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Special issue on the EU and multilateralism

This SCOOP special issue takes a thematic approach to **the EU and multilateralism** and presents a 'cluster' of three projects that have developed distinct but complementary insights on this theme.

One of the most visible and complex features of the EU is its changing role and competencies as an international actor. Thus, a thematic activity on 'Europe in the World' was included in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) research programme under FP7 to understand, assess and, at times, anticipate the developments on the ground.

A key element of the EU's action and discourse as an international actor is its commitment to 'multilateralism', and the following three research projects have addressed it in empirical, theoretical and normative terms: **MERCURY** (Multilateralism and the EU in the new global order), **EU GRASP** (Changing multilateralism: the EU as a global-regional actor in security and peace), and **EU4Seas** (The EU and sub-regional multilateralism in Europe's Sea Basins: neighbourhood, enlargement and multilateral cooperation).

These projects shared some activities, including a joint policy conference held in Brussels on 7 October 2011. This was part of the broader effort of the SSH programme to link academic and practical knowledge, and discuss research findings with decision-makers in EU institutions and other relevant policy communities.

While this special issue only reports on these three projects, other projects in the SSH programme have also contributed insights on multilateralism. For example, when addressing global economic governance (project PEGGED: Politics, economics and global governance), the relations between multilateralism and 'multipolarism' (project GREEN: Global re-ordering: evolution through European networks), or the relations between the EU and global regulatory frameworks on specific issues (e.g. project PRIV-WAR on Regulating the privatisation of war: the role of the EU in assuring compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law).

Given the continuous changes, and, at times, turbulence, in our globalised economies and societies, research on how the EU tackles such changes, and relates to other actors and 'powers' is an essential part of the EU's research 'Horizon'.

What is multilateralism?

Multilateralism is the lifeblood of the European Union and the means to achieving global peace, stability and prosperity, the cornerstones of EU policy. The concept of multilateralism is, in its 'minimalist' definition, a minimum of three or more states working together to tackle common issues, such as trade, financial and economic instability, terrorism, or climate change. But multilateralism throughout history has not been easy to attain and even its relevance for modern global politics is complex. It is currently under intense debate in the academic and political communities. ([more...](#))

Multilateralism and the EU

The EU has been championing multilateralism in areas ranging from climate change to security and trade, and such commitment is also enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. It is therefore necessary that the EU evaluates its successes and failures, past and present, in order to be an effective global multilateral player now and in the future. With this in mind, the MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects each assessed a different aspect of the EU's contribution to multilateralism, each drawing on a multidisciplinary spectrum of law, economics, international relations and political science. ([more...](#))

Main Findings: Obstacles and opportunities

MERCURY - In general terms, the EU does not follow a uniform approach to multilateralism. Many different strategies have been employed, depending on the actors involved and the specific policy issue. ([more...](#))

New direction needed for multilateralism

MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects highlight a number of ways for the EU to be more effective in its approach to multilateralism. Drawing on extensive empirical and theoretical work, the researchers have identified issues that EU policy makers should consider. These are briefly summarised below and the full text can be accessed at: http://www.eu4seas.eu/images/stories/policy_brief_eu_and_multilateralism.pdf ([more...](#))

Where does the EU go from here?

To bridge the gap and preserve its place on the world stage, the EU needs to ensure that it not only keeps abreast of the changing playing field, but that it is also a *driver* of those changes. Because the concept of multilateralism itself is changing, the findings of the MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects indicate that the *practice* of multilateralism within modern global politics is extremely challenging. ([more...](#))

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↑ What is multilateralism?

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How has multilateralism changed?

The last few centuries have seen many parts of the world emerge from colonial rule, partitioning the globe into a multitude of independent states. However, the emergence of the United Nations in 1945 sparked a growing trend towards the formation of regional and international institutions, set up to unite countries with common interests, thereby offering

protection and strength to its members. Since then, such institutions have been multiplying and include a strong legal dimension: in the roughly 30 years after 1970, the number of international treaties more than tripled, leading to a significant increase (by about two-thirds) in international institutions.

Essentially, the world is moving from a system of states to a system of regions (ranging from ASEAN to AU or MERCOSUR) experiencing different levels of integration. These regions, of which the EU is the 'oldest' and deepest in terms of competence, have come to be major players in shaping modern politics. This is partly because many modern challenges are global in nature and therefore require global solutions.

