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## Capabilities and Expectations in EU's Relationship With the United States: Still a Gap?

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BACHELOR THESIS POLITICAL SCIENCE

**Capabilities and Expectations  
in EU's Relationship With the United States:  
Still a Gap?**

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## **Introduction**

The Capability-Expectations Gap (CEG) is a concept that is used in the field of EU foreign policy to describe the imbalance between what the European Union (EU) is expected to deliver, and the number of available capabilities the EU has at its disposal (Hill, 1993). It is meant to evaluate EU's actorness: can the EU be seen as a cohesive and effective international actor (Hill, 1993)? The concept is also used as a framework to measure the size of the gap in different cases or from various perspectives, with Lai et al. (2023) being the most recent example of such a study. Yet the bulk of the literature on the CEG has been conceptual, and little case studies that empirically test the CEG have been done (Lai et al., p. 453). Moreover, the current collection of case studies shows mixed results and is mainly applied to the relation between the EU and Asian countries (Lai et al., p. 455).

In this thesis, I will use the Capability-Expectations Gap framework to analyze the existence of a gap in the relation between the European Union and the United States (US). More specifically, I will compare EU's perceived capabilities with American expectations towards EU's external action. This creates the possibility to determine whether a gap exists between American expectations and EU's capabilities, or no gap exists at all. This way, the thesis contributes to the academic debate by applying the CEG-framework to EU-US relations for the first time. It also gives insight into the usefulness of the CEG in contemporary international relations.

EU-US relations go back to the Union's predecessor, the European Communities, and consist roughly of two components. Whereas the economic relationship is characterized by interdependence, with positive evaluations of EU's capabilities in this area, the story looks different for the security domain. Here, the US holds mostly negative views of the EU, caused by European inaction and lack of solidarity between EU states during conflicts in the 1990s and 2000s (Smith & Steffenson, 2023). In other words, the EU was said to suffer from a capability-expectations gap during these decades, as it lacked a single authority in the field of high politics to reach full actorness (Smith & Steffenson, 2023, p. 380). This thesis examines how the capability-expectations gap in the EU-US relationship has evolved since then, covering the three most recent presidential

administrations. This gives insight into the perceived actorness of the EU, and therefore to what extent the EU is regarded as a valuable partner in external relations.

Understanding this is societally relevant for both the relationship and EU foreign policy. If a gap exists, it may lead to a debate over false possibilities and, consequently, creates resentment on US side when expectations are not met (Hill, 1998, p. 23). Moreover, the analysis offers a useful reflection moment for EU's foreign policy, as policies themselves shape external actors' perceptions of the EU and influence future cooperation (Dominguez & Larivé, 2018, p.241). Therefore, this study also tries to explain why a gap exists, because it provides better understanding of how to solve the underlying causes, optimize EU foreign policy and close the gap in the transatlantic relationship. If the gap doesn't exist, explanation may enhance our knowledge of how to close the gaps in EU's other external relationships (for example, with Japan (see Tsuruoka, 2008)). Thus, the aim of this paper is to describe and explain, which translates into the following research question: *Is there a gap between EU's capabilities and American expectations towards EU external action, and how can this gap be explained?*

This paper will proceed as follows. First, a review of the literature on the capability-expectations gap will give an overview of how the concept has been complemented, reframed, narrowed and tested. Second, I will present the theoretical framework that underpins this research. The methodology section elucidates why the case of EU-US relations is important and describes how the method of document analysis is used. In the analysis chapter, each part discusses a separate administration and ends with a paragraph on the overall status of the gap. The concluding section discusses the main findings and answers the research question, followed by recommendations for future research.

## Literature review

### *The original CEG framework*

Three decades have passed since Christopher Hill introduced his concept of the capability-expectations gap in 1993 (Hill, 1993). At that point in time, the dissolution of the Soviet Union created space for the European Union (European Communities before 1993, but I will use EU from here on) to act on the world stage (Larsen, 2020, p. 965). However, Hill saw the Union's ineffectiveness during international crises, such as in Yugoslavia and the Gulf (Hill, 1993, p. 306). This led him to question its ability to operate in the global (security) order, something that was expected of the EU after the Cold War. In his article, Hill takes a pragmatic approach by looking at EU's functions in the international system, and at the perceptions which are held of its role by third parties (Hill, 1993, p. 306). This was at that time radically different from the discussion on European foreign policy, which was normative and focused on theorizing Europe's international role (Toje, 2008, p. 123). Hill's central argument is that EU's capabilities 'have been talked up to the point where a significant capability-expectations gap exists', thereby drawing a more realistic picture of Europe's foreign policy (Hill, p. 306).

Hill differentiates between functions that are already performed in the international system, such as managing world trade, and functions that might be carried out in the future, for example being a global intervenor (Hill, 1993, pp. 310-14). Many internal *and* external parties (called *demandeurs*) have the expectation that the EU performs these functions. However, these expectations and demands are a challenge to the actual capabilities of the EU, creating a gap. These capabilities consist of:

- \* EU's ability to agree (also defined as *cohesiveness*: member states take collective decisions and stick to them)
- \* resources (financial assets, arms)
- \* instruments (institutional tools such as a bureaucracy)

The gap can be closed by either increasing capabilities or decreasing expectations (Hill, 1993, p. 321). Reducing expectations can be realized by lowering one's own ambitions and communicating this to third actors (Hill, 1993, p. 322). Increasing capabilities requires more resources, but more importantly the political tools to take collective decisions and mobilize the necessary instruments and resources (Hill, 1993, p. 316).

