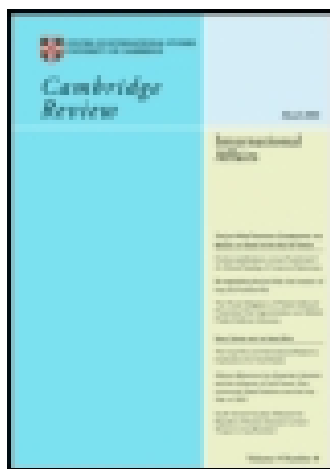


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Partnerships for effective multilateralism? Assessing the compatibility between EU bilateralism, (inter-)regionalism and multilateralism

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Partnerships for effective multilateralism? Assessing the compatibility between EU bilateralism, (inter-)regionalism and multilateralism

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Abstract *This article investigates the notion of 'lateralisms' and how various modes of engagement (namely bilateralism, regionalism and multilateralism) relate to one another. It begins with a careful analysis of the evolution of 'lateralisms' and their (in)compatibility at the global level, building on the existing literature from multiple research disciplines. The second part of this article focuses specifically on the European Union's (EU's) foreign policy approach. The author puts forward two main hypotheses. First, the EU has performed a rebalancing act between bilateralism and regionalism/multilateralism over the last decade in favour of the former, notably through the deepening of its so-called 'strategic partnerships'. Second, this enhanced bilateralism is not necessarily compatible with other 'lateralisms', as it can at times undermine regional integration processes or the building of an effective multilateral order. The author eventually formulates some recommendations to ensure that bilateral partnerships are geared towards the strengthening of the multilateral fabric which remains the EU's fundamental and long-term objective.*

The European Security Strategy (ESS) was a milestone in the development of a specific European Union (EU) approach to international relations. The document has been extensively analysed and often criticized for its inability to set clear priorities for the EU's conduct of foreign policy (see for instance Biscop and Anderson 2008). These criticisms contend rightly that the ESS is more explicit on *how* to do things than on *what* to do, which ultimately raises a question over the strategic value of the document. Unsurprisingly, most scholars have thus focused on the *how*, namely the EU's global modes of engagement, and more specifically on the concept of 'effective multilateralism'.

Effective multilateralism was presented by the ESS as the EU's preferred *means* or mode of engagement. But it was also advanced as an *end* or objective in itself. It is an ambiguous concept, largely resulting from the context of the document's drafting. After the 2003 Iraq War, the EU wanted to uphold a certain vision of multilateralism. On the one hand, 'effective multilateralism' refers primarily to the universal and legally binding multilateral system, putting the United Nations (UN) at its epicentre. On the other hand, it defends a vision of multilateral institutions that can be 'effective' to deal with contemporary challenges, notably due to their ability to enforce commitments. Effective multilateralism was also presented in the ESS as built on strong regional governance, hence re-emphasizing the importance of the EU's promotion of regional integration worldwide.

Multilateralism and regionalism were not the sole modes of engagement advanced in the ESS. In order to pursue its objectives, the EU would also work ‘through partnerships with key actors’, stated the strategy. The so-called ‘strategic partners’ with whom the EU should deepen cooperation, according to the ESS, included the United States (US), Russia, Japan, China, Canada and India. A list to which Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and South Korea were later added. If some partnerships have been developed with regional and international organizations, the concept has essentially been used to describe the EU’s growing engagement with great and emerging powers.¹ Over the last couple of years, a new strand of scholarly literature has emerged, focusing narrowly on the EU’s strategic partnerships (for a literature review, see Renard 2012; Schmidt 2010).

The EU thus conducts its foreign policy through bilateralism, (inter-) regionalism and multilateralism simultaneously. This raises at least two questions that have been largely eluded to this day and determine the core of this article. (1) Do strategic partnerships indicate a shift away from the EU’s traditional foreign policy, based on regionalism and multilateralism, towards a deeper bilateral approach? And why? (2) Is this new bilateralism compatible with regionalism and multilateralism? And how? This article offers a new and still exploratory take on these questions.

In terms of structure, this article will start at a more generic and global level, by first clarifying what it means by bilateralism, regionalism and multilateralism, before quickly reviewing the historical evolution of these international practices. Then, based on a review of the existing literature, I will posit my two main hypotheses. First, there is no exclusive shift towards bilateralism, but rather a rebalancing with other modes of engagement. Second, all these modes coexist in many policy areas and can therefore be made compatible, although this is not necessarily the case. Finally, the article will test these hypotheses on the EU, through the ‘strategic partnership’ instrument.

Definitions and evolutions of lateralisms

The international order of the early twenty-first century is often depicted as one influenced by two major systemic changes: the increasing pace and depth of globalization, on the one hand, and the rise of non-Western powers, affecting the regional and global balance of power, on the other hand. As a result, international relations are becoming ‘thicker’ or denser (Heisbourg 2007), with ever more actors—of different kinds—engaging globally. Although different kinds of ‘lateralisms’ have coexisted for decades, the growing density of international relations—and thus of ‘lateralisms’—renders more salient the question of the coexistence and compatibility between them.