From a size perspective, and given its supranational competences, the EU can be considered a key regional player and has pledged its commitment to multilateralism since its establishment, and more specifically, through the 2003 Security Strategy and the Lisbon Treaty. But just like any other multilateral actor, the EU's practical understanding of multilateralism must continually adapt to accommodate the changing playing field. So the question is *how successfully does the EU engage in, and promote, effective multilateralism?* The answer requires an understanding of the challenges to be addressed 'multilaterally' as well as the dynamic relations between the EU's internal and external policies and competences.

What are the challenges?

One of the main challenges facing EU policy makers is how to approach issues in a multilateral way while remaining loyal to EU values as well as economic and security interests. This has often been considered a question of priorities. The *internal* complexity of the EU, as a grouping of 27 Member States, can also make it very difficult to arrive at a common *internal* agreement to reflect *externally* in the form of foreign policy. Independent Member States naturally tend to prioritise solutions that protect their own interests.

As a regional power, the EU also has a significant opportunity to act fairly towards external regions and international organisations. However, the EU is also not the only multilateral actor in Europe. Many international organisations overlap, such as the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN), leading to an added level of complexity in tackling European and global issues.

So what's new in 2012?

The MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects represent three distinct, multidisciplinary initiatives funded by the EU's 7th Framework Programme. Each project has its own sets of goals and methodologies, but the common denominator has been to explore and evaluate how effectively the EU delivers on its commitment to promote and engage in effective multilateralism (see Article 2 of this special issue).

A key aspect of all three projects has been to provide clear messages to policy makers, as well as to contribute to the academic understanding of multilateralism. In addition to the individual findings of each project, as described in Article 3 of this special issue, the researchers of all three projects propose a set of joint policy recommendations (Article 4). In a future-oriented perspective, the final article (Article 5) looks in more detail at the changing face of multilateralism and the challenges and opportunities this presents for the EU.

↑ Multilateralism and the EU

The EU has been championing multilateralism in areas ranging from climate change to security and trade, and such commitment is also enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. It is therefore necessary that the EU evaluates its successes and failures, past and present, in

order to be an effective global multilateral player now and in the future. With this in mind, the MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects each assessed a different aspect of the EU's contribution to multilateralism, each drawing on a multidisciplinary spectrum of law, economics, international relations and political science.

The objective of the **MERCURY** project was to explore the conceptual and historical understanding of multilateralism and to ask specifically *how successfully the EU has engaged in international multilateral efforts over the last ten years*. An open-access database of EU legal instruments in external policy fields (DATEX) was developed in this regard.

An important aspect of this was to look at how the internal organisation and legal framework of the EU can help or hinder its effectiveness in dealing with external partners. The MERCURY researchers, a consortium of academics from Europe, China and South Africa, looked specifically at EU relations with African and Asian partners in relation to trade, national security and environmental policies.

The **EU-GRASP** project complemented the goals of MERCURY by identifying the lessons that can be learned from past and present experiences of multilateralism (global, regional and inter-regional), to develop a forward looking perspective for strengthening the role of the EU as a multilateral actor in peace and security.

The EU-GRASP researchers – coming from various European countries, as well as Canada, China, Israel and South Africa - analysed close to 30 case study areas, with specific reference to peace and security issues. This incorporated three 'traditional' security issues: conflict resolution, weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, and three issues that have become 'securitised' (accorded security status) more recently: migration, energy security and climate change, and severe human rights abuses.

The question the researchers asked was *how successful has the EU been in working together with other global actors to deal with each security issue*. The EU-GRASP researchers also looked, in detail, at how the concept of multilateralism is evolving and what this means for the changing role of the EU in the future.

While the main policy objectives of MERCURY and EU-GRASP were to assess how effective the EU is in *engaging* in external multilateralism, the complementary objective of **EU4Seas** was to evaluate how effective the EU is in *promoting* multilateralism within itself and its close neighbours in Europe.