In an essay that Hill wrote five years later, he stressed the importance to look at the gap as a yardstick (Hill, 1998, p. 18). That means, we can see expectations and capabilities as scale variables that can be measured, which allows us to monitor change in European foreign policy (EUIP) over time *and* to determine to what extent the EU has reached actorhood (i.e., being a cohesive and effective international actor). The smaller the gap, the higher degree of actorhood. Furthermore, he suggested that a widening gap could have dangerous consequences. These dangers apply to both EUIP itself and external actors: 1) risk-taking by third actors as they expect too much of the EU (causing resentment), and 2) unfeasible policies of the EU (Hill, 1993, p. 315). This, in turn, negatively influences the Union's credibility as an international actor, which is problematic because the EU needs external partners to tackle border-crossing issues (Tsuruoka, 2008, p. 112).

#### ***External expectations: learning ability***

Lai et al. (2023) is the most recent study that uses the CEG-framework. The authors investigate a potential gap between EU-capabilities and expectations from four Asian countries: China, Japan, South-Korea and Indonesia. They find that all countries have low perceptions of EU-capabilities, especially the Union's ability to agree (Lai et al., p. 466). Furthermore, the authors discover that only China had high expectations of EUIP (contrary to low expectations in the other countries), which means the gap between capabilities and expectations is largest from Chinese perspective (Lai et al., p. 466). This is contrary to what Hill (1993) argued, namely that external parties had high expectations of the EU (this is not true for Japan, South-Korea and Indonesia). The results led the authors to conclude that Asian countries formulate their expectations *after* assessing EU's capabilities (Lai et al., p. 467). In other words, it matters how external parties perceive EU's capabilities, and they may subsequently adjust their expectations. This adds a new dimension to Hill's framework: not only endogenous factors are important (ability to agree, resources, instruments), but also exogenous factors (Lai et al., p. 467).

#### ***Effectiveness and actorhood***

Although the purpose of this thesis is not to evaluate foreign policy effectiveness, the concept deserves a closer look, because it is linked to the CEG. Hill (1993) already illustrated the relevance of the effectiveness concept when he argued that we should not look at what the EU might do in its external relations, but its actual impact on world events. If the EU wants to be a genuine international actor (in other words, reach

*actorness*), it needs to have 1) the practical capabilities to be effective in external action, together with a 2) clear identity and 3) an independent decision-making system (Hill, 2002, p. 30). If EU's foreign policy is not effective in meeting its objectives, the EU would lose internal confidence, external influence and legitimacy (Ginsberg, 1999, p. 444; Schunz, 2021, p. 134). In other words, we can see effectiveness as a minimal requirement for the Union to be perceived as an international actor.

The link between effectiveness and the CEG is illustrated by two authors. First, Dover (2005) compares the internal expectations towards the EU with EU's capabilities during the Bosnian civil war (in contrast to a study of external expectations by Lai et al. (2023)). He concludes that the CEG framework is useful to assess effectiveness of foreign policy (Dover, p. 298). In the economic domain, the policy was effective because expectations and capabilities were in line. However, in the military domain the policy wasn't effective because the EU could not prevent the conflict from erupting, which means there was a gap (Dover, pp. 313-14). Dover argues that this was caused by a 'failure on the demand side': the EU couldn't agree on a common strategy when it comes to the Bosnian case (Dover, p. 314). This failure is often seen in the intergovernmental pillar of security and defense, due to, as noted by Hill (1993, p. 315), the absence of the political tools to respond to (military) demands.

The second author, Holland (1995), shares a more optimistic view by demonstrating that the EU can be an effective international actor in the security domain. He did a case study of South-Africa and concluded that, with help of the CEG framework, there was no gap between capabilities and expectations (Holland, p. 569). More importantly, the findings of Holland (1995) and Dover (2005) illustrate that high levels of effectiveness correlate with a small capability-expectations gap. Similarly, a smaller gap points at a higher degree of actorness.

### ***Consensus gap***

The aforementioned case of Dover (2005) on the 'failure on the demand side' is also illustrated by Toje (2008). He introduces the concept of the consensus-expectations gap. Toje agrees with Hill's (1993) original CEG framework, but observes that the gap has become smaller, since EU's capabilities have grown since the 1990s (Toje, p. 124). At the same time, there remains a gap between what the Union is expected to do in the world



and what the member states can agree upon, which the author describes as a consensus-expectations gap (Toje, p. 122).

Toje (2008) zooms in on the concept of consensus, because he thinks it is the missing piece of the puzzle. He then presents a specific solution to overcome the gap, based on the assumption that small states refrain from blocking any external action related proposal from big states, such as France and Germany (Toje, p. 134). Hence, a ‘grand bargain’ between France and Germany over foreign policy integration could be a first step in solving the consensus problem (as is also illustrated by Helwig (2013, p. 252)). Toje nuances his own ‘grand bargain’ argument by saying that governments do not always have the freedom to make such a deal (Toje, p. 134). Nonetheless, we should not forget that grand bargains can succeed (creation of the Economic and Monetary Union; and delegation of authority to negotiate trade agreements).