Bilateralism is defined as a dyadic relationship. This relationship can be asymmetric due either to an imperfect balance of power or, alternatively, to a

¹ Despite the existence of a few strategic partnerships with third regions (Africa and Latin America) and with multilateral organisations (North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] and the UN), these partnerships appear fundamentally different from their bilateral equivalents and I leave them outside this study while recognizing that they should be the subject of future research.

difference in the nature of actors. This latter definitional element is adapted to fit the analysis of the EU as a single actor. Traditionally, bilateralism has been limited to relations among nation states but more recently the term has been applied to the EU's external action as well. Some authors talk about the 'rise of bilateralism' (Heydon and Woolcock 2009) particularly when looking at international developments in trade and investment areas. It should be clear that bilateralism is the rule and not the exception in international relations, however. Historically, actors have engaged bilaterally before they envisioned more complex international regimes. According to the UN Treaty Series, there are more than 50,000 bilateral treaties compared with only about 3500 universal multilateral ones. The difference is probably even greater than these figures suggest, since the number of bilateral treaties is likely to be underestimated (perhaps even by a third) whereas the number of multilateral ones is likely to be inflated (Blum 2008, 326).

Heydon and Woolcock (2009, 9–11) note that the number of preferential trade agreements (PTAs) has proliferated in recent years, with an annual average of 20 notifications to the World Trade Organization (WTO), whereas that number was less than three during the four-and-a-half decades of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). In 2011, there were around 300 PTAs, the majority of which are bilateral (WTO 2011, 60–61). In terms of investment regimes, bilateralism is also the rule with more than 2800 bilateral investment treaties (BITs) at the end of 2011 involving more than 175 countries (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] 2012). There has been a slowdown in the number of BITs signed annually since a peak in the 1990s, although bilateral treaties continue to dominate—more than 90 per cent—the number of international investment agreements.

Beyond trade and investment, the predominance of bilateralism over other modes of engagement has been described in various other policy areas, such as international security. The American security order is still largely based on bilateral alliances, particularly in the Asia–Pacific region (Tow and Taylor 2013). Some authors, particularly structural realists, see a connexion between the rise of bilateralism—and unilateralism—and the shift in the global balance of power since the end of the Cold War (see Ikenberry 2003). More broadly, hard security issues are generally treated preferentially at the bilateral level.

Multilateralism can be defined as the coordinated relationship between three or more parties according to a set of rules or principles (Keohane 1990). This definition implies that there is a myriad of different expressions of multilateralism. The number of parties can vary from three or few (minilateralism) to all existing nation states (universal multilateralism). These multilateral interactions can be regulated by hard law or soft law arrangements. I will call these forms of multilateralism respectively 'hard multilateralism' and 'soft multilateralism'. According to Caouette and Côté (2011, 15), 'soft multilateralism' refers to informal mechanisms where norms and principles may guide actions or decisions, but are not constraining. By contrast, 'hard multilateralism' refers to more binding structures and agreements.

The practice of multilateralism must be distinguished from multilateral organizations (Caporaso 1992; Ruggie 1992). If the latter is clearly the tangible expression of the former, the practice of multilateralism runs deeper and 'appeals

to the less formal, less codified habits, practices, ideas and norms of international society' (Caporaso 1992, 602).

One must look at both aspects to understand the recent evolution of multilateralism. On the one hand, the number of multilateral organizations increased from a few dozen in the early 1900s to around 250 in the mid-2000s following a peak towards the end of the Cold War (Union of International Associations 2005). It should be noted, however, that these numbers are contested and can thus vary widely (Volgy et al 2008). The overall trend in recent years does not seem to be an increase but rather a relative stabilization after a sharp decline. On the other hand, more multilateral treaties are continually being signed worldwide, although here as well a slowdown is manifest since the early 2000s, 406 multilateral treaties being concluded in the 1990s compared with only 262 in the 2000s. However, this relative slowdown in international regimes seems to be more due to the inadequacy of international law to cope with the increasingly diverse and complex international society than to some kind of crisis of multilateralism (Pauwelyn et al 2012).

Regionalism is an elusive concept, with competing interpretations (Mansfield and Milner 1999). It can be centred on economics or on other sectoral issues or, alternatively, on a political process. The concept of region itself is loosely defined. To a certain degree, however, it is commonly understood that regionalism is a particular expression of multilateralism. Adler (2001, 146) defines 'regionalism' as a form of 'thick multilateralism', that is to say, 'self-conscious efforts to construct regional identities by the use of multilateral identities and organisations'.

The literature has identified several waves of regionalism, going back as far as the mid nineteenth century (Mansfield and Milner 1999), the most recent wave following the end of the Cold War. Since the 1990s, the number of regional agreements registered with the WTO has exploded (Choi and Caporaso 2002), although the depth and the scope of these agreements remain extremely limited. The number of regional organizations has continuously increased since 1945, with a boom in the 1990s. Yet, most existing regional organizations originated during the Cold War and very few new organizations were created in the 2000s. As a result, Börzel (2011) concludes, regionalism is neither a new phenomenon nor really on the rise. Instead, she observes a 'bifurcation' between deeper regional integration within existing communities and a 'proliferation' of lighter regional intergovernmental cooperation with an increasing trend to 'draw on existing forms'. The proliferation and the deepening of regionalism have opened new opportunities for region-to-region contacts, that is, inter-regionalism.

