



Can EU Strategic Partnerships deepen multilateralism?

SUSANNE GRATIUS

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»» The EU has identified ‘effective multilateralism’ as a major goal and an umbrella for its relations with ten strategic partners. Differing from its approach in the 1990s – when it established strategic partnerships on a regional basis – the EU has reinforced relations with a select group of allies, identifying bilateralism as a key step towards effective multilateralism. In this context, bilateral strategic partnerships (SPs) are presented as an innovative means of striving towards the EU’s ultimate goal on an international scale: global governance under the tutelage of multilateral organisations and binding international rules.

However, the EU’s and its ten partners’ understandings of multilateralism are very different. So too are their views on concrete issues on the international agenda. While there is relatively significant agreement on development cooperation and trade, disagreement prevails on global peace and climate change. In the short and medium run, the group of ten strategic partners is too heterogeneous to devise a collective answer to multilateralism. This means that the SPs cannot be used as the basis for an overarching strategy for advancing multilateralism.

A three-step strategy is needed to deepen multilateralism. In the short-term the EU should focus on bilateral selectivity. Only gradually and on a country-by-country basis can the SPs relate more positively to multilateralism and over the long-term become an instrument that assists certain pockets of rule-based global governance.

Diverging views

»» The differing views on multilateralism have been widely studied.¹ Nonetheless, it is worth briefly emphasising the many differences between the ‘special ten’ and the EU with regards to their concept and use of multilateralism.

The EU. The EU is multilateral by nature and by vocation. As a unique collective actor with shared sovereignty at its core, the EU uses multilateralism as a tool to achieve the ultimate goal of global governance, reducing unilateral behaviour by means of international law, shared rules and principles negotiated between ‘equals’. According to its treaties, European foreign policy should be committed to ‘an international system based on stronger multilateral cooperation and good global governance’ (article 21.2.h, TEU). The concept of ‘effective multilateralism’, a long-standing aim, was first mentioned in the European Security Strategy approved in 2003.

1. G. Grevi and A. Vasconcelos (eds.), ‘Partnerships for effective multilateralism: EU relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia’, Chaillot Paper 109, Paris 2008; and National Intelligence Council (NIC), ‘Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World’, Washington DC 2010.

For the EU, rule-based effective multilateralism is a path towards global governance and managing multi-polarity. Both the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are at the cornerstone of the EU's vision of effective multilateralism. EU member states account for one eighth of votes cast at the UN General Assembly; make up 40 per cent of the UN Security Council (UNSC); and contribute more than 35 per cent of the UNSC's budget and over 60 per cent of UN development funding. Beyond the UN, as the world's largest trading bloc speaking with one voice, the EU is one of the six key negotiators at the WTO Doha Round of trade negotiations.

Although 'effective multilateralism' has become a European concept, even within the EU interpretations of the term vary. For functional European multilateralists, it is one tool among many others; while for normative multilateralists it is a superior formula for interaction and for pooling sovereignty at the international level. While smaller EU member states tend to prefer multilateralism, unilateralism and 'minilateralism' remain the main foreign policy instruments of larger powers.² A clear example of recent unilateralist behaviour within a framework of multilateralism was Germany's decision to abstain from the UNSC vote on the humanitarian intervention in Libya.

Despite the EU's commitment to multilateralism, a large gap remains between collective and individual interests. Divergences became evident through Germany's role in the European crisis and its aspiration to become a permanent power at the UNSC, an idea strongly opposed by Italy and Spain.³ Working against the aim of obtaining a collective EU seat, Germany formed part of the G4 pressure group (with Japan, India and Brazil), pushing for individual membership of the UNSC.

This is just one of many examples demonstrating that 'the EU must channel more efforts into mapping a clearer long-term design for global governance'.⁴ However, it should also be stressed that the European External Action Service (EEAS) provides an opportunity to increase the EU's international presence and credibility at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

The following short profiles of multilateral perceptions are divided into three groups of countries, according to their relations with the EU: the three established status quo partners Canada, Japan and the United States; the new like-minded allies Mexico and South Korea; and the more distant BRICS.

Canada. Canada's idealist and defensive multilateralism demonstrates that Ottawa has no intention of becoming a great power. Canada is multilateral by vocation, seeking to enhance its influence through international institutions and bargaining processes.⁵ Given that Canada depends on the US, its commitment to multilateralism as a preferred foreign policy instrument can be explained by an idealist rationale and

2. See F. Attina, 'Managing globalisation: EU's effective multilateralism', *Jean Monnet Working Papers in Comparative and International Politics* 65, September 2008.

3. U. Guérot and M. Leonard, 'The New German Question: How Europe can get the Germany it needs', ECFR Policy Brief 30, European Council on Foreign Relations, London 2011.

4. P. Solbes and R. Youngs, 'Europe is failing to shape the global governance debate', *Europe's World*, Summer 2010, pp. 8–12, p. 11.