### ***Expectations deficit***

Whereas the consensus-expectations gap denotes a positive gap – that is, expectations outweigh capabilities – Tsuruoka (2008) shows that a gap can also be negative. Tsuruoka begins by refuting Hill’s (1993) presumption that all third parties have high expectations. He observes that Japanese expectations towards the EU have remained low despite EU’s growing capabilities, which he calls an ‘expectations deficit’ (Tsuruoka, 2008, p. 110). This suggests that expectations may remain low, even though capabilities have expanded. This goes against the conclusion from Lai et al. (2023, p. 467) that Asian countries have ‘learning ability’ and adjust their expectations after assessing EU’s capabilities. Tsuruoka asserts that this expectation deficit is a structural problem, due to a long-standing ‘culture of indifference’ where both Europe and Japan do not see each other as important allies (Tsuruoka, 2008, p. 119). However, Chaban and Holland (2013) show in their empirical study that the public in Asian countries (including Japan) holds grand expectations towards the EU, which refutes Tsuruoka’s expectation deficit. At the same time, these authors do not contest the idea that culture has explanatory power when analyzing the relation between Europe and Asia (Chaban & Holland, pp. 21-22). Therefore, further empirical studies on Tsuruoka’s ‘culture of indifference’ are needed.

### ***The Lisbon Treaty: expanding capabilities***

The 2009 Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the position of the High Representative (HR) by giving it more autonomy and the right of initiative (Vanhoonaeker & Pomorska, 2013, p. 1320). Together with the creation of the EEAS, the treaty reform could in theory lead to more actorness, because the EU had now more diplomatic capability and more possibilities to speak with one voice in foreign policy (Helwig, 2013, p. 238). Yet the question remains whether the Lisbon Treaty also improved EU's ability to agree in practice. This will also be addressed in the analysis.

In any case, the Lisbon Treaty increased expectations (Bindi & Angelescu, 2011, p. 276; Alcaro & Shapiro, 2014). This is also acknowledged by Helwig (2013). He observes that both capabilities and expectations have grown since Lisbon, which led him to conclude that the gap continues to exist (Helwig, 2013, p. 236). Helwig attributes this to a lack of political will of the member states to give the HR and the EEAS maneuver (Helwig, p. 236). Closing the gap requires 'co-leadership' between the HR, the Commission and member states, with the HR taking the lead in seeking consensus (the missing link according to Toje (2008)). However, the HR still lacks the material resources (arms) that member states have (Helwig, p. 238). As a result, the Union has difficulty with fulfilling the expectations of its *demandeurs*. Yet Helwig is optimistic that the enhanced position of the HR can narrow the CEG, and he mentions two things. First, the HR's diplomatic service (EEAS) can provide the member states with information and diplomatic support. Second, the HR can together with the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council communicate towards third actors. The latter creates the possibility, as in line with Hill (1993, p. 322), to reduce expectations among external actors, thereby closing the gap and limiting the danger of resentment.

All in all, this literature review has shown that the capability-expectations gap has declined since 1993, but that the ability to agree (the EU as a *cohesive* actor) remains a difficult task. This led Toje (2008) to introduce a more focused conceptualization of the gap: the consensus-expectations gap. Moreover, it was described how the gap can also be understood and studied from external perspective, as Lai et al. (2023) did. This thesis also examines the gap from external perspective, but then from American point of view.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that guides this research consists of the basic arguments of the original CEG framework, complemented by newer insights and concepts that were introduced in the literature review. This section begins by conceptualizing the research question: *Is there a gap between EU's capabilities and American expectations towards EU external action, and how can this gap be explained?*

First, capabilities refer to the ability to agree, resources and instruments that the European Union has at its disposal in the field of external action. The ability to agree is understood, and also operationalized, as 'EU states succeeding in making common decisions'. Resources are more concrete assets such as technology, financial reserves and weapons, whereas instruments consist of institutional tools: diplomatic capability, economic leverage and use of force (Hill, 1998, p. 23). Second, EU external action deals with the Union's relations with external actors and consists of three main areas: the Common Commercial Policy (CCP), Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid (Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2023). Next, expectations in general refer to the 'ambitions or demands of the EU's international behavior which derive from both inside and outside the Union' (Hill, 1998, p. 23). This paper will only look at external demands from the United States towards the EU, not at demands from EU institutions, member states or other countries.

Expectations and capabilities can be seen as measurable variables that can be compared. In case of a 'gap', there is a difference between expectations and capabilities. Of course, both variables vary over time, which results in different gap sizes at different points in time (Hill, 1998, p. 18). Gaps can be positive (expectations are greater than capabilities), negative (capabilities exceed expectations) or non-existent (capabilities and expectations are in line) (Lai et al., 2023, p. 455).

Rather than looking at *real* capabilities, this thesis takes a perceptual approach and analyzes *perceived* EU-capabilities. I draw here on the study by Lai et al. (2023), who did an empirical study on expectations and perceived capabilities from Asian perspective. More specifically, this study examines if the United States regards the EU as capable of delivering the functions described by Hill (1993), such as 'the EU as a global intervenor'.

