



Clingendael Policy Brief

No. 21; June 2013

Clingendael Institute

Why the EU is not promoting effective multilateralism

On a fundamental flaw in the European Security Strategy

Louise van Schaik
and
Barend ter Haar

Although the EU adopted effective multilateralism in 2003 as a core principle of its European Security Strategy, it has accomplished little in this field, mainly because of a fundamental inconsistency in its approach. The Strategy obfuscated the fact that promoting effective multilateralism requires active involvement and commitment on the part of the whole government, not just of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. As long as other Ministries are not directly involved, the promotion of effective multilateralism will remain largely a dead letter.

Implementing Effective Multilateralism

According to the European Security Strategy in 'a world of global threats, global markets and global media, our security and prosperity increasingly depend on an effective multilateral system'. Therefore the 'development of a stronger international society, well functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order' would be 'our objective'. In other words, multilateralism means that international issues are preferably not dealt with case by case between individual states, but rather by building a general system of rules and institutions that is accepted by a wider number of states.

The precise meaning of 'effective' before 'multilateralism' has been the subject of discussion. We believe that in this political

text it means that a multilateral approach is the EU's preferred option, but that it might choose an other approach, e.g. unilateral or bilateral, when the multilateral approach is not effective.

Multilateralism is believed to be in the European DNA. The European integration project is the example *par excellence* of how states can address cross-border policy challenges by building a rule-based international order. It was therefore no surprise that in its European Security Strategy of 2003 the EU warmly adopted *An International Order Based on Effective Multilateralism* as one of its three strategic objectives.

However, in the decade since 2003 the EU has become increasingly quiet about this objective. Paradoxically (but logical in view of the

explanation given below) the only field where the EU has been partly successful is the field of classic security, a field where feelings of national sovereignty are usually strongest.

In other fields the support of the EU for effective multilateralism has, for the most part, been fragmented and weak. The experts who represented EU countries in international talks on issues such as the environment, health, food, water, education and transport, often seemed hardly aware of the existence of a European strategy to strengthen an effective multilateral system. And the diplomats who were aware of this strategy usually rather concentrated on the promotion of their national priorities.

This, in combination with the Eurocrisis and the threat of the UK to leave the EU reinforced the impression that the EU is a power in decline, better known for its rhetoric than for its action.

At the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009 the EU was rudely confronted with a new world order in which emerging economies use their increased power to further their interests. Despite tenacious efforts to promote a new international climate treaty to succeed the Kyoto Protocol and a detailed 'leadership by example' strategy, the EU found itself sidelined, partly because of its inability to speak with a strong single voice. The case also illustrates the EU's lack of sensitivity to its negotiating environment. Promoting effective multilateralism is not the same as simply expecting others to adopt European views and standards.

An ongoing study of the way the EU has operated in a large number of multilateral forums has led us to the conclusion that the fiasco at Copenhagen is not an exceptional case, but is symptomatic.¹ We were struck by the lack of a European strategy in most

forums.

We found some instances where the EU supported a multilateral approach, e.g. in the G20. However, in most cases the EU did not promote strategic goals, but concentrated instead on administrative reforms. In larger debates the EU was sometimes conspicuously absent due to its inability to come to a joint position, or because nobody felt responsible to cover the topic.

Furthermore, many of the representatives of the EU were unaware of the positions of EU member states and EU institutions in other relevant forums. This made issue linkage difficult and could lead to contradictory positions (e.g. on intellectual property rights).

Why did the strategy fail?

There are several factors that have contributed to the failure of the EU to provide consistent support to effective multilateralism, such as the bad state of the multilateral system. However, the most fundamental reason is usually overlooked. It is that the Strategy has obfuscated a fundamental contradiction in traditional security policy.

It is generally accepted that the most effective and durable way towards greater security is to address the causes of insecurity rather than taking military or repressive measures. The EU is the best example of this approach: the European security dilemma was not solved by military measures, but by addressing conflicting interests in the fields of the economy, energy, and so on.

1. Cf. This research will become available as an edited volume in the first half of 2014: Drieskens, E. and L.G. van Schaik (eds) (forthcoming), *The EU and effective multilateralism: External and Internal Reform*, London and New York: Routledge.