5. P. A. Haslam and E. B. Edison Rodrigues, 'Worlds apart: Canadian and Brazilian multilateralism in comparative perspective', *Canadian Foreign Policy*, Spring 2009.

the desire to balance US influence and hegemony. As a pioneer middle power – with ability to mediate – Canada is a strong advocate of global peace and human rights. Its use of multilateralism is less interest- than idea-driven and normative rather than instrumental. Consequently, Ottawa's position is very close to the EU's idea of effective multilateralism.

Japan. Japan's pragmatic normative multilateralism has a similar motivation to that of Canada, although it is more interest- than value-driven. Like the EU, Japan is particularly committed to traditional multilateralism and is keen to balance US unilateralism through norms, rules and collective principles. Nonetheless, its international commitment is rather limited compared to its engagement in regional multilateralism. As is the case with some EU member states, as part of the G8 Japan is a 'status quo' power declining in influence, and is thus very interested in maintaining the Western alliance.

The United States. The US follows a policy of assertive multilateralism. On the one hand, Washington is a strong advocate of international organisations, providing financial support to a number of multilateral bodies: for example, the US funds 22 per cent of the UN's budget. However, the US understanding of multilateralism is also closely tied to national interests. In this sense, multilateralism is merely one of many US strategies; a means to an end. Although the Obama administration constantly reasserted its commitment to multilateralism, it is not its dominant foreign policy instrument as in the case of the EU or Canada.

Mexico and South Korea. Due to their strong commitment and presence in traditional multilateral organisations (both belong to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, headed by a Mexican), the EU considers Mexico and South Korea to be like-minded countries. Unlike the BRIC countries, Mexico's multilateral strategy tends to follow that of the United States. Mexico shares with its NAFTA partner Canada a vocation for multilateralism and a rejection of unilateral behaviour. Mexican foreign policy also has a strong tradition of 'third-worldism'. South Korea's multilateral engagement is motivated by both the conflict with North Korea and its alliance with the United States. As a successful developmental state that introduced democratic reforms, South Korea has a pioneer role in the millennium development goals (MDG) and democratic progress. Ban Ki-moon's nomination as UN Secretary General and Song Sang-Hyun's as President of the International Criminal Court (ICC) reflect the country's multilateral interests and its global presence. Forming a north-south bridge, Mexico and South Korea share a concern for global development: in 2002 Monterrey hosted the UN Conference on financing for development, while the 2011 conference on aid effectiveness will be held in Busan.

Brazil. The statement 'among the BRIC countries, Brazil is the most committed to multilateralism, the EU's civilian power concept' does not accurately represent reality.⁶ As a historic ally of the United States, Brazil is part of the Western alliance, and its foreign policy is clearly multilateral. But although Brazil, as a consolidated democracy, is in theory an ideal partner for the EU, its positions on international issues tend to differ from those of the EU. Brazil's multilateralism is less value-oriented and

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6. A. de Vasconcelos, 'Multilateralising multipolarity', in G. Grevi and A. Vasconcelos, op.cit., Paris 2008, pp. 11-32, p. 27.

more pragmatic, with a clear development focus. Under former president Lula, Brazil moved from a defensive to a status-oriented offensive multilateralism,⁷ aimed at soft-balancing US power.⁸ Its perception of multilateralism is increasingly instrumental to the country's national interests and its candidacy for a permanent seat at the UNSC.

Russia. As a traditional non-Western power, Russia's multilateral engagement has been limited.⁹ As with China, multi-polarity prevails over multilateralism. Its post-Cold War integration into global multilateralism remains incomplete: its non-membership of the WTO is the main symbol of Russia's gradual transition into the international system. However, as part of the 'permanent five' (P5) at the UNSC, Russia is a key global power.¹⁰ The use of its veto right – more than any of the other P5 – has been Russia's major stance on multilateralism, while its behaviour on the global stage is characterised by functional multilateralism and a strong emphasis on national sovereignty.

India. India's 'great power approach' means that multilateral institutions are considered 'as a means to pursue its national interests'.¹¹ Like Brazil and Russia, at the United Nations, India tends to vote against the traditional Western powers or to abstain. Its concept of multilateralism is less proactive than that of Brazil, and is also defensive (against China). Among the BRIC countries, India is the most committed to UN peace missions and is the third greatest provider of troops. Like Brazil, a principal goal of India's foreign policy is to become a permanent member of the UNSC. Its global policy is characterised by its self-identification with the global south and the defence of national interests.

China. China's independent multilateralism is a mirror of its own power projection, and viewed as a path towards a more balanced global order. Multilateralism is subordinate to its main goal 'to pursue an independent foreign policy of peace [and] to preserve China's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity'.¹² As the leading BRIC power, China is strongly committed to creating a multi-polar world order and – unlike the EU – perceives multilateralism as an instrument for reaching that ultimate goal. As a permanent veto power in the UNSC, China's capacity to influence the global agenda is high and its views tend to differ from those of the EU.¹³ Although China is still a 'rule-taker' rather than a 'rule-maker',¹⁴ it shapes the global debate from economics to development.