This allows for comparison between the perceived EU-capability to perform certain functions in the international arena, and the functions that the EU is expected to perform (Lai et al., 2023). Subsequently, we can determine whether a gap exists between perceived capabilities and expectations. This boils down to a subjective analysis of EU's capabilities, rather than an objective study of real capabilities. This is for two reasons: 1) objective analysis of EU capabilities creates the risk of automatically translating capabilities into useable power (Hill, 1998, p. 25), and 2) it gives the researcher the opportunity to compare capabilities with expectations more easily. After the comparison, we can answer these subquestions:

*\* Subquestion 1: Is there a gap between perceived EU-capabilities and American expectations towards EU external action during the Obama administration?*

*\* Subquestion 2: Is there a gap between perceived EU-capabilities and American expectations towards EU external action during the Trump administration?*

*\* Subquestion 3: Is there a gap between perceived EU-capabilities and American expectations towards EU external action during the Biden administration?*

But why would perceptions of EU-capability matter for EU-US relations? As outlined in the literature review, Lai et al. (2023) already demonstrated that third parties' perceptions of EU-capabilities influence their expectations ('learning ability'). This works as follows. Although China had low perceptions of the EU in general, it had positive perceptions of EU-capabilities as an international actor, which caused Beijing to increase expectations of EU's role as a global actor (Lai et al, p. 466). This creates a gap if the EU cannot fulfill those higher expectations. Likewise, South Korea and Indonesia held negative perceptions of EU-capabilities, which meant that expectations were also low (Lai et al., p. 466). This means that the gap is either closed when perceived capabilities and expectations are in balance, or there remains a gap when low expectations still exceed perceived capabilities. In other words, external actors form their own judgement of EU-capabilities and adjust their expectations accordingly. Consequently, external perceptions themselves can produce a gap and lead to the negative consequences that Hill (1993) talks about. This paper adds these external perspectives to prevent EU-centrism, which is the problem of studying European foreign policy in a vacuum without taking into account outside views (Keukeleire & Lecocq, 2018).

The next part of the theoretical framework helps to address subquestion 4:

*\* Subquestion 4: What can explain a capability-expectations gap in the EU-US relationship?*

The explanatory variables, listed in Table 1, can be divided into factors that explain either the level of capabilities or the level of expectations. In addition, the factors are split up into endogenous and exogenous ones, with the former referring to explanations to be found within the EU, and the latter outside the EU. This distinction helps to understand where the problem is located and what the Union itself can do about it. As for endogenous explanations, Dover (2005) argues that EU's inability to agree on a common strategy caused it to operate ineffectively in the Bosnian war, resulting in what Toje (2008) would define as a consensus-expectations gap. Toje (2008, p. 122) describes how EU-capabilities in terms of resources and instruments have grown since the 1990s, but that the capacity to overcome dissent and reach consensus is underdeveloped. Although the position of the High Representative was strengthened in 2009 (Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013, p. 1320), reaching consensus among member states remains challenging, which makes this variable relevant to discuss. Another author, Helwig (2013, p. 251), explains that EU's capability to act is a function of the political will of member states. As long as the political willingness to activate existing capabilities is missing, the capability-expectations gap cannot be closed.

Another factor was introduced by Tsuruoka (2008), who argued that a 'culture of indifference' can explain the existence of an 'expectations deficit'. Even when capabilities rise, expectations can remain low, resulting in a negative gap. This might be the case when actors disregard each others' importance or priority in external relations, caused by an often long-standing tradition of underestimation and lack of awareness of the other (Tsuruoka, 2008, pp. 115-19). Consequently, low expectations outweigh the full potential of a relationship (Tsuruoka, 2008, p. 109). The indifference culture can be an endogenous and exogenous factor, depending on where this culture persists.

The final factors to be discussed here are exogenous. Lai et al. (2023) describes that external actors can form their own judgements based on their own perception of EU capabilities (p. 467). So, the learning ability of third actors can cause them to lower expectations when capabilities are assessed negatively, which narrows down the gap.

Lastly, international systemic pressure forces the EU to act. Global interdependence and border-crossing issues mean that the Union cannot hide from international challenges, even though the EU may lack the capabilities to respond (Ginsberg, 1999, p. 435). In other words, a capability-expectations gap might persist because the EU does not control the strategic agenda (Toje, 2008, p.139). This is well illustrated by the end of the Cold War, when the demand from eastern Europe towards the EU to provide democracy and stability proved unachievable (Hill, 1993).

**Table 1. List of variables that could explain a capability-expectations gap.**

Explaining...	Variable	Description	Author(s)	Variable type
...Capabilities	Failure to reach consensus	EU states cannot agree on common positions/actions	Dover (2005); Toje (2008)	Endogenous
	Lack of political will	EU states lack the will to employ existing capabilities	Helwig (2013)	Endogenous
...Expectations	Culture of indifference	Parties do not see each other as important	Tsuruoka (2008)	Endo-/exogenous
	Learning ability	External actors adjust their expectations after assessing EU's capabilities	Lai et al. (2023)	Exogenous
	International systemic pressure	Changing global politics and external shocks create pressure on EU to act, regardless of its capabilities	Ginsberg (1999)	Exogenous

<sup>1</sup> Note: This list is not exhaustive, but it covers the most important debates in the CEG literature.