On the coexistence and compatibility of lateralisms

Different kinds of 'lateralisms' coexist today. Overall, all 'lateralisms' developed over the course of the twentieth century as a cause and consequence of the densification of international relations. Bilateralism remains the dominant practice in international relations whereas multilateralism and regionalism appear now to be stalling after a catching-up phase. Yet, the balance varies from one policy area to another and perhaps also from one geographical region to another. For instance, investment is an area traditionally dominated by bilateralism, whereas climate change or human rights have been largely dominated by multilateral engagement.

Most of the time, however, different regimes coexist within a policy area or geographical region.

Higgot (2004) has shown that unilateral and bilateral behaviours take place within multilateral organizations. It is well known to observers that a multitude of bilateral and plurilateral talks occur on the margins of multilateral meetings. This highlights, again, the need to distinguish the *practice* of 'lateralisms' from established *regimes* and *organizations*.

If bilateralism is dominating globally, multilateralism and regionalism are simultaneously being revived in other formats, smaller and lighter. The G20, which emerged as the key forum to cope with the global economic crisis and its consequences, is perhaps the most remarkable illustration of this. Many more informal multilateral clubs have been established in recent years, including BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). Multilateralism in the early twenty-first century is seemingly diluted in an alphabet soup whereas new forms of regionalism are emerging, such as the Pacific Alliance.

It would be misleading, therefore, to talk about a shift towards bilateralism in international relations. We should rather consider that the system is in a phase of adjustment and stakeholders are consequently re-evaluating their preferred modes for conducting international relations. This is my first hypothesis.

Beyond the issue of coexistence, there is the problem of compatibility between 'lateralisms'. At the theoretical level, the different forms of 'lateralisms' can be seen as 'alternative conceptions of how the world might be organised' (Caporaso 1992, 602), in which case they are incompatible. Yet, others seem to identify synergies between them. As Blum (2008, 377) puts it: 'oftentimes, far from an either-or choice, it is a combination of both [bilateral and multilateral/regional] structures that may produce the most potent architecture'.

A pragmatic analysis, like mine, frames the compatibility question as follows: does bilateralism substitute, complement or compete with regionalism and/or multilateralism? The first scenario implies that bilateralism comes in when regionalism and multilateralism have proved ineffective or inexistent. The sequencing neutralizes compatibility concerns. The second scenario implies that bilateralism is compatible with and mutually reinforcing with regionalism/multilateralism. The third scenario implies that bilateralism is incompatible with and mutually undermining with regionalism/multilateralism.

These questions have been discussed at length in the trade literature. An important part of the debate has been framed around Bhagwati's famous dilemma (Bhagwati 1993): are PTAs (bilateral or plurilateral) 'building blocks' or 'stumbling blocks' of the multilateral system? In other words, the question is whether preferential agreements encourage or discourage evolution towards a globally liberalized multilateral trading system. Research on this dilemma has yielded ambiguous results, some authors leaning towards the 'building blocks' hypothesis and others towards the 'stumbling blocks' one (for a review of these arguments, see Heydon and Woolcock 2009). The trade literature also indicates that cross-regional bilateral PTAs weaken regional integration and intra-regional trade patterns (Heydon and Woolcock 2009, 233). In other words, bilateralism can threaten to unravel regionalism.

In the international law literature, Blum (2008) has shown how bilateral treaties can build on and complement multilateral ones. Indeed, bilateral treaties can repeat, specify (that is, adapt multilateral regulations to a specific bilateral context), clarify (when several multilateral treaties overlap) or deepen (set more stringent obligations) multilateral treaties. Conversely, a counter-movement is also possible by which bilateral treaties are developed in absence of a multilateral framework and eventually, in time, develop into multilateral international law. Yet, compatibility should not be taken for granted. Bilateral treaties can sometimes be used to escape multilateral commitments and, conversely, multilateral efforts may make it easier for states to resist some of their bilateral obligations.

Overall, existing research is inconclusive with regard to the compatibility between bilateralism and regionalism/multilateralism—at least conceptually. It suggests, however, that all hypotheses laid down above can be found empirically. Two major factors appear determinant in shaping this outcome. First, the outcome will vary across different policy areas. Bilateralism and multilateralism/regionalism may be more compatible in some areas than in others. For instance, in the tax regime, bilateral arrangements are only compatible with a light multilateral framework (see Rixen 2010), whereas in climate change or human rights the effectiveness of the multilateral framework relies on the limited scope of bilateral agreements. Second, the preferences of actors involved will have an impact on the balance between bilateralism and multilateralism/regionalism. Indeed, research suggests that several factors can influence the choice of one mode of engagement over another, which implies a rational choice weighing the costs and benefits of these different modes. These factors include transactions costs, power asymmetries and domestic constraints, among others (see for instance Thompson and Verdier 2010; Morin and Gagné 2007). However, Blum (2008) suggests that this rational choice can be obscured by ‘ideological preferences’ for one specific mode of engagement. In conclusion, depending on the issue, region or actors involved, bilateralism can be, alternatively, a substitute, a complement or a competitor to multilateralism/regionalism. This is my second hypothesis.