South Africa. South Africa's regional multilateralism is restricted in scope, with a strong focus on development and Africa. Like Brazil and India, South Africa is aiming for a reform of multilateral organisations and a shift in power towards emerging regional and global powers. Although it has limited global influence, as a strong 'voice of Africa' South Africa is part of both the G20 and the G8 + 5. Under the presidency of

7. M. Fortuna Biato, '¿Qué está haciendo Brasil por la gobernabilidad global?', *Nueva Sociedad* 210, July-August 2007.

8. A. Hurrell, 'Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?', *International Affairs* 82, 2006, pp. 1–19.

9. See A. P. Tsygankov, 'Russia in Global Governance: Multipolarity or Multilateralism?', in D. Lesage and P. Vercauteren (eds.), *Contemporary Global Governance: Multipolarity vs New Discourses on Global Governance* (Frankfurt/Brussels: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2009), pp. 51–62.

10. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, 12 July 2008 (<http://www.mid.ru/ns-osndoc.nsf>).

11. C. Wagner, 'The EU and India: a deepening partnership', in G. Grevi and A. Vasconcelos, op.cit., pp. 87–105, p. 90.

12. Foreign Ministry of China (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>)

13. See L. Odgaard and S. Biscop, 'The EU and China: Partners in Effective Multilateralism', in D. Kerr and L. Fei (eds.), *The International Politics of EU-China Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

14. F. Zhongping, 'A Chinese perspective on China-European relations', in G. Grevi and A. Vasconcelos, op.cit., pp. 77–87, p. 82.

Mbeki, the country strove towards an African renaissance and sought increased global power for Sub-Saharan Africa, including a permanent seat at the UNSC.

To conclude, there is a divide between what Catherine Ashton called ‘established partnerships’ (Canada, Japan and the United States) and ‘emerging powers’ (BRICSAMS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Mexico and South Korea).¹⁵ Canada, Japan and the United States are the EU’s key partners for UN- and WTO-centric multilateralism. As members of the G8, they also share an interest in global economic stability and the maintenance of the Western alliance and values in the global system. Compared to these three ‘status quo’ strategic partners, the BRICSAMS group seek to gain influence and improve their positions in the international system. For these seven countries, the principle of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs still has a strong appeal. They also agree on the use of multilateralism as a strategy to contain the most powerful states. Among this group, as allies of the United States and middle-weight powers, Mexico and South Korea are closer to the EU position than that of the BRICs. The BRIC group is part of the ‘alienated emerging powers, unhappy with their place in the UN’.¹⁶ This is particularly the case for the countries that are not permanent members of the UNSC. For all five countries, multilateralism is an instrument for a multi-polar world order and a platform for increasing their individual power positions.

These highly diverse views on multilateralism confirm the existence of a large gap between the EU’s rather normative concept and most of its partners’ preference for functional and/or revisionist multilateralism. Due to the variation in views, there is little ground for a common approach towards multilateralism. Canada’s multilateralism is the closest to EU perceptions, followed by the like-minded strategic partners Japan, Mexico and South Korea. On the other side of the coin are not only the BRICs and their revisionist multilateralism, but also the US’s assertive multilateralism.

The BRICs’ desire for a substantial readjustment of power within the international system is only partly shared by the EU and its traditional strategic partners. While the EU’s Western allies Canada and Japan are strongly committed (through both presence and financial contributions) to effective multilateralism based around the UN, the United States has shifted between commitment and distance, and the BRICs prefer a southern multilateralism and/or a type of multilateralism tailored to their national priorities and interests. South Korea and Mexico are middle powers with a lower international profile and are therefore closer to EU views on multilateralism.

The institutionalised multilateralism of the post-World War order coexists with the new multilateralism of informal ‘G’ groupings and south-south alliances. The EU and its strategic partners Canada and Japan tend to prefer the first option,¹⁷ while the revisionist powers of the BRIC group represent the new ad hoc multilateralism and the United States’ position lies somewhere in between. To strengthen effective

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15. Catherine Ashton, ‘Europe and the World’, speech given in Athens, 8 July 2010.

16. R. Gowan and F. Brantner, ‘A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN’, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), London, 2008, p. 3.

17. In a recent report, the European Parliament warns that there is a risk that the G formations will erode the UN system. See European Parliament, ‘Report on the EU as a global actor: its role in multilateral organisations’ (rapporteur: María Muñiz de Urquiza), 29 April 2011, paragraph 16.

multilateralism would mean increasing emerging powers' participation in and financial contribution to 'old multilateralism'. At present, the EU, Canada, Japan and the United States share the burden of more than two thirds of the UN budget (78.9 per cent), while the BRICSAMS account for less than 10 per cent.

Limited grounds for global action

»» These general views of multilateralism manifest themselves in differences at the level of concrete policies. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations' (ECFR) foreign policy scorecard 2010, the EU showed the highest level of coherence and coordination on climate change (discussed through the UN), global conflicts (UN, NATO and ICC) and the Doha Round discussion of trade liberalisation (WTO).¹⁸ These issues and the development agenda (UN/OECD- DAC) rank highly on the EU agenda and are included in its relations with the special ten.