## **Research design**

### ***Case selection***

This paper uses the CEG-framework to investigate the EU-US relationship, which comes down to a single case study. The introduction already touched upon the scientific and societal relevance of such a study. As outlined, the lack of unity among EU member states, especially in the field of security, has caused frustration on the American side and also led to views of the EU as a weak power (Mead, 2004, p. 20). However, both sides of the Atlantic currently recognize the importance of cooperation: Biden's administration described the Union as an indispensable part of the western security system (Smith & Steffenson, 2023, p. 396); and the EU Global Strategy of 2016 also mentioned the value of a solid relationship with the US (European External Action Service, 2016). Consequently, it is worth examining to what extent the gap has closed and the EU has reached actorness, from American perspective. In other words, is the EU regarded as a cohesive and effective partner? Moreover, studying the transatlantic relationship is also relevant for the broader international system, as both actors are leading economic and military powers (Smith & Steffenson, 2023, pp. 381-82).

The analysis is not limited to the current Biden administration, but also takes the Obama (2009-2017) and Trump administrations (2017-2021) into consideration. Each period is analyzed separately. This allows for exposing differences and similarities between the administrations, and for discovering any trends in EU's perceived actorness. It is also relevant to see if the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, as outlined in the literature review, changed EU's perceived capability to take collective decisions.

### ***Data and operationalization***

American expectations towards EU external action and perceptions of EU-capabilities will be measured by looking at press releases, speeches and think tank analysis. Press releases from the White House and U. S. Department of State contain information on the progress of EU-US cooperation in international affairs. To compensate for the diplomatic character of press releases, the data collection also contains speeches from the President, Vice President and Secretary of State. The relevance of studying these official sources lies in the fact that the government ultimately decides on foreign policy and interacts with external parties such as the EU. However, official sources do not always contain

evaluations of EU-capabilities, which is problematic for comparing expectations and capabilities. Besides, politicians' views are often influenced by party lines and are not representative for an entire country. For these reasons, the data collection also includes more objective, elaborate expert analyses from the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington that conducts policy research.

The data is selected by searching for press releases and speeches on the official website of the White House and State Department that mention the relevant EU institutions, but these words need to be used in the context of EU external action. The same is done on the website of Brookings to select expert analyses. Documents are selected over the entire presidential periods, because that increases the number of relevant speeches and diminishes the risks of 'snapshotting', when perceptions and expectations are temporarily influenced by major events (Chaban & Elgström, 2021, pp. 279-80).

An expectation is operationalized as an 'implicit or explicit demand or wish expressed towards the EU', which almost equals the definition in Lai et al. (2023) except for the term 'implicit'. That means, I will also look at latent expectations, because there is otherwise not enough data on expectations. Expectations are implicit when Washington shows its 'confidence' that the Union will live up to its promises; or when both actors sign a cooperation agreement, creating the mutual expectation that both sides adhere to it.

Expectations can be directed towards the EU in general, or to one of its institutions that are active in the field of external relations (i.e., European Commission/EC; European External Action Service/EEAS; Council of the European Union/Council; European Council; High Representative). The analysis is exclusively EU focused: expectations towards individual member states without EU reference are not included. In addition, expectations are categorized into various functions. I use the list of functions in Hill (1993) as a starting point. This list (see Table 2) is adapted to current world politics and can be, in the analysis section, supplemented by other functions. A widely accepted definition of 'function' does not exist, but it can be understood as a 'task' or 'activity' that the EU could perform in international relations.



**Table 2. List of functions that the EU might be expected to perform.**

<b>Function</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Operationalization <i>references to:</i></b>
Providing regional security and prosperity	Stabilizing the European region in economic, political and security terms	Europe; European Neighbourhood Policy; support for Ukraine
Managing world trade	Negotiating trade agreements and making global trade policies	WTO; trade regulations; free trade
Bridge between North and South	EU providing development assistance	Development; Build Back Better World
Counterbalancing China in the balance of power	EU partnering with the US in the global competition against China	Chinese subversion; pressure on China
A global intervenor	Protection of the rules-based order with political, economic or military means	Defending human rights, democracy and multilateralism
Mediator of conflicts	Providing diplomatic assistance to resolve conflicts	Peaceful resolution; negotiations

***Method of analysis***

This paper takes document analysis as the research method. The analytical procedure runs as follows. As described in the theoretical framework, I look at American perceptions of EU-capabilities. Previous qualitative studies on external perceptions, such as Chaban and Holland (2013), Chaban and Elgström (2014) and Lai et al. (2023), took ‘recognition’ and ‘evaluation’ as important dimensions. This paper does the same, resulting in the following questions: “Does the US recognize EU’s capabilities?” and “Is the EU perceived as capable of performing a certain function?”. This boils down to an evaluation of capabilities, which can be positive, negative or neutral.