In the following sections of this article, I will test these two hypotheses on the case of the EU, with a specific focus on the concept of strategic partnerships. Do these privileged bilateral relationships suggest a shift of preference towards bilateralism? Are strategic partnerships compatible with (inter-)regionalism and effective multilateralism?

The EU’s rebalancing act between multilateralism and bilateralism

The empirical evidence

Traditionally, the EU has been a staunch promoter of regionalism and multilateralism. This is not to say that bilateralism was absent in the early days (it was not); rather, a preference for regionalism and multilateralism prevailed.

The EU is a long-standing advocate of regional integration, which is part of its identity. Regional integration worldwide is perceived as a good way to manage conflicts and foster prosperity, but also to diffuse the EU’s norms and values (Börzel and Risse 2009). Ultimately, it is also conceived as a way to shape the world in a more orderly manner (Van Langenhove 2011). As regional integration has spread globally, inter-regionalism has become a ‘consistent and manifest

component of the EU's external action' (Ponjaert 2013, 140) and one that is fully compatible with effective multilateralism. Regional integration and inter-regionalism are consistently mentioned as instruments and objectives in EU policy documents and they constitute a standard practice in EU foreign policy. The EU has even concluded strategic partnerships with some regions (Africa and Latin America), and it regularly mentions partnerships with regional organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Interviews with a scholar confirm that EU policymakers are genuinely committed to the inter-regional approach (Murray 2010).

The EU also promotes the strengthening of an effective multilateral system. It is an active participant and a major funder of many multilateral organizations, particularly those of the UN system. The promotion of effective multilateralism is a central feature of EU policy documents and foreign policy practice. As the EU becomes a more powerful actor, it seeks to upgrade its status within the international society to better match its new ambitions and competences (see Emerson et al 2011). At the same time, the EU has shown a lot of openness and flexibility in its approach to multilateralism. It has supported or even initiated softer and lighter forms of multilateralism, such as the G20.

The EU's practice of bilateralism is not new either, but we may identify an upgrade of the 'bilateral way' in the EU's global set of preferences, starting with the political prioritization of the 'strategic partnership' instrument. The 2003 ESS stated that the EU should 'work with partners'. But the document does not say anything with regard to *when, where* or on *which issues* the EU should engage its partners more. Should the EU systematically engage its partners, or only occasionally? Should the EU and its partners focus on specific geographic regions, for example Africa? Are there specific issues on which bilateralism should be privileged over other practices? Should the EU engage all its partners on any issues or should it be selective? The ESS remains silent on all these key questions. The vague policy recommendation leaves therefore space for antinomic interpretations. A minimalist view would be that the EU should work with partners only in specific circumstances and in a manner that complements or supports regionalism and multilateralism. By contrast, a maximalist view would be that the EU should engage its partners as often and on as many issues as possible independently from the multilateral framework. In short, the ESS puts forward the 'bilateral way' but does not indicate in itself a complete shift towards bilateralism.

Since 2003, the EU has continued developing its strategic partnerships by adding more countries to the list. Over a decade, the EU established ten strategic partnerships with Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia,² South Africa, South Korea and the US. The concept has also received a lot of political attention: it was debated several times by foreign ministers and was even the main item on the agenda of the September 2010 European Council. At the beginning of her mandate, Catherine Ashton, the EU's former high representative, presented strategic partnerships as one of her three key foreign policy priorities. She confirmed later the importance of building stronger and more operational

²The EU–Russia strategic partnership is arguably on hold at the time of submitting this article as a result of the Ukrainian crisis.

strategic partnerships (Council of the EU 2012). The new high representative, Federica Mogherini, has indicated her ambition to pursue this track.

Some observers have pointed out that these partnerships remain highly superficial or, in other words, rhetoric labelling (Keukeleire and Bruyninckx 2011) and that the choice of partners was perhaps more 'accidental' than strategic (Renard 2011). It is far from clear whether this proliferation of bilateral partnerships reflects a conscious choice for more bilateralism or is the expression of ad hoc behaviour with limited implications. One must look beyond the strategic and political level in order to spot any possible trend towards bilateralism.

In the course of a decade, since 2003, the EU has significantly deepened and broadened its bilateral relations with strategic partners. This claim can be illustrated in many ways. First, the EU has set ambitious objectives for its strategic partnerships which have been articulated in joint action plans (JAPs) and other political documents with most of its partners. Second, the EU has concluded a growing number of agreements and joint declarations with its partners on a large number of issues, ranging from regulatory issues to security ones, such as cybersecurity and international terrorism (see for instance Council of the EU 2012). Third, an overview of the political and sectoral dialogues between the EU and its partners reveals the breadth of strategic partnerships, which include regular strategic or security dialogues as well as dialogues on energy, environment, economy or education, among other things.³ These dialogues have been proliferating in recent years. In 2014, each partnership counts between 30 and 70 such policy dialogues.