The following paragraphs briefly outline the variations between countries and policies in the areas of development, trade, peace and climate. Overall, a comparative analysis demonstrates that consensus-building is particularly difficult when it comes to climate change, while the greatest level of cohesion between the EU's position and those of the special ten can be found on global development, followed by trade and conflict resolution.

Progress on global development. All strategic partners share a particularly high level of commitment to global development. As the world's largest donor, development is key to EU interests. Although it is not an equally relevant issue for its strategic partners, they are all committed to the MDG and, in the case of the OCDE donors, to the target of increasing development assistance to 0.7 per cent of GNP. In this, the EU is more advanced (0.44 per cent in 2009), while Canada (0.30 per cent), the United States (0.21 per cent), Japan (0.18 per cent) and South Korea (0.10 per cent) still fall far behind. Among the group of beneficiaries (and donors), Brazil and South Korea will probably attain the MDG by 2015; with further efforts, Mexico, Russia and South Africa could fulfil the criteria; while it remains unlikely in the cases of China and India (see table 1).

Three different groups can be distinguished. First, the EU shares a strong consensus with the traditional global donors Canada, Japan and the United States due to their long-standing coordination at the DAC-OECD, and their commitments on aid efficiency.¹⁹ It is therefore not surprising that, when it comes to development issues,

18. J. Vaïsse and H. Kundnani et al., 'European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2010', European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), London 2011. The EU's performance was given a B+ evaluation.

19. In 2010, the EU and the United States agreed to produce a work plan to improve country cooperation on aid effectiveness (see EU-US Summit, Joint Statement, Lisbon, 20 November 2010).

these four powers vote in a similar manner at the UN.²⁰ The EU also increasingly shares interests and positions with the second generation OECD members, particularly with South Korea (a recent addition to the DAC) and Mexico. Third, emerging donors such as Brazil, China and India concentrate on a new definition of south-south cooperation that seeks a distinct policy to that pursued by traditional donors. They are rather reluctant to form part of the OECD club and/or to fulfil the political criteria, notably democratic conditionality. However, triangular cooperation with Brazil and India is evidence of the political will for further coordination. Since the development agenda concentrates on Africa, South Africa is also a key partner and an important EU ally.

Table 1: Achievement of UN development goals

	0.7% ODA/GNP, 2009	MDG MONITOR 2011
Brazil	-	4 achieved, 4 very likely
Canada	0.35%	-
China	-	3 very likely, 2 possible, 3 no information
India	-	4 very likely, 3 possible, 1 out of track
Japan	0.18%	-
Mexico	-	2 achieved, 4 very likely, 1 possible, 1 no information
South Africa	-	5 very likely, 3 possible
South Korea	0.10%	5 achieved, 1 possible, 2 no information
Russia	-	1 achieved, 3 very likely, 2 no information
United States	0.21%	-
EU	0.44% (average)	-

Sources: OECD Development Co-operation Report 2010; MDG Monitor 2011.

Partial advances on trade and the WTO Doha Round. Trade is the second greatest area of common interests and increasing convergence between the EU and its strategic partners. According to the European Council on 16 September 2010, ‘enhancing trade with strategic partners constitutes a crucial objective’. Trade ranks particularly high on the EU’s agenda with its major partners the United States, China and Russia and with those that have already signed a Free Trade Agreement (Mexico, South Africa and South Korea), will do so soon (India) or are about to start negotiations (Canada, Japan). Trade is a rather conflictive aspect of the EU’s relations with China, Brazil, Russia and the United States. Thus, it is no coincidence that trade liberalisation with this group of countries is not foreseen or not very likely (in the case of EU–MERCOSUR negotiations).

Apart from sectoral trade disputes between the EU and the United States (2 per cent of total exchanges), the main trade conflict is the north-south divide between the EU, the United States and Japan on the one side, and the BICSAMS (without Russia) on the other. While the first group seeks a substantial reduction of tariffs on industrial



20. T. Renard and B. Hooijmaaijers, ‘Assessing the EU’s Strategic Partnerships in the UN System’, Security Policy Brief 24, Egmont, Brussels 2011, p. 2.

products and the opening of the service sector, the BICSAMS demand longer periods of transition for tariff reductions and the elimination of agriculture subsidies. The latter was a major obstacle preventing the conclusion of the WTO Doha Round, stalled since 2008. Brazil in particular is a fierce opponent of agriculture subsidies and holds high tariffs for key products in the industrial sector, where it is more protectionist than India and South Africa.²¹

Compared to these areas of dispute, trade is a minor problem in relations with Mexico and South Korea, which have already signed Free Trade Agreements with the EU. Russia is a special case. Although its bid for WTO membership has been backed by the EU, over 16 years of negotiations demonstrate the many obstacles involved (including a high level of farm subsidies). Nonetheless, at the EU-Russia summit in June 2011, the President of the European Commission José Manuel Durao Barroso stated that ‘Russian WTO accession is still possible this year’.²² If he is proven right, this would be a triumph for the EU’s push for effective multilateralism in its relations with Russia. Nonetheless, there is not too much ground for optimism given the long road of negotiations.