Subsequently, the analysis asks the question if the function is also expected from the EU. This comparison allows for labelling the capability-expectations gap as positive, negative or non-existent per function. The reasons for distinguishing between multiple functions

is that it gives EU policymakers insight into what exactly is expected from the Union, and in what policy domains a gap exists. It should be noted, however, that the document collection is not sufficient for a detailed assessment of each function in each administration. This would require more data, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

## Analysis

### *Obama administration*

Barack Obama and his administration, beginning in 2009, expressed several expectations towards EU external action. The first Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, emphasized the principle of ‘shared responsibility’, which means that *“each nation must step up to do its part”* (Clinton, 2010). This demand was directed to all alliances, including NATO and the EU. As for the latter, the administration called for closer collaboration between EU states to make the Union stronger, which enhances EU’s capability to deal with internal and external challenges (Kerry, 2016). This is in American interest, because the US regards the EU as an important partner on many global issues, such as climate change and counterterrorism (Kerry, 2016b). Expert analysis also shows the benefit of closer EU-NATO collaboration, as both alliances can complement each other in areas such as antiterrorism (Drozdiak, 2015). The government also encourages these overlapping cooperation mechanisms, with Clinton stating: *“We don’t see those as in opposition, but as complementary”* (Clinton, 2009). Still, when it comes to matters of security, the Obama administration emphasizes the necessity of NATO (Clinton, 2009; Obama, 2016).

These expectations and calls for more collaboration cannot be seen in isolation from the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which raised expectations. The Americans thought that the newly empowered HR could now provide a more clear, decisive European foreign policy, creating opportunities for enhanced cooperation (Alcaro & Shapiro, 2014). Clinton stated: *“And the post-Lisbon EU is developing an expanded global role, and our relationship is growing and changing as a result”* (Clinton, 2010). The EU is specifically expected to perform the functions ‘advancing global energy transition’ (Kerry, 2016b), which is a new function that can be added to the list, and ‘global intervenor’ by protecting the rules-based order with economic and political means (Obama, 2014). Moreover, the EU should join the US in protecting the international order against Chinese subversion, referring to EU’s external task of ‘counterbalancing China’ (Le Corre & Pollack, 2016).

The Obama administration perceives the EU as capable of performing all functions that are mentioned above (Kerry, 2016). John Kerry, Secretary of State from 2013 onward, mentioned for example EU’s diplomatic efforts in the Iran deal: *“I’m deeply grateful to EU High Representative Mogherini and to her predecessor, Lady Cathy Ashton (...) for*

*their help in that effort*” (Kerry, 2016). Earlier during the Obama presidency, Clinton had already recognized EU’s diplomatic capabilities in the Middle East peace talks, and its economic instruments when the EU implemented sanctions against Iran (Clinton, 2010).

However, these positive evaluations stand in stark contrast to negative perceptions of EU’s ability to agree. American views of European unity are strongly influenced by economic and political challenges within the EU. For example, shortly before the United Kingdom held a referendum on leaving the EU, Obama said: *“I wouldn’t describe European unity as in a crisis but I would say it’s under strain”* (Obama, 2016b). He called the financial crisis and migration crisis major challenges that face Europe. Obama also mentioned the visible discord between northern and southern Europe, and that *“at a time of globalization, (...) there is a temptation to want to just pull up the drawbridge”*, referring to growing anti-EU sentiments in Europe (Obama, 2016b). In addition, Kerry points at Brussels’ difficulty in taking collective decisions: *“I hear my fellow foreign ministers from one country or another talk about (...) how difficult it is to sometimes get things through, move fast, get Brussels to make a decision, or they feel imposed upon.”* (Kerry, 2016). Yet European unity is exactly what Washington would like to see, because *“it’s through the strength of those countries coming together that we are able to make good things happen”* (Kerry, 2016b).

Answering subquestion 1, no capability-expectations gap is identified for the functions ‘advancing global energy transition’, ‘global intervenor’ and ‘counterbalancing China’, because EU’s perceived capabilities are in line with American expectations. Still, the Obama administration has low perceptions of EU’s ability to take collective decisions. In general, therefore, the capability-expectations gap has narrowed down since the 2000s but has not disappeared. It now centres around a particular type of gap introduced by Toje (2008), the consensus-expectations gap.

### ***Trump administration***

Trump’s presidency is best characterized as a period of hostility towards the EU. With his description of the Union as a “foe” in the area of trade, and claiming that it was set up to take advantage of the United States, Trump even attacked EU’s very existence (Rettman, 2018; Galindo, 2018). Therefore, very few expectations can be found in the

analyzed materials. Those expectations that are found are non-committal, such as Secretary of State Pompeo's 'invitation' to Europe to defend the international order from Chinese subversion (Pompeo, 2020). As for the rest, the Trump administration seems to worry most about restoring the role of the nation state: *"Is the EU ensuring that the interests of countries and their citizens are placed before those of bureaucrats here in Brussels?"* (Pompeo, 2018).

We should not forget, however, that Trump explicitly and repeatedly demands Europe to contribute more to NATO: *"(...) I have been very, very direct (...) in saying that NATO members must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations"* (Trump, 2017). Yet this expectation is expressed towards NATO members, not specifically to the EU. That is not surprising, given the fact that the EU is perceived as a weak security power and fully dependent on NATO and the US (Stelzenmüller, 2019, pp. 19-20).