The logical consequence would be to widen the scope of the Security Strategy to a Comprehensive Strategy and to recognize that the key to our security and prosperity is largely outside the mandate of the traditional security community. However, the authors of the Strategy could probably not agree on that and therefore decided to ignore the contradiction between the wide agenda and the limited mandate of the security community.

The result is an ambivalent document. It is full of references to broader challenges, such as poverty, pandemics, the scarcity of natural resources, global warming and migratory movements, but these challenges are not included in the chapter on *Key Threats*.

Two of the three Strategic Objectives, *Addressing the Threats* and *Building Security in our Neighbourhood* are mainly directed at security in a limited sense, but the third objective, an 'International Order Based on Effective Multilateralism', has a much wider scope.

It encompasses two different goals: the maintenance of international security and the development of a rule-based international order or, as the Strategy puts it succinctly, 'upholding and developing International Law'. These two goals are closely connected, but they are different in character and scope and they therefore require a different approach.

The first goal is about maintaining the existing order. The second goal is about changing it. Whereas upholding international law can be delegated, for example to the Security Council, the further development of international law requires the explicit consent of all countries. Furthermore, developing a rule-based international order has a much wider scope than security in its classic sense. It does not only include military security, trade and development cooperation, but also human

rights, public health, science, education, the environment, water, transnational crime, transport and a wide range of other topics.

Retaining and, if necessary, restoring the existing international order is the field of classic security affairs, the core business of diplomats. Developing a rule-based international order, on the other hand, is not a matter for diplomats alone. Because it involves most if not all fields of governmental policy, it requires the active involvement and commitment of the whole government.

The European Security Strategy passes over these important differences and as a result the implementation of the principle of effective multilateralism has been left to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and recently their colleagues in the EEAS, although most subjects of multilateralism fall outside their expertise and final responsibility.

The last decade has proved that this does not work. Building a rule-based international order in such fields as climate change, the scarcity of water, new diseases, education and biodiversity requires the active involvement and commitment of the ministries that bear national responsibility for these issues.

Needless to say, the close involvement and commitment of the most important stakeholders, such as the relevant line ministries, is a necessary, but not a sufficient precondition for effective multilateralism. Diplomacy will remain essential, for instance to link various international agendas and to understand and take into account domestic political circumstances that are underlying the positions of other parties in international negotiations.

Should effective multilateralism remain a strategic objective?

After the weak performance of the EU at Copenhagen the question has been raised whether the EU's objective of effective multilateralism is still worth pursuing, or should rather be stalled as an unrealistic fairy tale. However, so far no one has proposed a credible alternative for the current multilateral system. The UN system may be far from perfect; alternatives all have their own shortcomings. Public-private partnerships or ad hoc coalitions of states, for instance, are politically less representative and legitimate and therefore provide less legal certainty. Therefore, the EU has in our view no alternative but to put serious efforts into strengthening and reforming the existing multilateral institutions.

Recently a debate has started on whether and how a future EU foreign and/or security strategy should look like. This debate is catalysed by several foreign ministers, such as the Swedish Carl Bildt and the Polish Radosław Sikorski, and by think tanks such as Notre Europe. However, several EU member states, including the Netherlands, appear to be lukewarm to the idea of a new foreign policy strategy that updates or replaces the current European Security Strategy of 2003 and its implementation report of 2008.

A key issue in the debate is whether a new strategy should start from a broad and comprehensive view on EU foreign policy or rather concentrate on security and defence issues. As we have argued above, a limited Strategy misses the point that Europe's long term security and prosperity require effective multilateralism in a field that is much broader than traditional security.

What is in it for the Netherlands?

As one of the founding fathers of the European integration process and a traditional advocate of international law and cooperation, the Netherlands, at least its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been a staunch supporter of the principle of effective multilateralism. But with an increasingly Eurosceptic population voting 'no' to the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, waning support for international cooperation and development aid in particular, and the recent economic downturn, the focus seems to have shifted towards promoting the Netherlands' economic interests.

What sometimes seems to be overlooked, though, is how dependent the economy of the Netherlands is on international trade, and therefore on a strong rule-based multilateral system. The Port of Rotterdam and Amsterdam Airport (Schiphol) operate as logistical hubs for a hinterland that is much wider than the Netherlands. Also its large financial sector, its service industry and its large agro-food sector are highly internationally oriented. Its prosperity therefore depends to a large extent on free trade both within the EU and globally. The smooth functioning of this free trade system for its part depends on a set of legal, financial, food safety, transport, health and other standards that are usually agreed upon and controlled by multilateral bodies.