Divergences on international conflict resolution. International security issues are a shared concern in all strategic partnerships. These include Iran and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and Afghanistan and the ICC – two issues where consensus between EU member states is significant. Overall, however, consensus between the EU and its partners is not particularly high.²³ The voting behaviour on conflict resolution and security issues at the UN suggests that Canada is the EU’s closest global ally, followed by Japan and South Korea, while India and China remain far from European positions.²⁴ Canada and the EU share a particularly strong commitment to global peace through multilateralism, and cooperate closely regarding the stabilisation of Afghanistan,²⁵ Kosovo and the Palestinian Territories. Iraq, Guantanamo and Libya have divided both the European and international communities over the best way to solve global conflicts and security threats.

The EU has a key role in combating nuclear proliferation, particularly in the case of Iran. Most of its member states assumed responsibility to stabilise Afghanistan; and all 27 support the International Criminal Court (ICC). The European position on non-proliferation is strongly backed by its three traditional partners and its ‘natural ally’ South Korea. The BRICs’ position is rather ambivalent regarding the recognition of nuclear powers. Brazil in particular has been reluctant to condemn Iran’s potential rise as a nuclear power while Russia delayed before supporting ‘tougher sanctions’.²⁶ The EU firmly backed the UNSC resolution in June 2010 that imposed sanctions on

21. S. Gratius and S.L. John de Sousa, ‘The IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) Dialogue Forum and the EU: Prospects for coordination’, in J. Husar and G. Maihold, *Europe and new leading powers: towards partnership in strategic policy areas* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010).

22. Statement by President Barroso following the Russia–EU Summit joint press conference with the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, and the European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, Nizhy Novogorod, 10 June 2011.

23. Security is included in the ‘four common spaces’ with Russia and the strategic partnership with Japan, and it is a key topic on the agenda with South Korea. Public security is important for Brazil and Mexico, and cooperation with South Africa has focused on regional security. The EU has established sector dialogues on security and defence with Canada, China, India and the United States.

24. T. Renard and B. Hooijmaaijers, *op.cit.* p. 2.

25. Canada participates in the EU’s police mission (EUPOL) in Afghanistan.

26. K. Barysch, ‘The EU and Russia: All smiles and no action?’, CER Policy Brief, Centre for European Reform, London, 2011.

Iran. While France, the United States, the UK, China, Russia and the non-permanent members (among them Japan and Mexico) voted in favour of the sanctions, Brazil voted against. Although non-proliferation is part of the EU's security dialogue with India, the country is itself a nuclear power. This fact was unofficially recognised by India's agreement on nuclear cooperation with the US, undermining the credibility of the multilateral non-proliferation regime.

A further division has been created by the ICC. EU support for it is strong, yet the US has refused to join, and China, India and Russia are reluctant. There is also limited scope for collective cooperation in Afghanistan: the strong engagement of the EU and its traditional partners, particularly Canada and the United States, at both NATO and UN levels, contrast with the non-participation of the BRICSAMS.

Different positions on climate change. Although climate change is a concern shared by the EU and the special ten, consensus regarding the best approach is particularly low. The UN convention on climate change has been adopted by the EU and all strategic partners, but the United States has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Although all parties agree on the need to reach a global agreement and on the ultimate goal – to limit the increase in global average temperature to below 2°C – their views on the means required differ. Divisions are particularly high between the EU on the one side and China and the United States on the other. The latter countries have been the strongest opponents to binding commitments on cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, a key aim of the EU. While the EU has become a leader on climate change multilateralism, Washington has emerged as a major veto power.

Climate change is also relevant in the EU's relations with Brazil, a green power with clean energy sources and the world's largest rainforest.²⁷ Despite high level EU-Brazil dialogues on Climate Change and on the Environmental Dimension of Sustainable Development, the north-south divide is evident: while Brazil requests a substantial cut in GHG emissions by industrialised countries, the EU demands the end of deforestation which is responsible for 15 per cent of GHG. Other strategic partners, such as Russia or India, are not particularly concerned with climate change, and are less committed to individual reductions of GHG emissions.²⁸

The positions of the strategic partners can be divided into two groups. While Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa demand high percentages of GHG reductions for industrialised countries, Japan, the United States and Canada will only accept a lower level of reductions (see table 2). In the cases of China, India and Mexico, their utmost priority is poverty eradication, not climate change. Differences between the EU and its strategic partners became evident at the 2009 Summit in Copenhagen, when China and the United States, the top carbon dioxide emitters, joined forces to block an agreement. A non-binding accord was drafted by the United States and the BRICs. Although the EU presented a common position, it did not manage to build a negotiation bloc with others: not even Japan or Canada shared its position.²⁹



