

February
2012

Changing Multilateralism: the EU as a Global-Regional Actor in Security and Peace, or EU-GRASP, is a European Union (EU) funded project under the 7th Framework Programme (FP7).

EU-GRASP aims to contribute to the articulation of the present and future role of the EU as a global and regional actor in security and peace.

Therefore, EU-GRASP is aimed at studying the processes, means and opportunities for the EU to achieve effective multilateralism despite myriad challenges.



Multilateralism today: What Role for the European Union in the Field of Peace and Security?

By Luk Van Langenhove &
Léonie Maes*

Executive Summary

Today's multilateral world order implies new challenges, but also offers new opportunities. The increasingly open society provides great room for a wide range of actors to play a relevant role on the international scene, by engaging in multilateral relations. The European Union has proved to be a formidable aspirant to 'effective multilateralism', but much remains to be done if the EU is willing to retain and strengthen its position of regional and global player in the future. This Policy Brief develops an analysis of the role of the European Union as a global-regional actor in peace and security based on three dimensions, namely the Capacity to carry out its tasks, the Willingness to act, and the Acceptance of its actions. It further contributes to the reformulation of the EU's strategic approach by suggesting it to adopt the 'triple F' strategy: stay Focused, remain Flexible, act and react Fast.

Multilateralism today

Multilateralism is far from being a novel concept. Originally, it was rooted in the Westphalian state-centric vision. Accordingly, multilateralism was instituted as a form of cooperation among sovereign states, which are the building blocks that initiate any multilateral arrangements or enterprises. However, the contemporary trend towards the proliferation and growing importance of non-state actors renders obsolete this conception of international relations, which does no longer accurately depict today's reality.

Developments characterising the rapidly evolving global environment are reflected in the 'Multilateralism 2.0' concept. The latter emphasises the diversification of multilateral actors and the ensuing diversification of multilateral playing fields. The concept accounts for a complex network of actors that perform and interact in a multipolar environment, where openness and flexibility are the keywords.

Today's world order is undergoing considerable and fast changes. The challenges that arise from the new multilateral system, rather than being considered as threats to the states' domestic power, should be seized as opportunities to grow stronger. Actors that aim at playing a relevant global role have to adapt their strategy.

The United Nations (UN), as the paramount organisation at the international level, represents the primary platform for multilateral cooperation. This does however not preclude other organisations from playing a role. Indeed,

when it comes to the maintenance of international peace and security, the ubiquitous nature of conflicts requires the UN to be selective in its choices. This has opened to the recognition of the relevant contribution to be made by regional organisations to regional and to global stability. By undertaking a number of peace and security operations, regional organizations indeed have the potential to ease the burden on the UN and to play a role of international reach. The position of the European Union is analysed in this framework.

The role of the EU in Peace and Security

From the outset of European integration, security and defence concerns have been both of primary importance and highly controversial. Early attempts to set up a defence union were largely unsuccessful. The emergence of new security threats at the end of the Cold War provoked a renewed interest in security and defence-related issues.

Today, there is no doubt that the European Union earnestly desires to play a critical and important role in global and regional peace and security in the new multilateral order.

Together, there are three determinants that shape the role and influence of the EU as a global-regional actor in peace and security: the Capacity – institutional, material, human and operational, and financial – to undertake missions; the Willingness to devote resources to security and defence purposes, mainly driven by member states' priorities; and the Acceptance – internal and external – of

the EU as a leading actor in peace and security.

Capability

The EU's capacity to undertake missions is influenced by its resources, but also by the level of sophistication of its command structures. Therefore, it is examined from the (i) institutional, (ii) material, human and operational, and (iii) financial points of view.

First, the institutional security and defence framework of the EU has undergone many reforms in the past two decades. The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with the ambitious goal of coordinating EU member states' foreign policies. The European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) has then been developed as part of the CFSP. The effectiveness of the ESDP, while the merits of the policy must be acknowledged, was hampered by numerous inconsistencies. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) was a relevant answer to a number of them. It renamed the ESDP as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Concretely, it created the function of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and set up the European External Action Service (EEAS) in order to ease inter-institutional tensions and enable the EU to act as a coherent and effective actor in its external relations. These developments are as many promises of a strengthened institutional framework endowing the EU with strengthened capabilities in terms of political control and strategic command.