The researchers focused on a particular form of multilateralism, known as 'sub-regionalism'. This is the cooperation between geographically or politically linked countries that form a subset of a larger regional space, in this case Europe. Many European sub-regions emerged in the 1990s in response to common challenges faced by neighbouring nations after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, marking the end of the Cold War. The primary research question for the EU4Seas researchers was *how has EU policy reinforced or hindered the formation, stability and influence of these smaller forms of multilateral cooperation within Europe and neighbouring countries*.

The EU4Seas team, comprising eight partners from Estonia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Iceland, Italy and France, selected four sub-regions centred on closed seas; the Baltic, Black, Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. Closed seas provide an interesting context as the presence of a common interest or resource can prove a unifying factor or, at the other extreme, the cause of political tensions between bordering states.

In each sub-region, the researchers evaluated the extent and effectiveness of sub-regional cooperation across four key policy areas: energy and transport, politics and security, the four freedoms (movement of people, goods, services and capital) and environment and maritime issues.

The question of how effectively the EU deals with pre-existing and emerging multilateral networks inside Europe and on its periphery is critical to how confidently the EU projects itself to external partners. This is an important connection between the three projects.

Specifically, whether sub-regional multilateralism within Europe is a source of stability or instability can help understand the strengths and weaknesses of the EU's participation as a single actor on a global stage, which are, in turn, the aims of the MERCURY and EU-GRASP projects.

↑ Main Findings: Obstacles and opportunities

MERCURY

In general terms, the EU does not follow a uniform approach to multilateralism. Many different strategies have been employed, depending on the actors involved and the specific policy issue.

Overall the EU's foreign and security policies have been characterised by significant multilateral approaches. The number of joint actions with a multilateral legal basis has been significantly higher than the number for which multilateral implementation was foreseen. This suggests that the EU is more active in taking account and strengthening international law than in pooling resources with other international actors.

EU trade policy has maintained a very strong, unified position within multilateral fora, such as the World Trade Organisation. However, the EU has been criticised for acting less normatively than it should with respect to externalising its internal market-related policies, for example by possessing the power to impose a partial or complete cease in trading in order to coerce states into changing regulatory standards. On the other hand, it is also argued that the role of the EU as a 'market power' may be its most effective tool in creating multilateral partnerships.

The main findings of the MERCURY project are published in peer-reviewed e-papers and policy briefs, available to download from <http://www.mercury-fp7.net/>. The open-access DATEX database on EU legal instruments in external policy fields is also available from: http://www.mercury-p7.net/fileadmin/user_upload/Mercury_DATEX_cfsp_trade_environment_Aug2011.pdf

EU-GRASP

As part of the EU-GRASP research, a series of in-depth mapping studies explored the current state of EU bilateral relations (i.e. with China, Israel, Pakistan, North Korea, Russia and Afghanistan), region-to-region relations (with Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Mediterranean) and global relations (i.e. with the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Criminal Court (ICC)). These served as inroads to deeper analysis within the EU-GRASP project from which the following conclusions were formulated:

- The concept and the practice of multilateralism are undergoing a profound set of changes towards a more 'open' system, referred to as 'Multilateralism 2.0' and characterised by cooperation between many different types of actor (regional, national, sub-regional and non-governmental).
- There has been a shift in the number and type of issues that are classed as security issues, to include environmental as well as social issues, (e.g. migration, food security and climate change). Some security threats also present opportunities for social and technological development, such as global climate change, food production, cyber security and international migration.
- Framing foreign policy around security can skew the implementation of other EU policies, such as development and aid policy, which has appeared inconsistent at times.

- The EU has struggled to unify Member States over foreign policy towards weapons of mass destruction, a particularly difficult issue for the EU.

EU-GRASP has output 35 peer-reviewed papers and policy briefs, and two special issues in academic journals. These and the series of mapping studies mentioned above are all available to download from: <http://www.eugrasp.eu/>

EU4Seas

Sub-regionalism and multilateralism have the potential to mutually reinforce or weaken each other. The strengthening and unifying impact of internal cooperation can only serve to increase the power and legitimacy of the EU on the world stage. However, failing to promote effective sub-regionalism is likely to undermine its credibility as a global multilateral player in the eyes of other international actors.

