations; 2) high capabilities-low expectations; 3) low capabilities-high expectations; 4) low capabilities-low expectations. The chosen cases were, respectively: international trading system; EULEX Kosovo; the Libyan case and FRONTEX.

Each cases presented valuable results. 1) As for the international trading system, it was shown how the Union has always had a great impact as a coherent actor. The EU projected some principles of its economic integration outside its boundaries; contributing in the creation of a stable international trading system. This situation eventually changed in the last decade, more or less; but this has nothing to do with a lack in terms of capabilities, or in problems concerning the level of expectations. The international system has changed, and the rising of new global actors is the reason behind the losing of a privileged position. A closer look at the Doha Round, was sufficient to show this situation.

2) EULEX Kosovo showed how the Union has given itself the right capabilities when it come to the civilian side of the CSDP. In this particular case, the whole mission was possible because of a procedural coherence that was reached at the European level as for the capabilities, and tasks of this mission. Finally, the mission started under the worst auspices, and this ended up in lowering the level of expectations drastically. To some extent, it was a fortunate coincidence. This case is the one that I have defined as the one with a ‘positive gap’.

3) The Libyan case, is on the contrary, the perfect exemplification of Hill’s classic gap. The whole situation, occurred after Lisbon, came as the testing ground of the new, highly worded, military-side of the CSDP. Unfortunately, Libya represented the ‘death of the CSDP’. Uncoordinated institutions, unilateral actions, different historical traditions and an unresolved relation with NATO, all ended up in this spectacular European failure.

4) The forced immigration case, with a particular attention to FRONTEX, was probably the most interesting result of the thesis. **Although being technically a no-gap situation, the analysis of this mission showed as many inconsistencies as a failure case.** Moreover, it has shown how the relative combination of both capabilities and expectations, if at a low level, are in qualitative terms more of a reason for concern, rather than security.

The conclusion of this empirical part of the thesis is that, in the spirit of the original concept, the capabilities-expectations gap is a valuable tool for the assessing of the integration process at the European level. Another finding is that **the way chosen by different players - member states and European institutions - to address this issue proved to be unsatisfactory.** The capabilities-driven approach is now at a standstill. This situation is understandable also from a mathematical perspective. The gap in fact becomes an issue only operant the level of expectations. The relevant question therefore should be: what are the expectations on Europe? As long as there will be no common answer to this question, the gap will always be an issue in some policy area. No institutional reform could ever change that.

For the sake of argument, the last finding was to show how the gap *per se* is not the fundamental element that separate a success from a failure. In fact, besides the classic configuration which is the one of the Libyan case (low capabilities-high expectations); there is also a situation of ‘positive gap’ - here represented by the EULEX Kosovo - with capabilities outnumbering expectations. This condition leads to a success. On the other hand, this approach makes possible an important differentiation between the two no-gap situations. While the high capabilities-high expectations is easily understood as a case of success - trade system; the low capabilities-low expectations need a further explanation. Theoretically, since there is no gap, we should expect a success in missions of this kind - here FRONTEX; however, if we decide to analyse this case on more qualitative terms, the situation change. Hardly a success, this case seems more like a soon-to-be-failure. In fact, this situation is also the one more likely to change since, in the last years we are witnessing an ever-increasing level of expectations on this very topic. It goes without saying that, in the moment in which the level of expectations will be over the one of capabilities, Hill’s classic gap will be opened once again.

To conclude, this thesis showed in the first place that the capability-expectations gap is today, some twenty years after its first theorization, still an issue. In a way, it became **a permanent feature of the EU’s foreign policy**. Besides that, however, the situation is not as bad as it might seems. Looking at the last twenty years in fact, it is also evident how **the general trajectory was positive**, in the sense that the gap narrowed steadily. To date, the analysis of Lisbon showed that the Union has preferred to look at the side of capabilities rather than the one of expectations. The capability-driven process of institutionalisation, although being effective in some cases, has reached a peak that cannot be pushed any further without a change in the approach. EU’s institutions and member states need to work together on the other side of this function, if they want to close the gap. For this reason the debate needs to be pre-institutional, and to address other issues. After that, there would be two possible outcomes: 1) increase the level of capabilities; 2) decrease the level of expectations. In a word, Hill’s variable geometry approach.

In substance, Europe is at a juncture: if we want to move toward a political union, it is necessary for all

member states **to agree on a single idea of Europe and then, consequently, proceed with a proper process of institutionalisation of it.** Otherwise, the dream of a common foreign policy for the Union should go back in the drawer, just to be remembered as the equivalent of a political childhood dream.

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