However, and this leads us to the second

point, the EU still sorely lacks military planning capability. In terms of civilian and military capacity, the numerous missions deployed under the ESDP have demonstrated a certain EU potential. From 2003, they have proliferated in number, diversity and geographical scope, namely in the Balkans, Georgia, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. But military capability, be it human or material, is still considered as insufficient. EU standby battlegroups have been settled as well-trained and -equipped forces that can be deployed on short notice, but have so far never been resorted to. The establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, constituting a remarkable attempt aimed at tackling the capability deficit, has been stalled. Moreover, the absence of a common operational structure for coordinating efforts and deployments on the ground is an urging issue to be dealt with. Finally, CSPD's narrow focus on crisis management and its ensuing reactive attitude to conflicts and crises are prejudicial to the efficiency of its military interventions. CSDP operations would therefore highly benefit from the establishment of a comprehensive contingency planning capability invested with three crucial tasks besides intervention, namely knowledge and anticipation, prevention, and deterrence.

Thirdly, the financial aspect does arguably not constitute a major hindrance to the EU's actions. The EU's defence budget is important, and its financial contributions to UN peace missions are considerable. However, the ongoing budget cuts might generate problems in the future if they are uncoordinated.

Willingness

In light of the reasonable capabilities that the EU has at its disposal, it is relevant to further inquiry into the reasons for its effacement. This leads us to the second dimension that conditions action, the willingness to act. Willingness relates to the power that member states entrust upon the EU. Whatever the ambitions of the EU are, the need to be in tune with the positions of its member states is crucial. Common security and defence policies fall under the EU's intergovernmental pillar, which implies that member states dominate the decision-making process and are the main responsible actors for the policy output.

Moreover, one has to keep in mind that member states, while committed to the purposes of the Union, remain driven by their national agenda and priorities. Indeed, the diverging preferences, interests and priorities of EU member states make it difficult to reach common strategic positions at the European level. The ineffectiveness of the Union can therefore not be entirely attributed to the institutional configuration of the Union, and the responsibility of every member states shall not be overlooked. While the very preferences of the EU member states are unlikely to be easily altered, it is believed that strong and coordinated European institutions have the potential to shape the member states' behaviour and influence their willingness to involve financial and military assets in operations. Indeed, the link between the willingness and the eventually deployed capacity is arguably strong. Germany provided an outstanding illustration thereof in the intervention in

Libya. The seventh military power worldwide was conspicuous for its absence from the operations. This continued reluctance to resort to military force is rooted in Germany's past and history of military debacles, and is now part of its Foreign Policy strategy.

Acceptance

The third, sometimes overlooked, factor, relates to the place of the European Union in the geopolitical reality and the multilateral playing field, and the acceptance of the EU's actions, both internally and externally. Indeed, the importance of perception is to be seriously taken into account. First and foremost, the EU has to be recognised as having the potential to play a relevant role in maintaining global peace and security at the national and regional level. The support of European citizens is of utmost importance as it provides the EU with a leverage in terms of authority at the global level. On top of that, a high degree of internal acceptance generally goes together with a sense of community and shared identities, which in turn can positively influence member states' willingness to engage resources for the fulfilment of the EU's purposes. A relevant example thereof is again provided by Germany. In a context of coming elections, the risk of low citizens support for a forceful intervention in Libya conditioned the country's willingness to take part in the military operation. However, looking exclusively inwards is insufficient. For the European Union to establish itself as a globally recognised leader, its acceptance by external actors and international organisations is essential. Effectiveness

and consistency are highly relevant in this context, as bad performance will cast doubts on the capacity and willingness of the EU to effectively discharge its commitments and will negatively impact on the external, but also internal, acceptance.

This analysis demonstrates that the EU's capacity, willingness and acceptance of actions are three interlinked and intertwined factors that influence each other and are, separately but also jointly, determinants of the EU's actions. In view of the complexity of the EU context and framework for external action, institutional reforms and advancements must be promoted, as much remains to be done to make the EU a coherent capable, willing and accepted global player.

The EU and the 'triple F' strategy

The 'triple F' strategy recommends the European Union to be Flexible in its strategic approaches towards the increasing number of relevant actors, Focused with regards to its battles in order to be efficient in the tasks it has committed to, and Fast in taking important decisions despite its internal diversity.