- EU policies have a mixed record, sometimes strengthening and other times weakening smaller forms of cooperation within European sub-regions. In some cases, the EU has achieved its aim of promoting sub-regional cooperation by financially supporting the institutions that keep sub-regional entities alive. For example, the Baltic Sea cooperation has helped the European integration of Poland and the Baltic states. However, in the Mediterranean and the Caspian Seas, EU policies promoting sub-regional cooperation have been unsuccessful in overcoming legal disagreements and internal conflict.
- In some other cases, EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies have made sub-regional cooperation harder, not easier. For example, the step-by-step inclusion of formerly peripheral countries into the EU, has physically divided some sub-regions, restricting free movement and creating political tensions between, for example, Russia and the rest of the Baltic Sea sub-region. Therefore, despite efforts to promote sub-regionalism as a cohesive influence, the external boundary of the EU has become a major divisive factor in Europe.
- The attraction of joining the EU and the commitment to complying with EU policies tends to outweigh loyalties towards a nation's direct neighbours. Sub-regional cooperation tends to falter as a result, no longer playing a part in political decision-making.

The interviews from more than 40 countries that make up the EU4Seas dataset are freely available from: <http://www.eu4seas.eu/>. A number of project reports, newsletters and other dissemination materials are also available to download.

↑ New direction needed for multilateralism

MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects highlight a number of ways for the EU to be more effective in its approach to multilateralism. Drawing on extensive empirical and theoretical work, the researchers have identified issues that EU policy makers should consider. These are briefly summarised below and the full text can be accessed at: http://www.eu4seas.eu/images/stories/policy_brief_eu_and_multilateralism.pdf.

- **The EU must adapt** to the redistribution of power and the emergence of multilateral actors of varying sizes, levels of resources and experience. More robust forms of multilateralism are needed to deliver on urgent global challenges, such as climate change, the financial crisis and maritime security
- **Be more flexible and innovative** in multilateral engagement. The dream of a world of regions modelled on the EU can result in a tendency to focus on institutional questions at the expense of a strategic vision. This is particularly problematic in the

case of issues or regions where institutions are absent or fail.

- **Strengthen internal capabilities** by developing mechanisms to allow greater cohesion and a more unified decision-making process. For the EU to become a more effective multilateral player, it needs to focus on using the combined capabilities of EU institutions and EU national diplomats, and reducing the time spent negotiating amongst EU Member States.
- **A unified voice** for the EU is needed. The EU has a role to play in solving many global challenges, but the EU will be most effective if speaking with a single, strong voice in, for example, the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, G20 and other multilateral fora. This argument needs to be made to both politicians and citizens to secure greater acceptance of the role of the EU by its Member States.
- **The long-term interest** of the EU can be served by promoting multilateral frameworks, but the EU should not define its interests too narrowly. The promotion of multilateralism is sometimes seen as conflicting with EU interests, but these conflicts are often more apparent than real. Multilateralism can act as a means of advancing EU interests.
- **Do not assume a moral high ground** over individual countries or with less cohesive or less formalised groups of states. The EU has alienated some regional groups by over-stressing its unique level of integration and prioritising its own policies over genuine multilateral cooperation.
- **Make space for other organisations in Europe** - The EU is not the only approach to regional integration and multilateralism, even if it is the most advanced and successful one. The EU border is one of the strongest dividing elements on the Continent and to uphold its commitment to multilateral solutions, the EU needs to reconsider policies to make space for wider as well as narrower (sub-regional) forms of multilateralism.
- **Overcome fragmentation** - The European External Action Service (EEAS)¹ could help develop the EU's activities in regional and global multilateral forums, but this potential will only be realised if the Member States' diplomatic services relinquish substantial parts of their own multilateral engagement.
- **Look forward and be prepared to lead** - while the EU must exercise sensitivity to Member States to maintain credibility, it cannot afford to look solely inwards and must push for a greater European role in meeting the demand for multilateral solutions to global problems. For instance, the Euro crisis highlights the need for a strong Euro and a stronger EU in international monetary affairs.

1 See: <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/>

↑ Where does the EU go from here?

To bridge the gap and preserve its place on the world stage, the EU needs to ensure that it not only keeps abreast of the changing playing field, but that it is also a *driver* of those changes. Because the concept of multilateralism itself is changing, the findings of the MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects indicate that the *practice* of multilateralism within modern global politics is extremely challenging.