Looking more narrowly to specific sectors, one can sense the centrality of bilateralism. In trade and investment, for instance, bilateralism has become a new instrument of choice to the EU. The 2006 Global Europe strategy (European Commission 2006) ended the self-imposed moratorium on the negotiation of new bilateral trade deals and suggested the exploration of a new generation of free trade agreements (FTAs) with emerging economies as well as established ones. Trade bilateralism is not new to the EU but it has become more far-reaching and more strategically developed than previously (Koopman and Wilhelm 2010). Since the launch of this new strategy, several FTAs have been concluded or initiated. The EU–South-Korea FTA is now presented as a model for such future agreements, and other important trade deals are being negotiated (with the US and Canada, for example) or envisioned (for example, with Japan). Strategic partnerships are distinct and clearly not limited to the trade agenda. In fact, EU trade officials are often careful to avoid using the political label of 'strategic partners'. Yet, the two are intimately connected. Trade is evidently the backbone of any EU strategic partnership, given that it is the EU's strong arm and part of its DNA. Bilateral FTAs are being negotiated or envisaged with most strategic partners and the trade and political agendas largely overlap (see European Commission 2013).

There is thus a trend in the EU's external action to put more emphasis on its bilateral relations with a set of key players, including its strategic partners.

³ For an overview of all dialogues between the EU and its strategic partners, see the data collected by this author on the website of the European Strategic Partnerships Observatory (ESPO): <www.strategicpartnerships.eu>.

Depending on the issue at stake, the EU seems more willing than before to engage with pivotal players at the bilateral level. Instances abound in different policy areas, such as environment, energy, security or trade. Having said this, I argue that this trend does not (yet) imply a *shift* towards bilateralism; it implies, rather, a *rebalancing*. A shift means that bilateralism will replace or become preponderant over other types of engagement, such as inter-regionalism and multilateralism. This is a possibility in the future which depends on how the EU manages the compatibility between these different approaches. But at the moment bilateralism continues to coexist with inter-regionalism and multilateralism in the EU's external practice.

Explaining the rebalancing act

There are at least two major explanations for the EU's rebalancing between bilateralism and regionalism/multilateralism. Although both explanations are contextual, one lies at the systemic level and the other one is specific to the EU. My contention is that the EU's rebalancing is internally *and* externally driven.

I have already indicated that different 'lateralisms' coexist and that the system seems to be rebalancing between bilateralism, (inter-)regionalism and multilateralism. One can thus reasonably assume that the EU is adjusting to external stimuli whose two major sources we may identify as growing interdependence and the diffusion of power. Both are affecting the system deeply.

On the one hand, globalization is deepening global interdependence at an unprecedented pace. As issues and actors are increasingly connected together, more interactions take place at different levels and through various channels. Between governments, they can be bilateral, inter-regional or multilateral.

On the other hand, the continuous diffusion of power that has been underway since the late twentieth century creates a significant systemic uncertainty. The diffusion of power operates in two different directions. First, it is horizontal with the (re-)emergence of a number of 'new powers'. These countries are, generally, emerging economic powerhouses, leveraging their economic clout to increase their political influence and develop their military might. Second, diffusion of power is vertical with the empowerment of subnational, supranational as well as non-state actors. These contradictory processes of fragmentation and integration are occurring simultaneously and cannot be dissociated; this is why Rosenau (1997) aggregated them in the concept of 'fragemegration'. As a result of this hyperdiffusion of power, stakeholders at all levels (cities, regions, states, supra- or subnational actors) are uncertain about how best to defend their interests and values and with whom they should cooperate.

There is a general agreement that the co-occurrence of these two phenomena is significantly influencing the conduct of international relations. According to Grevi (2009), such an 'interpolar' world, where interdependence meets multipolarity, creates incentives for more international cooperation in order to deal with challenges that have themselves globalized. Wright (2013) nuances Grevi's argument. He states that the co-occurrence of interdependence and geopolitical competition, resulting from the rise of new powers, is as likely to lead to discord and tensions as to cooperative behaviours.

Beyond this important nuance, both scenarios of inter-polarity imply a rebalancing between 'lateralisms'. At the root of this rebalancing lies the multilateral system's deadlock, partly a result of the changing balance of power, which affects its legitimacy and effectiveness (Saxer 2012). At the same time, regional integration processes seem to be slowing down or even stagnating. However, it is not multilateralism and regionalism per se that are questioned in the inter-polar world, but rather inadequate institutions. Multilateralism remains a central feature of the international system but it is evolving together with the global environment. The last two decades, for instance, have seen a rapid rise of smaller and lighter forms of multilateralism (Penttilä 2009), referred to above as 'minilateralism' and 'soft multilateralism', respectively.