27. Brazil will host the Rio + 20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012.

28. T. Renard, *op.cit.* 2011, p. 26.

29. See Council of the European Union, EU–Canada Summit, Press Statement, Brussels, 5 May 2010.

**Table 2: Positions on climate change
(commitments on absolute volumes, 2009)**

Brazil	Cut 10% of GHG emissions of 1990 levels by 2020
Canada	Cut 17% of GHG emissions of 2005 level by 2020 (approx. 4% of GHG emissions of 1990 levels), aligned to US position
China*	Cut 40% of GHG emissions of 2005 level (per GDP) by 2020 (approx. 6% of GHG emissions of 1990 levels)
India*	Cut 25% of GHG emissions of 2005 level by 2020 (approx. 2% of GHG emissions of 1990 levels)
Japan	Cut 10% of GHG emissions of 1990 level by 2020
Mexico	Cut 50% of GHG emissions of 2000 levels by 2020 (6,5% of 1990 levels by 2020)
Russia	Cut 10-15% of GHG emissions of 1990 levels by 2020
S. Africa	Cut 18% of GHG emissions of 1990 level by 2020
S. Korea	Cut 17% of GHG emissions of 2005 levels by 2020 (approx. 4% of GHG emissions of 2005 levels by 2020), aligned to US position
USA	Cut 17% of GHG emissions of 2005 levels by 2020 (approx. 4% of GHG emissions of 1990 levels)
EU	Cut 20% of GHG Reduction of 1990 levels by 2020

Source: own elaboration.

* China and India relate cuts of GHG to GDP and not to emission levels.

This short overview demonstrates that there are varying degrees of convergence, by state and by issue. Bilateralism seems to be a more realistic option for advancing in the field of climate change, while a minilateralist approach taken by ad hoc coalitions is more suitable for progress on trade and global peace. Development is the only issue where collective multilateralism between the EU and the ‘special ten’ seems possible without diluting European multilateral positions and commitments.

According to their basic positions on climate change, global development, peace and trade, Canada and Japan look like the closest European allies, while major differences prevail in relations with Russia and China. Global views across sectors also show that there is a case for labelling South Korea and Mexico as like-minded countries closer to the EU than to the BRICs.³⁰ The United States is undoubtedly the EU’s main counterpart – but not necessarily its strongest ally for effective multilateralism.³¹ Differences regarding climate change and international conflict resolution confirm ‘the need to raise the political profile of EU-US relations and make them more strategic and effective’.³² South Africa, India and Brazil remain rather distant partners for

30. This judgement coincides with a similar study of their behaviour in the UN General Assembly: Canada, Japan and South Korea showed the highest voting cohesion with the EU, followed by Brazil, Mexico, Russia and South Africa, while China, India and the United States tended to vote differently. See T. Renard and B. Hooijmaaijers, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 1.

31. As confirmed by T. Renard and B. Hooijmaaijers, *op.cit.*, 2011.

32. Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee: ‘A stronger EU-US partnership and a more open market for the 21st century’, Brussels, 18 May 2005, p. 17.

global governance, although the differences are not impossible to overcome. National sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs still dominate the international behaviour of the BRICs.

Obviously, global affinities and distances between the EU and the special ten depend on the political orientation of their respective governments and their views on these topics. Brazil under Lula was probably more difficult to 'align' than it is under Rousseff; a global partnership with Mexico's conservative government might be easier than it would be with a PRI-governed country; South Africa under Mbeki had more in common with the EU than under the current Zuma presidency; and the Obama administration is closer to the EU approach than the former US government. But although there is no stable alliance with any of the ten strategic partners beyond government stances, some are closer to EU positions than others.

Multilateralism through bilateralism

»» The EU's aim to use its strategic partners to deepen multilateralism is a very long-term goal that can only be achieved partially. For the time being, building on bilateralism appears to be a more feasible approach, making the best possible use of strategic partnerships.

Bilateral patterns still determine multilateral behaviour. The increasing number of individual trade agreements between the EU and its strategic partners and the stalling of the WTO Doha Round demonstrate the limits of multilateralism in a multi-polar world. Further proof of the trend towards bilateral solutions with multilateral costs was evident in the Copenhagen deal between China and the United States, which opposed the EU's agenda.

A similar conclusion can be drawn regarding global peace and the non-proliferation regime, whose setbacks can be explained by the adherence to the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference of the BRICs, but also by the failure to reform the UNSC. Against this background, the European Parliament stresses that the EU 'should play an active and leading role in global governance reform' as the only way to reinforce institutional multilateralism.³³

Minilateralism and the opposition between traditional and south-south multilateralism characterise the global agenda of development cooperation. There is a clear division between the value-oriented OECD world and the south-south approach of non-interference in internal affairs (including democracy, human rights and governance). »»

33. European Parliament, 'Report on the EU as a global actor: its role in multilateral organisations', Committee on Foreign Affairs (rapporteur: María Muñiz de Urquiza), Brussels, 29 April 2011, paragraph 4.

Nonetheless, since priorities (such as Africa) are higher and interest is greater, it seems that there is more scope for reaching a mutually agreeable position in development than in other fields.

However, limited progress in terms of cohesion and cooperation between the EU and the ten strategic partners shows that multilateralism is in crisis. Increasingly, a multilateral approach is being replaced by more realistic bilateral and minilateral formulas. Due to the weaknesses of the UN system and the WTO's decreasing weight as the driving force for global free trade, the EU's effective multilateralism is also losing ground. Beyond smaller countries such as the EU's traditional allies Canada and Japan, it is difficult to find bilateral partners for European positions within multilateral organisations.