The EU is not perceived as a totally incapable actor, as it can potentially perform the functions 'managing world trade', 'counterbalancing China' and 'global intervenor' with its economic, regulatory and normative power (Gewirtz, 2020; Belin & Reinert, 2019). However, the Trump administration just doesn't seem to expect these functions from the EU. This can be explained by Trump's disapproval of multilateralism and his emphasis on national sovereignty (Stelzenmüller, 2019, p. 4), but EU's perceived failure to take collective decisions is also an explanatory factor. Similar to the Obama administration, the Trump government has negative perceptions of European unity and its ability to act collectively. This negative view is illustrated by a comment from Pompeo: *"Not everybody in the EU will share – (...) there'll be two dozen different views, right. This is true on many issues."* (Pompeo, 2020). In addition, populism and deep divides over socio-economic policies within Europe are thought to have a negative impact on EU foreign policy (Belin & Reinert, 2019; Stelzenmüller, 2019, p. 19). Thus, the general assumption in the US is that Washington cannot expect too much from the EU, as long as EU states are not able to overcome these internal challenges and formulate clear policy positions on external action (Brattberg & Taussig, 2020).

Overall, the Trump administration has low expectations of EU's external action. When considering EU's perceived capabilities, experts from Brookings recognize economic and

normative instruments, which they think could enable the EU to perform the functions ‘managing world trade’, ‘counterbalancing China’ and ‘global intervenor’. Therefore, normative instruments should be added to Hill’s (1993) list of capabilities. However, equal to the Obama government, both the Trump administration and experts have low perceptions of EU’s ability to agree. This specific capability, as shown in the previous paragraph, is by the Trump government regarded as crucial to EU’s external action: without this capacity, the EU cannot even meet low expectations, despite its recognized instruments. Therefore, answering subquestion 2, a consensus-expectations gap is identified for the Trump years, because low expectations still exceed perceived EU-capabilities.

### ***Biden administration***

Shortly after Joe Biden’s 2020 election victory, the EC and HR published a ‘new transatlantic agenda’ for cooperation (European Commission, 2020). This was received positively in the US, with Biden claiming that a “*new era of transatlantic cooperation*” had begun after the Trump years (Biden, 2021). Indeed, cooperation in the economic domain has flourished since then. For example, the White House released a joint statement by Biden and EC-President Von der Leyen announcing the creation of a Clean Energy Incentives Dialogue meant for information-sharing, which helps the EU and US in multilateral economic fora (The White House, 2023). It also encourages both actors to “*take steps to avoid any disruptions in transatlantic trade and investment flows*”, and to innovate their own economies and those of developing countries for the transition to green energy. This points at EU’s function ‘advancing global energy transition’. Moreover, the new dialogue creates the (mutual) expectation that the Union performs the function ‘bridge between North and South’, which refers to the provision of development assistance to lower-income countries. Here, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken underlined EU’s efforts within the Build Back Better World initiative, thereby recognizing EU’s capabilities for this function (Blinken, 2022).

With a war raging at the eastern border of the EU since 2022, a prominent aspect of the EU-US relationship is support for Ukraine. Secretary of State Blinken, during a conversation with HR Josef Borrell, spoke about his ambition “*to continue rebuilding*

*Ukraine's energy infrastructure*" and *"to support Ukraine's energy needs"*, together with the EU (Blinken, 2023). He noted that these actions were progressing due to deliveries of the required equipment, which denotes a positive evaluation of EU's technological resources. He also *"very much"* appreciated EU's military assistance to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (Blinken, 2023b). The President repeated this: *"The European Union (...) stepped up with unprecedented commitment to Ukraine, not just in security assistance, ..."* (Biden, 2023). Together with a joint naval exercise under EU flag (U. S. Department of State, 2023), these examples illustrate that the US recognizes the Union's military resources. In addition, Biden had a positive view of EU's ability to agree after the Russian invasion: *"We see the unity among leaders of nations, a more unified Europe, a more unified West"* (Biden, 2022). Overall, these quotes represent a positive evaluation of EU's capabilities in its function as 'providing regional security and prosperity'.

Although its military resources were recognized, the EU is nowhere described as a military power. This implies that the EU is not deemed capable of wielding its 'use of force' instrument. However, Blinken articulates his ambition to strengthen the EU-US alliance after some years in which *"trust has been shaken"* (Blinken, 2021). He explicitly demands that allies do their fair share of the burden and build capacity, although this is not directly aimed at the EU. According to Blinken, deepening EU-US collaboration hinges on issues like cybersecurity and health security; military security isn't mentioned. In this area, NATO is still given the most attention. This is also visible in the function 'counterbalancing China', as part of a broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Although Blinken urges the EU to deliver this function, he doesn't seem to expect a military contribution. Security tasks in the Indo-Pacific would rather come from alliances such as AUKUS and the 'Quad' (Blinken, 2021; Blinken, 2022b). Washington seems to rely here on the economic (sanctions) and normative capabilities of the Union, which are evaluated positively. As the Secretary of State put it: *"When the EU and the United States are working together, we have a tremendous capacity to lead the world. Together our economies represent about 45 percent of world GDP. When we're acting in concert we can move others, motivate others, ..."* (Blinken, 2022).