In this context, bilateralism offers an alternative route. According to one view, it will proceed where multilateralism and regionalism recede. Or, to put it differently, bilateralism is the 'normal consequence of failed multilateralism' (Leal-Arcas 2009, 33). According to another view, however, bilateralism can be the cause of the multilateral deadlock or of its underdevelopment. These arguments echo the debate presented in the first part of this article.

The second explanation of the rebalancing between 'lateralisms' is EU specific. Over decades, the EU has progressively become a global player with real instruments of power, hard and soft. The Maastricht Treaty in the 1990s transferred some foreign policy competences to the EU level under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and more recently the Lisbon Treaty established the EU as a global player with a world-class diplomatic service and growing competences in external affairs. To some, it has become a 'superpower' (McCormick 2007) while to others it is still a 'small power' (Toje 2010). But whatever power it is, despite the fact that the EU is not a state it is increasingly becoming a *normal power*.

As a 'normal' power, the EU is choosing from a broad range of instruments in its foreign policy toolbox. When the multilateral or the inter-regional approaches are not proving fruitful, the EU will easily switch to the bilateral level, particularly when there are pressing (economic) concerns or immediate gains to be pursued with this shift, as in the case of trade (see for instance Hardacre and Smith 2009). Depending on the issue at stake, different forms of 'lateralisms' may appear more effective vis-à-vis different partners. For instance, in the case of energy efficiency and clean energy sources, a bilateral approach appears more necessary with China and India than with Brazil (Afionis and Stringer 2012). In other words, for practical reasons of effectiveness, the EU is overcoming its 'ideological preference' for multilateralism to contemplate a multi-dimensional approach encompassing all 'lateralisms'. This seems to confirm our hypothesis that the choice of 'lateralism' is influenced by a number of factors, including the policy area at stake or the (evolving) actors' preferences.

As one European Commission official put it with regard to Asia: 'our Asia strategy has been a bit a function of the integration pace in Asia, which is quite slow and ... that explains why we go for bilateral relations ... we individualise the countries and we deal with them individually' (quoted in Murray 2010, 259). Other research suggests that the limitations of regional integration in Latin America are negatively affecting inter-regional relations with the EU and may lead to a dash for bilateral agreements (Sanahuja 2008; Hardacre and Smith 2009). In sum, with strategic partnerships the EU has developed a new and flexible

instrument that appears well suited to the changing international environment of the early twenty-first century.

Bilateralism is not new to the EU—its bilateral diplomatic contacts date back to the 1950s—but it is now becoming a real strategic option. The concept of ‘strategic partnerships’ is the articulation of this new option. The only difference from a power like the US, presumably, is that the EU will intuitively favour a multilateral or inter-regional approach and only shift to bilateralism if needed. The US, conversely, intuitively favours a hub-and-spoke approach based on bilateralism and can then switch to multilateralism when it suits its interests to do so.

EU’s bilateral partnerships, regionalism and effective multilateralism: compatibility modes?

The 2003 ESS suggested that bilateralism, through the strategic partnerships, could coexist with regionalism and multilateralism. The 2008 review of the ESS went a step further by suggesting that these different ‘lateralisms’ were compatible and that they could complement one another: this was the meaning of the words ‘partnerships for effective multilateralism’. The question is whether the practice confirms the EU rhetoric. Going back to my hypothesis: do strategic partnerships substitute, complement or compete with regionalism/multilateralism? I will test this hypothesis on a number of examples from diverse regional and functional areas.

The empirical evidence

The implementation of strategic partnerships raises many dilemmas. First, it has been said before that the new EU trade agenda, geared towards ambitious bilateral deals, could be detrimental to effective multilateralism. This is a clear danger despite the EU’s commitment to preserve and strengthen the multilateral trading system (European Commission 2013). Shortly after the publication of the new EU strategy, the WTO warned in a report that it ‘could further complicate its trade regime and divert interest from the multilateral trading system’ (WTO 2007, xii). Second, the pursuit of bilateral partnerships has proved problematic with regard to regional integration in some parts of the world. Two cases are illustrative here: Brazil and South Africa. These cases are particularly interesting given the EU’s strong inter-regional engagement with Latin America and Africa, probably stronger than with any other region of the world.

The EU–Brazil strategic partnership is generally regarded positively, not least because both partners share a certain number of interests and values. Having said this, the bilateral partnership is growing against a backdrop of fragmentation and centrifugal tendencies in Latin America (Santander 2009). The EU reinforced these tendencies when it negotiated agreements with Colombia and Peru regardless of the Andean Community. As EU–Mercosur (Southern Common Market) trade negotiations are in deadlock, the possibility of a bilateral deal exists, although neither side is willing to take the initiative. The EU–Brazil partnership is also tickling regional rivalries, with some countries, particularly Argentina, wondering why they have not been granted such a privileged relationship with the EU. The EU–South-Africa partnership is equally problematic for at least two reasons. At the subcontinental level, it singles out South Africa at the expense of regional

integration through the Southern African Development Community (SADC). At the continental level, South Africa is the only African country to have been granted the privileged status, hence raising rivalries with other potential regional powers but also contradicting the Africa–EU strategic partnership, which was meant to ‘treat Africa as one’ and put the African Union (AU) at its centre (Council of the EU 2007).