According to José Manuel Durao Barroso, 'in our globalised world, the relationships we build with strategic partners determine our prosperity'.³⁴ If strategic partnerships condition Europe's future, as the President of the European Commission suggests, the EU should devote more time and attention to assessing how to deal with the 'special ten' at the global level. There are three connected possible ways in which SPs can be used: as individual bilateral partners; as selective allies for minilateralism; or as a multilateral bloc of countries. Based on these options, the EU should develop a three- step strategy for effective multilateralism: 1) advance first at the bilateral level, 2) create ad hoc alliances in the medium term and 3) in the long term, seek progress between the EU and the special ten at the multilateral level.

As a first step, the EU should deepen its bilateral alliances and select topics for multilateral cooperation. In the short and medium terms, a bilateral approach for global action seems to be a more realistic option than collective multilateralism between the EU and the ten partners. Creating bilateral alliances also serves to promote a stronger EEAS focused on solid relations with a broad range of partners.

The EU should also recognise that different categories of strategic partnerships for multilateralism coexist under the same headings: allies (Canada and Japan), like-minded countries (United States, Mexico and South Korea), distant partners (Brazil and India) and difficult partners (China and Russia). Within this group, there are both dominant (United States, China and Russia) and minor partners (all the others). Moreover, there is a clear gap between old and new strategic partners. Such variation should be reflected in the EU's policy.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need to adapt the strategic partnerships to the different stages of alignment and to develop differentiated instruments for each of them. In this sense, bilateral member states' strategic partnerships – 16 in the case of Russia – should also be integrated into a collective and more coherent EU policy towards the 'special ten' in the framework of the EEAS. This harmonisation could include new issues (such as military cooperation in the case of Brazil and France) in the bilateral EU-'special ten' agendas. It would also need more actively to involve member states in relations, summits and decision-making at the supranational level, according to

34. President Barroso's 'State of the Union' Address, Brussels, 7 September 2010.

the Lisbon Treaty's division of labour in EU foreign policy between the European Commission, the Council and member states.

In practical terms, this scenario would imply a deepening of bilateral alliances starting with the issues where common positions with individual strategic partners are more likely, such as trade with Russia, global peace with Canada and Japan, and development with the United States, Mexico and South Korea. However, instead of common statements that suggest non-existent common positions, dialogues and summits should also serve as a forum to discuss and overcome divergences. Bilateral country strategies and action plans could be designed to address the global agenda.

This is not to suggest that it is not vital for the EU to engage with more 'difficult' states – indeed the SPs exist in part to manage divergences. Rather, it is to argue simply that it needs to chalk up some tangible successes under its SPs in the short-term, to demonstrate that at least on some issues and with some partners these accords can play a useful role in underpinning multilateral rules, rather than threatening them. For all the rhetoric, the EU still has to show that the SPs are capable of this modest objective.

Step two would be to broaden out such bilateral cooperation. Given its size and the likelihood of future decline, the EU needs to address new allies to push for global governance and international rules. Thematic ad-hoc alliances could be a way forward. Instead of pushing towards a 'grand bargain', the EU could focus on creating an alliance with its closest partners on multilateralism (Canada, Japan, South Korea and Mexico) with the aim of progressing towards global governance; consolidate coordination with its real strategic partner the United States; and deepen cooperation with its distant global partners, particularly China and Russia.

If the EU decides to build ad hoc alliances, it must first recognise diversity by concentrating on differences (consensus building on controversial issues) and similarities (common action and positions). Building on this basis, specific instruments could be developed, such as a separate forum with like-minded countries (Canada, Japan, Mexico and South Korea), the BRICs and key strategic partners China and the United States.

Another option would be to chose partners along thematic lines, focusing on climate change with Brazil, China and the United States; development with the BRICSAMs; trade with the partners that have already signed FTAs and with Brazil, India, China and the United States; and global conflict resolution focused on concrete topics with different partners (North Korea with South Korea and the other members of the six-party talks, Iran with Brazil, China and the United States, Afghanistan with Canada, India and the United States). These dialogues and ad hoc alliances could serve to settle differences with reluctant partners and to deepen consensus with like-minded allies.

At the moment, the third step, collective bargaining between the EU and the 'special ten', is a rather unlikely scenario. If strategic partnerships are seen as instrumental to the EU's effective multilateralism, there is still much work to be done. Beyond the general commitment to a strong UN-focused multilateralism, none of the issues analysed has attracted a full consensus between the EU and the 'special ten'. Rather, there is a clear division between like-minded allies, strategic partners and non like-minded partners.

One concrete example of the difficulty of defining common ground was the (initially unsuccessful) vote on the special status for the EU at the UN General Assembly in September 2010.³⁵ While four strategic partners (China, India, Russia and South Africa) initially voted against and Brazil and Canada abstained, the draft resolution was supported by four partners (Japan, Mexico, South Korea and the United States). Although the EU finally won the right to speak at the UN, the positive outcome on 3 May 2011 was the result of hard lobbying and the concession to extend the same right to other entities.

