



Multilateralism in Practice: Key Regions and Partners

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Multilateralism is the European Union's (EU) preferred way of action as well as its ultimate objective in relations with other regions and partners. Both the Treaty and in the European Security Strategy make clear that EU's history serves as the key argument in its effort to create a world order based on rules. In order to be effective, multilateral institutions, regimes and their member states must be ready to act when the rules are broken.

In reality, however, effective multilateralism remains a distant goal in EU's relations with other regions. The research conducted by the MERCURY¹ consortium in Work Package III "Multilateralism in Practice: Key Regions and Partners" shows that the EU does approach its partners and the target regions multilaterally sometimes, but behaves bilaterally or even unilaterally as often too. There are a number of interconnected issues that hamper the EU's multilateral efforts and where the EU needs to improve its performance if it wants to become more effective.

1. First, the form must not overshadow the subject matter. The EU claims to prefer multilateral solutions and in many cases it really engages with various partners on the ground. What is crucial, however, is not how many partners get engaged, but whether a solution to the problem in question is found. The EU must be aware of what should be achieved through multilateral arrangements and steer the negotiations accordingly. If the EU does not know where it is going it can never get there.
2. Second and related, the EU needs to understand the situation on the ground in order to define its objectives correctly. A wrong assessment leads to wrong priorities. This is true to resolving conflicts, where the EU must rightly identify the conflict parties and their motives as the case of Georgia shows; or to negotiations with partners on possible cooperation in multilateral fora. And also to relations with

¹ MERCURY is a three year, (approximately) €2 million EU Framework Programme 7-funded investigation into the EU's contribution to multilateralism. It is led by the University of Edinburgh and includes participation from the Universities 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 (Rome). The MERCURY Policy Briefs and Working papers are available at: <http://www.mercury-fp7.net>.

other regional actors, which might use the same words, but mean different things than the EU as the example of regional integration in East Asia suggests.

3. Third, the EU must delimit its role and the role of the member states more clearly. If the member states do not use the EU as the primary channel of their engagement, the EU will remain only one among many European actors, as in the case of Darfur. A plurality of European voices blurs messages and fails to deliver effective solutions. Moreover, the EU and its member states will remain vulnerable in negotiations because their partners will make use of the EU's divisions and sideline the EU as the EU-China climate change talks show. However, the EU knows how to use this tactics itself against even weaker collective players, such as the ACP countries, as in the Economic Partnership Agreements.
4. Fourth, the EU needs to agree on its approach itself, together with its member states. The case of EU Neighbour Policy shows how ineffective European assistance may be if not coordinated properly and if not supported by all member states. At the same time, convergence within the EU does not necessarily guarantee a multilateral - not to mention effective - action externally. It might be a precondition, but it needs more than internal agreement as the example of energy policy suggests. Moreover, the EU must not confuse internal negotiations with multilateralism, as sometimes in case of Bosnia. Reaching a compromise within the EU may take a lot of time, but multilateralism begins only when the EU as a whole reaches out towards other, external partners. Partners should not feel that the negotiations have already been concluded.

Three general recommendations can be drawn from the MERCURY Work Package III:

- The EU must offer solutions based on good understanding of the situation on the ground, positions and motives of its partners and the role of individual actors.
- The EU's engagement must be solution-driven, not form-driven. At the same time, the partners should not be left behind in the search for the solution.
- The EU must have clear understanding of its own priorities, clear and streamlined representation and better coordination between the EU and the member states to play an active and useful role in building a better world through effective multilateralism.

The following papers have been produced in MERCURY Work Package III:

- G. Romano, 2011, The EU-China Partnership on Climate Change: Bilateralism Begetting Multilateralism in Promoting a Climate Change Regime?, MERCURY E-paper No. 8.
- L. Fioramonti, 2011, The European Union Development Strategy in Africa: the Economic Partnership Agreements as a Case of aggressive Multilateralism, MERCURY E-paper No. 10.
- D. Camroux, 2011, "Chasing Pavements": The East Asia Summit and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Discursive Regionalism as Disguised Multilateralism, MERCURY E-paper No. 11.
- Y. Bo, G. Romano, and Z. Chen, 2011, The EU's Engagement with China in Building a Multilateral Climate Change Regime: Uneasy Process Towards an Effective Approach, MERCURY E-paper No. 12.
- T. Weiss, N. Mikhelidze, and I. Šlosarčík, 2011, Multilateralism as Envisaged? Assessing European Union's Engagement in Conflict Resolution in the Neighbourhood, MERCURY E-paper No. 14.
- Ľ. Debnárová, V. Řiháčková, S. Colombo, and L. March, 2012, The EU Neighbourhood and Comparative Modernisation, MERCURY E-paper No. 17.
- S. Colombo and N. Abdelkhalik, 2012, The European Union and Multilateralism in the Mediterranean: Energy and Migration Policy, MERCURY E-paper No. 18.
- M. Schoeman, 2012 (forthcoming), Multilateralism in practice: an exploration of international involvement in solving the crisis in Darfur.