A neo-realist reading of the EU’s foreign policy could conclude that the EU is playing regional powers against potential challengers in order to forge strong relationships and, as a result, to strengthen Europe’s position and role within these regions. But given the EU’s history and regional identity, it is difficult to believe that it has developed bilateral partnerships to consciously undermine its inter-regional approach. It is a fact, however, that there is a tension between the two approaches and there are indications that these bilateral partnerships could reinforce rivalries and centrifugal forces within respective regions.

At times, when necessary, the EU’s bilateral partnerships can substitute regionalism or effective multilateralism. This is notably the case when regional integration is limited or unsatisfactory—or has failed. In South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is gridlocked and shows little signs of further integration. In spite of the EU’s rhetorical support for integration in South Asia as well as of the political dialogue established between the EU and SAARC, the EU has focused most of its efforts in recent years on deepening its bilateral relations with India, through a strategic partnership, and with Pakistan. For the foreseeable future, it seems that the bilateral approach offers more flexibility but is also proving more effective to pursue the EU’s global and regional objectives, including promoting peace and stability, development and prosperity, and democracy and human rights in the region (Renard 2013).

Bilateralism can also be seen as a substitute for some forms of regionalism or multilateralism that are seen as contradicting the EU’s norms and values. This is the case for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), for instance, which promotes values that significantly differ from and to a certain extent conflict with European ones. Most evidently, the SCO is more a hindrance than a facilitator in the EU’s attempt to strengthen the international order through the ‘spreading [of] good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights’ (Council of the EU 2003, 10). The norms and values promoted by the SCO are simply not compatible with those of the EU and the two models of integration fundamentally clash, as the SCO ‘exemplifies integration through authoritarianism’ (Hussain 2011, 251). More pragmatically, despite ad hoc contacts between the two organizations, the EU considers that the SCO has nothing to offer at this stage that could not be obtained through bilateral talks with China, Russia and Central Asian states (Renard 2013). Since the EU has deepened its relations with China and Russia in the context of its strategic partnerships, the need to engage with the SCO appears very limited.

So-called ‘effective multilateralism’, as promoted by the EU, can also contradict the EU’s values and interests in some rare instances. This is the case for instance in the area of cyber-security and internet governance. The EU considers that the internet is global and should only be lightly regulated by norms and principles, whereas other countries led by China and Russia promote a strong state-based approach to internet governance, based on cyber-sovereignty, through

the strengthening of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The EU has thus made use of its strategic partnerships to cooperate on cyber-security and to improve internet governance with some partners, especially the US, while maintaining a normative dialogue on these issues with China and Russia (Renard 2014).

Bilateralism, in the form of strategic partnerships, can thus undermine or substitute regionalism and multilateralism. But there is no doubt that bilateral partnerships can equally, at times—and perhaps in most cases, we may dare to say—complement regional or multilateral approaches. One concrete illustration of this complementarity comes from climate change negotiations. As multilateral negotiations advance slowly, though remaining a key objective of the EU's climate policy, the EU is increasingly deepening its bilateral relations with key partners. In order to avoid another diplomatic fiasco like that of Copenhagen in 2009 and to make progress on a global agreement, the EU complements multilateral talks with bilateral ones, focusing at times and with some partners on diplomatic strategies and alliances, and at other times or with other partners on more pragmatic cooperation on energy efficiency, clean energy or green growth (see Afionis and Stringer 2012; Grevi and Renard 2012). In this case, at least from the EU's point of view, bilateralism is seen as complementing and strengthening the multilateral efforts—although it is debatable whether all partners share the EU's view on this. Another illustration relates to security issues, notably terrorism and non-proliferation. The EU has supported and promoted an effective multilateral response to these challenges, through the UN system, but it has sought to complement this approach with unilateral and bilateral cooperation with key players. In this case again, bilateral cooperation is framed as complementing and reinforcing the multilateral system, as illustrated by inter alia the EU–China joint declaration on non-proliferation and arms control (2003), the EU–US declaration on enhancing cooperation in the field of non-proliferation and the fight against terrorism (2005) and the EU–India joint declaration on international terrorism (2010).

Making bilateral partnerships compatible with effective multilateralism

The 2008 review of the ESS suggested that bilateralism is compatible with multilateralism. It also clarified that these bilateral partnerships were developed specifically 'in pursuit of that [effective multilateral] objective' (Council of the EU 2008, 11) and in parallel to (inter-)regionalism. The EU confirmed thus the multi-dimensional approach of its external action. But the document remains vague with regard to how specifically these different approaches can feed into one another.

If unchecked, bilateral partnerships could undermine rather than consolidate the EU's regional and multilateral approaches, as illustrated in the previous subsection. Strategic partnerships can indeed underpin multilateral efforts in an incremental manner (see also Gratius 2011). My contention is that bilateralism will not lead automatically to effective multilateralism but it could be a path-opener on the basis of three key principles.