Flexible

One major criticism that has been levelled against the European Union relates to the insufficient account often taken of the internal dynamics and particular contexts of the partners it engages with. Instead, the tendency is for the EU to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy, which is most of the time counterproductive. Therefore, the EU should adopt a Flexible approach in its relations with the outside world. This

would enable the organisation to constantly evolve in a dynamic multilateral environment and adapt its strategies in line with developments around the world. Moreover, this would contribute to enhance confidence and trust among its partners.

Besides, the EU, as a regional organisation, has had a tendency to emphasise inter-regional dialogue. This has brought forth successful achievements and should be continued. However, the EU should endow itself with (tailored) strategic approaches that would allow it enter into interactions with the wide variety of actors that make up the international environment. The focus should be on groups of states with multilateral ambitions, as well as on international organisations, especially the UN system.

Focused

The European Union clearly aspires to become an ubiquitous player in the field of peace and security. This is commendable. However, as demonstrated above, the EU has not yet fully developed its capacity to deploy and coordinate peace missions worldwide, be it from an institutional, material, human or operational point of view. Therefore, the EU should be more selective and Focused in its choices. The EU obviously knows where its strengths lie and is advised to select the fronts where it is willing to engage accordingly. A rational direction for the EU would be to focus on its direct neighbourhood, including the Balkans, the Caucasus and North Africa. The first reason is linked to the geographical proximity. Indeed, proximity implies a deep interest in solving conflicts, since instability in the EU's immediate

neighbourhood has inevitably negative side-effects on the EU's order. At the same time, the EU is likely to be efficient in swift deployments, as it has resources and personnel situated near the regions prone to disorder. The second motive is grounded in past experience. Relevant operational experience in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, and the ensuing acquired knowledge of the concerned regions, give hopes to further successful developments. Further, these factors can account for increased credibility and legitimacy. Obviously, being Focused on regions where it is always guaranteed some level of success should not be the EU's ultimate goal. Instead, it should be understood as a transitional step towards a more ambitious in scope and further-reaching European Union.

Fast

Finally, the enlargement of the European Union to its present strength of 27 members definitely bodes well for the organisation. However, experience has demonstrated the difficulty for the 27 member states-Union to reach a common decision on every single matter that falls under its tasks. The preferences, interests and priorities of the EU members may prove difficult to reconcile, especially when it comes to sensitive security issues. In practice, owing to the CFSP complex decision-making based on unanimity, competing national agendas has often hampered a coherent Union, and endless deliberations have generally led to limited or absent actions, or decisions taken outside the CFSP framework. In this regard, it is tempting to suggest that core decision-making in the EU should be left to

a group of states taking the lead, as France and UK did in favour of an intervention in Libya. While such a surrogate process will certainly reveal the lack of internal cohesion on security and defence-related matters, it may in the short-term help prevent stalemate and impasses. Were this option to be adopted, it will enhance EU's decision-making processes and will mean that decisions are reached much faster. It would however be naïve to assume that Fast is an easy option. To start with, the choice of the group of states deemed competent to take decisions on behalf of the whole EU is likely to be an highly controversial issue.

Nonetheless, it is possible that with increased promotion of common values by EU institutions, increased information exchanges, dialogue and coordination among member states, the EU decision-making process becomes more expedient. Thus, for now, what the EU should focus on is developing mechanisms that can help it achieve a faster turn-around time in decision-making. This implies the riddance of procedural complexity, which entails unnecessary time and monetary costs. The institutional transformations resulting from the Lisbon Treaty, if made fully effective, have the potential to enable the Union to act in more timely and coherent way.

Conclusion

Interestingly, a successful application of the advocated 'triple F' strategy may have positive implications on the three determinants that shape the role and influence of the EU as a global-regional actor in peace and security. Indeed, by endeavouring towards the realisation of the 'triple F' strategy, the European Union would potentially strengthen its role in the maintenance of international peace and security and enhance its credibility and legitimacy. This, in turn would increase internal and external Acceptance of EU's external engagement and international role. Besides, internal support would ideally be translated in a strong Willingness on the part of EU member states to contribute to the peace and security purposes of the EU in terms of financial resources as well as civilian and military personnel and material. This would contribute to endowing the European Union with a strengthened Capacity to deploy important peace and security missions. To complete this virtuous circle, a Union that performs successfully as a global and regional peace and security actor will inevitably gain legitimacy and credibility.

