



Organised Multilateralism: The EU in Multilateral Fora

MERCURY Fourth Policy Brief (January 2012)

Executive summary

This policy brief summarises findings from a research programme on multilateralism in the 21st century.¹ It assesses the EU's performance in a multilateral context by focusing on major international organisations and informal groups of which it is part. The level of the EU's ambitions and cohesiveness also depends on the issue at stake. Our research programme has explored the EU's approach to formal and informal multilateralism in different fields: conflict resolution, crisis management, energy, migration, trade, and climate change.²

1. Does the EU's participation in formal multilateral organisations contribute to their effective functioning?

The EU's participation in formal organisations and its commitment to multilateralism translates into the promotion of international law and has often acted as a stimulus for reforming the structures and membership of these organizations in order to make them more effective and representative. However, such support has sometimes been problematic and/or partial, given the difficulty of identifying the EU's priorities among the different approaches of its member states.

As for the EU's relations with the United Nations, one MERCURY study³ underlines that, on the one hand, the EU recognises the UN as the main guarantor of international peace and security; on the

¹ MERCURY is a 3 year, (approximately) €2 million EU Framework programme VII-funded investigation into the EU's contribution to multilateralism. It is led by the University of Edinburgh and includes participation from the University of Köln, Cambridge, Pretoria, Sciences Po Paris, Charles (Prague), and Fudan (Shanghai) Universities, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and the Institute of International Affairs (IAI) in Rome. All the papers mentioned in this brief are available at: <http://www.mercury-fp7.net>.

² See the following MERCURY papers: *Trade and climate change: harnessing European multilateralism for Africa's development*, by Brendan Vickers; *EU trade policy vis-à-vis China: Cooperation in the interest of multilateralism*; *The European Union and multilateralism in the Mediterranean: Energy and migration policy*, by Silvia Colombo and Nur Abdelkhalik.

³ Nicoletta Pirozzi, *The European Union and the Reform of the United Nations: Towards a More Effective Security Council?*, MERCURY E-paper no. 13, November 2011, http://www.mercury-fp7.net/fileadmin/user_upload/E-paper_series_no13_final.pdf.

other, the EU depicts itself as a regional player, which 'should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world'. While the EU can present itself as a role model for effective multilateralism, it should lead more often by example at the UN. But the divergent positions of the Union's member states and the multiple representation of the EU at the UN has so far inhibited the development of a unitary stance at the UN Security Council and of a single perspective on its reform.

A comparative analysis of key missions and diplomatic initiatives in the field of crisis management conducted in the framework of MERCURY⁴ further highlights the strengths and weaknesses on the ground of the much-heralded 'choice of multilateralism' underpinning cooperation between the EU and the UN. The EU strives to support the UN and operate legitimately within its framework and mandate; but it also wishes to carve out an autonomous space for its role in multilateral crisis management, be it through military means or through diplomatic strategies. Moreover, institutional cooperation at the top-level has not always resulted in good coordination on the ground, thus undermining 'effective multilateralism'.

2. Does the EU's role contribute to the transformation of ad hoc, informal or unconventional forms of multilateralism into a more durable and effective form of multilateralism?

The EU's role in ad hoc or informal multilateral fora can be assessed against its contribution to the emergence of agreed rules and institutionalised dynamics of cooperation, as well as its capacity to generate ideas and shape strategies. The EU has sometimes had only limited success if at all due to a mixture of institutional fragmentation and policy incoherence.

One MERCURY paper⁵ has analysed whether the 'Middle East Quartet' has become an effective multilateral forum in the field of conflict resolution in the Middle East, and to what extent the EU has contributed to the realisation of this goal. The paper argues that the Quartet has not affirmed itself as either a genuinely multilateral or effective mediation forum. Its activities have reflected the EU's unsuccessful attempts to frame American initiatives within a multilateral setting, or the US's successful attempts at providing a multilateral – and largely EU – cover for unilateral actions. The Quartet, and the EU's role in it, is not an endeavour without value. But to play a useful role, the EU should seek to enlarge it to new international and regional players and reshape it as a consultation forum to establish a renewed international consensus on the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is an interesting case of the potential pitfalls of ad hoc multilateralism and the EU's role in them, illustrating the extreme difficulty of moving major conflicts forward even by flexible means.

In the economic domain, an attempt to scrutinise the EU's role to facilitate fiscal multilateralism in the framework of the G20⁶ presents two modes of leadership: one of structural and one of informational leadership. The first is concerned with agenda control and the potential to exert leadership as an 'architect of change'. The second identifies leadership as a means of communicating key ideas and interpretations, so as to spark policy rethinking. Building on this distinction, this paper argues that the EU's leadership has been much stronger on the 'structural

⁴ Lorenzo Fioramonti and Gerrit Olivier, *The EU and Multilateral Crisis Management: Assessing Cooperation and Coordination with the UN*, MERCURY Joint Paper.

⁵ Nathalie Tocci, *The EU, the Middle East Quartet and (In)effective Multilateralism*, MERCURY E-paper no. 9, June 2011, http://www.mercury-fp7.net/fileadmin/user_upload/E_paper_no9_2011_final.pdf.

⁶ Charlotte Rommerskirchen, *Fiscal Multilateralism in Times of the Great Recession*, MERCURY E-paper no. 15, December 2011, http://www.mercury-fp7.net/fileadmin/user_upload/E-paper_no15_Dec2011.pdf.

leg' than on the 'informational leg'. Thus, its position has been weak in terms of championing fiscal multilateralism, where reform cannot be driven through by the exercise of power. For both modes of leadership, however the EU is likely to be most successful when acting in tandem with one of its own member states in the context of the G20.

On the basis of this analysis, it is possible to identify some maxims for the EU's action in formal and informal multilateral contexts:

- 1) the EU's contribution to effective multilateralism varies according to different frameworks of actions, namely formal and informal institutional settings, and different policy sectors;
- 2) the EU's preferred role in formal multilateral organisations is focused on strengthening international legal frameworks and campaigning for the internal reform of such organizations;
- 3) the EU's impact on informal multilateral settings is dependent on its degree of centrality to their particular functions and influence on their progressive institutionalisation, as well as on its own comparative advantages.

The enlargement to an EU of 27 has often made it more difficult to act coherently or strategically within multilateral settings. At the same time, the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty has offered the EU a number of instruments and principles to act as a unitary and effective entity on the international stage. This opportunity has not yet been seized.

The EU has been attempting to develop a workable concept of effective multilateralism and the strategic priorities connected to it. The EU's efforts have been hampered by its own internal dynamics, with member states still attached to different approaches, and the consequent difficulty of projecting its own identity and values vis-à-vis other international players.

In practice the EU has been most effective where it possesses developed policies and instruments of its own, as in trade and development. It has been far less effective in the fields of crisis management and conflict resolution, mirroring its far less coherent and unitary positions in these latter domains. In other words, the EU's ability to promote effective multilateralism in different policy sectors is directly correlated with its ability to act as a coherent and unitary actor in such sectors.