Meanwhile, due to the internal market, the common currency and in general the increased economic and political interdependency on the European continent, the policies of the Netherlands, and particularly those with a cross-border character, have been Europeanised to a large degree. On many issues, operating through the EU is no longer just an option, but the only legal or effective option. So why not make the best of this?

The Dutch position is underpinned by a provision in the Dutch Constitution that obliges the government to promote the development of the international legal order. Today's challenge therefore appears not to be whether the government should do this, but rather how and how it can make maximum use of its EU membership in this respect.

The Netherlands has a keen interest in bringing international regulatory frameworks into line with those of the EU, as this enlarges the level playing field for its companies. It has an equally strong interest in the EU promoting a more secure, sustainable and just world through efforts within the UN. Therefore in order to make the most of its Constitutional obligation to promote the development of the international legal order and to foster its interest in a strong rule-based international order, it would make sense for the Netherlands to seek to strengthen the EU's adherence to effective multilateralism.

What should be done?

The EU should not abandon its pursuit of effective multilateralism, but rather reinvigorate it, not only in the security field, but in all international organisations. This is in the interest of the EU, and in particular of the Netherlands, because its prosperity and well-being benefit greatly from a strong rule-based multilateral system. As its best chance of promoting multilateral solutions to global policy problems appears to be by operating through the EU, the Netherlands should strongly advocate effective multilateralism as a central concept of an updated EU foreign policy strategy that covers external action beyond security and defence issues and targets global issues in addition to regional problems.

The traditional security communities, in particular the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Defence, will have to acknowledge that important keys to our long term security are in the hands of other ministries, and these ministries will have to accept their international responsibilities. Effective multilateralism should not only be driven by foreign policy generalists and delegations to international organisations, but be part of a comprehensive strategy that acknowledges the wide range of global issues in need of effective multilateral agreements.

Because of this very wide scope both the EEAS and the Commission and both the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Ministries that bear specific responsibility for the subject will have to be actively involved. Together they need to consider how EU preferences and interests can be translated into coherent and feasible negotiating positions, where separate issues can be linked, as well as how the multilateral system in general can be strengthened.

In short, our key recommendations are the following:

- Effective multilateralism to build a rule-based international order should become a strategic objective within a new and comprehensive strategy for EU external action.
- Because it covers a very broad agenda, effective multilateralism should be a strategic objective for the whole of government, not just for the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.
- To address this wider agenda effectively, all relevant stakeholders, governmental and non-governmental, should, as far as possible, be actively involved and committed.
- The European position in multilateral negotiations should take into account that in the newly emerging world order the EU and the US can no longer simply impose

their norms and standards on the rest of the world.

Selected reading

- Drent, M. and L. Landman (2012), *Why Europe needs a new European Security Strategy*, Clingendael Policy Brief No. 9, The Hague: Clingendael Institute.
- Drieskens, E. and L.G. van Schaik (eds) (forthcoming in early 2014), *The EU and effective multilateralism: External and Internal Reform*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Fabry, E and C. Rosselli (2013), *Think Global- Act European IV: Thinking Strategically about the EU's External Action*, Paris: Notre Europe.
- Fägerstern, B., Marrone, A., Ortega, M. And R. Parkes (2013), *Towards A European Global Strategy – Securing European Influence in a Changing World*, European Global Strategy (EGS) initiative.
- Van Schaik, L.G. and S. Schunz (2012), *Explaining EU Activism and Impact in Global Climate Politics: Is the Union a Norm- or Interest-driven Actor?* *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50(1): 169-186.
- Van Schaik, L.G. (2013), *The EU's Effectiveness in Multilateral Negotiations: More than the Sum of its Parts*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

About Clingendael

Clingendael is the Netherlands Institute of International Relations. We operate as a think-tank, as well as a diplomatic academy, and always maintain a strong international perspective. Our objective is to explore the continuously changing global environment in order to identify and analyse emerging political and social developments for the benefit of government and the general public.

The authors

Louise van Schaik and Barend ter Haar are Senior Research Fellows at the Clingendael Institute. Rosa Dinnissen provided research assistance.