First, the EU must develop more *bilateral pragmatism*, that is to say deep and operational contacts within but also outside the multilateral system. On the one hand, the EU can deepen its bilateral activism in order to advance its interests in

the context of multilateral encounters, such as in the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM). On the other hand, the EU can pursue the objectives set or sought at the multilateral level through bilateral operational initiatives. Discussions on clean coal technologies and the partnership on urbanization are two good illustrations of bilateral pragmatism in the context of the EU–China strategic partnership in order to make progress on green growth and climate change while multilateral negotiations are stalling.

Second, the EU should aim for more *strategic bilateralism*. This means identifying the pivotal partners whose support is necessary to make progress on key global issues, preferably but not always within the multilateral system. Depending on the issue at stake, the relative importance of each partner varies from pivotal to marginal. For instance, Russia is a pivotal player in the Syrian crisis; China and the US are pivotal players on the North Korean issue; Brazil and China are two major interlocutors with regard to security and development in Africa. This idea has occasionally been called ‘strategic partnering’, but strategic bilateralism goes even further. It entails that the EU should also identify potential bridge-builders or partners that can facilitate contacts and narrow positions between the EU and more problematic partners. In climate change negotiations, for instance, Brazil and South Africa have demonstrated their ability to act as such bridge-builders between the EU, on the one side, and other BASIC members, that is, China and India, on the other side (Grevi and Renard 2012).

Third, in the longer term, the EU should strive for more *trustful bilateralism* with regard to effective multilateralism. The EU and most of its partners have very different views on global governance. If they converge rhetorically on global objectives and the need to pursue them multilaterally, their deeds suggest a significant gap (Gratius 2011). Within the UN system, the EU and its partners are still regularly divided and strategic partnerships have had little positive effect on this cohesion so far (Renard and Hooijmaaijers 2011). An explanation for this is the lack of trust between the EU and its partners, but also the lack of trust in the multilateral system. Strategic partnerships could thus be used as trust-enhancers, bilaterally and vis-à-vis multilateralism.

Conclusion

Bilateralism is the default level of international relations. As the international system is becoming increasingly interconnected under the influence of globalization, a higher degree of international cooperation is expected in order to cope with global challenges. As a result, a denser web of international relations is taking shape, further accentuated by the multipolarization of the global order. Different levels of interactions thus overlap—bilateral, regional and multilateral. This article has shown that they can coexist in practice, not least because bilateral patterns continue to determine regional and multilateral behaviours. The question of compatibility, however, remains theoretically inconclusive and probably dependent upon a number of factors, such as the policy area, geographical region or actors’ preferences.

A case study of the EU confirms that its external action relies on a multi-dimensional approach. Traditionally, the EU has placed the regional and multilateral approaches at the centre of its external action. In recent years,

however, it has performed a rebalancing between bilateralism, on the one hand, and (inter-)regionalism and effective multilateralism, on the other. This seems to be the result of both external and internal contextual elements, including: increasing interdependence; the rise of new powers; the deadlock of the multilateral system; the relative slowdown of regional integration worldwide; the increasing powers of the EU, particularly in foreign policy; and the embryo of strategic thinking at the EU level, witnessed by the reflections on the ESS and on strategic partnerships (see Biscop and Anderson 2008; Renard 2011).

The EU has come to the conclusion that it must imperatively strengthen its relations with a certain number of (rising) pivotal countries, in the framework of its so-called strategic partnerships. A strong and sophisticated bilateral network is increasingly supporting and complementing the multilateral architecture in a new kind of multi-dimensional puzzle. The driving principle emerging in foreign policymaking is *flexibility*. As the system is undergoing a deep transition and is characterized by uncertainty, all doors must remain open. For this reason, the EU has rebalanced its external engagement. In this sense, the EU's bilateral strategic partnerships do not contradict those established with other regions and multilateral organizations. The flexibility requirement is also visible in the rising importance of 'soft' agreements, that is to say political rather than legally binding agreements and processes. Soft multilateralism and strategic partnerships—which are 'soft law' agreements (Sautenet 2012)—are illustrations thereof.

This article has underscored the major dilemma that underpin this multi-dimensional approach, namely that bilateralism can possibly undermine the EU's traditional preference for inter-regionalism and effective multilateralism. This is a dilemma that cannot be ignored. Indeed, as the EU attempts to adapt to the new global order in the making, it is likely to be itself affected by centrifugal forces emerging from the system. In other words, the EU is likely to be partly shaped by the system while trying to shape it. For this reason, it must never lose from sight its preferred outcome (Renard and Biscop 2012). In the end, it is the diplomatic practice that will determine whether bilateralism can effectively complement regionalism and multilateralism. The EU's practice matters, of course, but so does the practice of other actors. Hence, the EU needs to pay attention to, and possibly shape, the preferences of its strategic partners.

At the end of the day, time is the crucial factor. In the long term, the EU could arguably strive for a world order based on regions and effective multilateralism, because that is the kind of order most suited to the EU animal. In the short to medium term, however, enhanced bilateralism and minilateralism appear more promising for pursuing the EU's values and interests worldwide.

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