



The EU and Multilateralism

MERCURY Policy Brief (Spring 2010)

Executive Summary

This policy brief summarises findings from a programme of research into multilateralism in the 21st century.¹ It investigates the notion of ‘effective multilateralism’, which the European Union explicitly seeks to promote. Its main conclusions are that: 1) multilateralism is still defined in multiple, different ways, particularly in different parts of the world; 2) all major powers seek multilateralism only as one strategy amongst many; 3) demand for effective multilateralism now extends beyond trade and security to climate change, disease control and migration. The EU shows consistency in the principles it promotes in all of these policy areas. But it has yet to develop a coherent doctrine of multilateralism.

Multilateralism is a poor, ugly duckling amongst ideas used in the study of international politics. A recent investigation by researchers at the University of Edinburgh² finds that – compared to anarchy, sovereignty, or interdependence – multilateralism is defined in a variety of different ways, particularly in different parts of the world. One result is uncertainty about whether the EU can lead in building ‘effective multilateralism’. A more general result is confusion.

Why such confusion? One possible answer is that multilateralism has gone through many changes since the post-1945 settlement which gave birth to the UN and other organisations. Understandings and practices of multilateralism are shaped both by conflict, such as the Cold War and the War on Terror, and by ongoing forces of globalisation. Multilateralism can be highly politicized – Coalitions of the Willing – and can be highly technocratic, as illustrated by the cases of trade or regulation of the internet. Moreover, it is not always clear that regional integration is compatible with multilateralism as a goal of wider international cooperation.

¹ MERCURY is a 3 year, (approximately) two million euro 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 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). All the papers mentioned in this brief are available at: <http://www.mercury-fp7.net>.

² C Bouchard and J Peterson, *Conceptualising Multilateralism*, MERCURY Working Paper D10

On the other hand, multilateralism may simply be a ‘weapon of the weak’: states that seek multilateral agreements lack the power to impose solutions to international problems that serve their own interests. Most EU states, especially its many small ones, could be categorised as such. By the same token, many claim that the United States (US) simply ‘does not do’ multilateralism.

Europe’s own internal experience of multilateralism might be unique and impossible to replicate. Yet, there is growing evidence that other regions of the world, particularly Asia, are looking to the EU for lessons about how multilateral cooperation can solve transnational problems. The 2008-10 financial crisis suddenly made the Group of 20 (G20) – a previously obscure configuration with (still) no permanent staff – the main forum for debates about how to restore global economic growth.

Multilateralism may be most clearly understood when we consider what it is *not*. It is not unilateralism, bilateralism or (arguably) inter-regionalism. To some extent, it is institutionalised. It may involve non-states, such as the EU, firms, or non-governmental organisations. Thus: *Multilateralism is three or more actors engaging in voluntary and (more or less) institutionalised cooperation, with rules that apply (more or less) equally to all.*

An investigation by a team of German, Chinese and Czech researchers into how great powers view multilateralism finds much more continuity than change over time in the diplomatic strategies of the US, China and EU.³ All seek multilateralism selectively when it suits their interests. Even the EU, which presents itself as a champion of multilateralism, pursues bilateral ‘strategic partnerships’ with Brazil, China and India, amongst others. Despite differences in the interests, capabilities, and political systems of great powers, their diplomatic strategies tend to converge considerably more than they diverge.

Is there increasing *demand* for multilateralism in our globalised, interdependent, 21st century world? Research by a team of scholars at the University of Cambridge finds that the search for multilateral solutions now extends beyond trade and security to new areas such as climate change, disease control and migration.⁴ In all of these policy sectors, the EU shows consistency in the principles it promotes as it seeks multilateral solutions. The EU has already developed certain principles of "effective multilateralism" as elaborated in the European Security Strategy of 2003. But it has yet to develop a coherent *doctrine* of multilateralism: a common point of reference about the rules that should guide the construction of multilateral solutions. In short, Europe is in a strong position to help build multilateralism. But it must first itself agree how to do it.

³ N Klein *et al*, *Diplomatic Strategies of Major Powers: Competing Patterns of International Relations?*, MERCURY Working Paper D12.

⁴ G Edwards *et al*, *The Evolving ‘Doctrine of Multilateralism in the 21st Century*, MERCURY Working Paper D13