How will multilateralism evolve in the future? Will it be determined by the extent of

interrelations between the established and emerging elements of a multilateral world? How far are all actors prepared to cooperate? Academics and policy makers are currently engaged in a debate to identify how a global multilateral governance system might look in the next 20, 50 or 100 years.

A theory put forward by Dr Luk Van Langenhove, project coordinator of EU-GRASP, draws a comparison with the concept of 'Web 2.0'. This is a term to describe the second phase of evolution of the World Wide Web, characterised by social media and tools for interactive participation. Similarly, the transition from Multilateralism 1.0 to Multilateralism 2.0 reflects the movement from a *closed* to an *open* system, characterised by increased connectivity between state and non-state actors, ranging in size from sub-national to regional, and including citizen and civil society organisations.

Fully adopting the Multilateralism 2.0 concept means accepting that this will not be a system of equal power for all actors, rather of varying degrees of influence that should constantly shift according to the most appropriate way to tackle a certain issue. Collaboration between governments at different levels, and other multilateral players, should come to be viewed not as competing interests but as a means for mutual strengthening and for working towards solutions to problems that surpass the capabilities of a single nation.

Multilateralism 2.0 is already somewhat in existence; however whether it will evolve into a fully-fledged system of governance is uncertain. Academics argue that the EU must engage fully with the principles of Multilateralism 2.0, not only to strengthen its negotiating position on the global stage, in line with the reality of today's international order, but also to take advantage of the opportunities that a more open system represents. While the transition to Multilateralism 2.0 is underway, it will not be an easy one.

The ability of the EU to establish a strong position as a global actor with the dawn of Multilateralism 2.0 will depend on a delicate balance between three variables: the *willingness* of the EU to perform the role of global multilateral actor, its *capabilities* and available resources and the *acceptance* of the EU as a global actor by others.

Willingness to move forward means taking a flexible approach to **engagement** in sub-regional multilateralism (as discussed in the EU4Seas project), which has in the past been relatively neglected as an academic and political priority, and international multilateralism with different types of actors.

Increasing levels of globalisation - the exchange of people, goods, capital, ideas, information and technology around the world - is also drawing distant countries ever closer. This presents both challenges and opportunities, and the EU must be prepared to fully embrace the new world order.

In terms of capabilities, an important aspect of continuing to move successfully towards Multilateralism 2.0 will be in increasing the efficiency with which the EU operates internally, and learning from the underlying reasons for past successes and failures. It has been argued that the EU should focus on its internal complexity not as a weakness but as a strength, i.e. being well-practiced at exchanging ideas from a variety of perspectives and encouraging dialogue allows the constant re-evaluation of multilateral decisions.

Related to this is the importance of not sacrificing the **credibility** of the EU with Member States in favour of acting multilaterally. This could happen by failing to accurately reflect the interests, concerns and views of its members, and the communities, businesses and civil societies within Member States. A lack of trust in the EU among its members risks undermining the authority and challenging the unity necessary to act decisively.

There is a need to improve communication between Member States and the speed at which decisions are made, so that the EU can speak more powerfully on foreign policy and global issues with a unified voice. Being clear on what the EU's values are and where it stands in Europe should make it easier to decide on policy abroad.

The issue of credibility extends into the readiness of other global players to accept the EU as

a regional player and rests to some extent on how well the EU resolves its internal issues. In the case of sub-regional multilateralism, failure to promote fruitful internal cooperation and solidarity within the EU undermines its **legitimacy** as a global multilateral actor, in the sense that it may be pursuing with external partners something that it has not successfully managed internally.

A further conclusion from the joint research is that not only are most modern political issues global in nature, but it is also becoming increasingly difficult to separate issues, such as climate change mitigation and the global economy, or globalisation and national security. Essentially, the boundaries between policy domains are blurring, which brings its own set of challenges and further highlights the need for effective multilateralism in providing working solutions to interlinking problems.

Principles for effective multilateral interaction, i.e. engagement, legitimacy and credibility, are key to successful multilateral action. Multilateralism may not be the solution to all problems, but plays a vital role in promoting peace, democracy, security, economic prosperity and sustainable development in an increasingly interdependent world.

It is for these reasons that the researchers from the MERCURY, EU-GRASP and EU4Seas projects *jointly* stress the importance of a constantly evolving research agenda to ensure strong links between research and policy are maintained.



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