Apart from the area of development cooperation, common global action between the EU and the ‘special ten’ as a group seems unlikely. Moreover, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that the strategic partnerships have supported the EU’s effective multilateralism. In the case of Canada as the EU’s closest ally on global governance (despite differences on climate change), international alignment is not the result of the rather economically-focused strategic partnership, but of long-standing relations based on similar global positions at the bilateral level and partnership in international organisations. In the case of those global players that are more removed from EU positions, particularly the BRICs, strategic partnerships have not reduced differing global views. Even defenders of ‘a meta-dialogue on multilateralism’³⁶ had to admit that the ‘process of establishing a strategic partnership had no visible impact on the voting patterns within the UN General Assembly’.³⁷

If strategic partners (including the BRICs) are conceived as a path towards multilateralism, Brussels also has to be willing and able to adapt to its new partners’ interests and priorities on the international stage. This mutual learning process will require complex negotiations and will involve making some concessions in terms of its interests (environmental and trade-related economic protectionism) and values (democracy and human rights, development and peace). This might also imply building a new internal consensus between supranational institutions and EU member states.

Without further efforts to align and coordinate at the bilateral and minilateral level, effective multilateralism through bilateral strategic partnerships is not a viable formula. It will be a difficult and gradual task to upgrade strategic partnerships to a higher level of consensus and coherence on the global stage, particularly on conflict issues (climate change and global peace). Progress depends on the political will of its more reluctant international partners to enter into an open and frank dialogue on controversial issues including the principles of sovereignty and non-interference as a major obstacle for global action with the EU. But it also depends on Brussels’ willingness to adapt EU policy towards the BRICs and to find a consensus between traditional European demands and the nationalist developmental approaches of its new strategic allies.

This option would mean harmonising the contents of the strategic partnerships towards the common goal of effective multilateralism, including similar topics and sector dialogues in all strategic partnerships and defining concrete goals for each global issue. This process has already begun, given that summit declarations and action plans reflect

35. The upgrading of the EU’s position to an enhanced observer status with the right of its representatives to take the floor.

36. T. Renard and B. Hooijmaaijers, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 41.

37. T. Renard and B. Hooijmaaijers, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 2.

similar topics and statements. However, without prior negotiations at the bilateral and minilateral levels, defining a common minimum denominator with the ‘special ten’ would probably not favour the EU’s own values and principles. Building common ground with the ‘special ten’ is a long winding route that must first pass through temporary bilateralism and minilateralism.

Conclusion

»» If multilateral interests and positions between the EU and the ‘special ten’ are very different, can strategic partnerships ‘become an instrument to move towards a cooperative future’?³⁸ In the long run, yes, but in the short and medium terms, this paper argues the opposite: instead of forcing a broad consensus on multilateralism, which could mean abandoning some traditional EU positions, the EU should first ‘go bilateral’ or practise tailored forms of multilateralism with its strategic partners.

While in difficult sectors (climate change, global peace) a ‘grand coalition on multilateralism’ could force the EU to adjust its concepts and positions to others, bilateralism and minilateralism would mean adjusting the ‘special ten’ to the EU’s values and institutionalised type of multilateralism and viceversa. Apart from global development goals, in the other three core issues analysed, a ‘grand bargain’ seems neither a realistic nor a desirable option for the EU.

For the moment, bilateral cooperation seems to be a more viable formula for strengthening the EU’s effective multilateralism. The aim here is not to advocate a bilateral Realpolitik, but to suggest a cautious three-step way forward for the EU’s effective multilateralism: to advance first at the bilateral level, to create ad hoc alliances in the medium term and to seek, in the long term, progress between the EU and the ‘special ten’ at the multilateral level. In this sense, bilateralism is not opposed to multilateral bargaining, but can be used as a long-term path towards a closer view of the EU’s understanding and practice of multilateralism. Nonetheless, a condition *sine qua non* of this tricky task is the recognition of existing differences and the political will to find common ground with individual partners on the global stage.

The EU has not yet made any formal decisions on how to deal with these options; indeed, it might never do so. Against official rhetoric, the EU uses strategic partnerships as a platform for enhancing bilateral relations rather than for global action or for strengthening effective multilateralism. Special mechanisms for global cooperation must still be developed. At present, the only available instruments are summit diplomacy and specific sector dialogues with some but not all partners.

»»

Moreover, there are very few financial or political incentives for the ‘special ten’ to subscribe to the EU’s understanding of multilateralism and global positions. The EU could do more. For example, the EU could offer its strategic partners preferential treatment and access to its rule-based system, or special trade concessions. Beyond strategic thinking regarding incentives, the EU urgently needs to explain to its partners the advantages of its normative multilateralism and to increase the visibility of European global views.

The next steps will prove whether the EU’s ‘special partners’ benefit from special collective treatment, or if they are seen as individual countries and part of the bilateral design of the EEAS and the EU’s concept(s) of effective multilateralism. In the meantime, the academic community will continue to speculate about the sense and content of collective (EU) and individual (member states) strategic partnerships with a highly heterogeneous group of states. In this sense, this document forms part of an open and ongoing debate on the future of EU foreign policy.

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