To sum up, the Biden administration expects the EU to perform the functions 'providing regional security and prosperity', 'managing world trade', 'advancing global energy

transition' and 'bridge between North and South'. In all functions, the EU is perceived as capable, with Biden and Blinken mentioning EU's military, economic and technological resources. Contrary to the Obama and Trump administrations, Washington holds nowadays positive views of EU's ability to agree. Consequently, no capability-expectations gap was identified for these functions. As for 'counterbalancing China', the EU was expected to support US policy, but this expectation did not apply to military tasks. Since EU's capabilities are recognized in the economic and diplomatic sphere but not in the military sphere, no gap exists for this function. Overall, the answer to subquestion 3 is that, given the results, no capability-expectations gap exists during the Biden administration.



## Conclusions

This thesis used the framework of the capability-expectations gap to address the question: *Is there a gap between EU's capabilities and American expectations towards EU external action, and how can this gap be explained?* This is relevant to know, because a gap can damage EU's credibility as a global actor and partner of the US, when hopes are not fulfilled.

A document analysis explored the three most recent presidential administrations. During the Obama administration, EU's capabilities matched American expectations, but Washington still had negative perceptions of EU's ability to agree. Therefore, the EU-US relationship still suffered from a gap during these years compared to the 2000s, but now in the form of a consensus-expectations gap. This can be explained by EU's perceived failure to reach consensus on both internal and external policies. Yet European unity was exactly what the US wanted to see, as it regarded the EU a valuable partner on global issues. The latter cannot be said from the Trump administration, whose cynical attitude towards the EU resulted in low expectations. These low expectations can be explained by Trump's aversion to multilateralism, but also by a perceived failure to reach consensus. The analysis showed that, if the EU was not able to agree on common external policies and solve its own domestic problems, the Union was perceived as not even capable of meeting low expectations. Therefore, the consensus-expectations gap continued during the Trump years.

The analysis of the first two years of the Biden presidency, however, has demonstrated that no capability-expectations gap seems to exist at this moment. The explanation for this is twofold. First, EU's success in reaching consensus on common positions and actions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine produced positive American perceptions of EU's capabilities, which matched expectations. Second, it seems that Washington has adapted its expectations of EU's security role to what the EU can deliver, namely economic and normative capabilities instead of military power. This is consistent with Lai et al. (2023) who showed that external actors have learning ability.

In a broader perspective, the findings also offer some interesting insights. The results show that the US regards EU's internal crises and disunity as problematic for EU's

actorness, that is, being seen as a cohesive and effective international actor that can be relied upon by the US. That means that Washington's perceptions of EU's internal cohesiveness and problem-solving ability are crucial for the expectations that it expresses towards EU's external action. Furthermore, the results show that the Lisbon Treaty reforms were not enough to deliver the high expectations that the treaty created in the US (Alcaro & Shapiro, 2014). This is true for the Obama and Trump administrations, during which EU's perceived ability to agree did not improve. EU's diplomatic efforts through the newly created EEAS, however, were received positively.

In the introduction, it was mentioned that the capability-expectations gap was largest in the security domain. The results suggest that the gap in this area, from American perspective, has been narrowed, but this is more due to lowered expectations than improved capabilities. The Biden administration is the first American cabinet that begins to recognize EU's military resources, but it does not perceive the Union as an actor that can use military force itself. This is not explicitly expected from all three administrations either. NATO is still perceived as more important: high expectations are expressed towards NATO states, not the EU as an organization. Yet too low expectations may cause more harm than good: it diminishes EU's importance as an external actor and decreases incentives to improve foreign policy (Dekanozishvili, 2020, p. 300; Tsuruoka, 2008, p. 111).

Nevertheless, this thesis has its limitations. The data sources that were used do not give insight into what happens 'behind the scenes' in politics, which may lead to an incomplete picture of what the Americans demand from the EU. Second, the amount of data was not enough to provide a complete picture of all functions. The lack of references to certain functions may indicate that these were not expected, but future studies should include more data to examine this. Third, this paper looked at perceptions of capabilities, but it cannot explain how these perceptions emerged. Future studies could address this and try to formulate recommendations on how the EU can change negative perceptions. Lastly, the results for the Biden administration suggest that the gap has been closed, but the war in Ukraine might have influenced the results, because the US and EU had a shared interest in showing unity and resolve against Russia. It would be naive to assume that long-standing divisions within the EU over issues like migration and socio-economic policies are solved, and the war might even create new divides (Krastev & Leonard, 2023).

Therefore, further research should clarify to what extent the EU has actually improved its capability to take collective decisions.

This case study has demonstrated the continued relevance of the CEG framework in evaluating relationships in international politics. The results give EU policymakers knowledge of how their external policies are perceived in a partner country, which capabilities are underdeveloped and what is expected. Especially EU's ability to agree is by the US perceived as crucial to the Union's actorness: without this capability, the EU is not seen as a genuine international actor. This brings with it an important implication: the EU should continue to work on building the instruments that help to overcome internal divisions, reach consensus, and speak with one voice to its external partners.

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