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## [Comment] From the new G20 to a new multilateral order

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Entering a new decade with a new Treaty, the EU now possesses more tools to adapt and cope with an increasingly complex, multipolar and interdependent world. Of course, the Lisbon Treaty in itself will not transform the EU into a global superpower, nor even save it from eventually becoming irrelevant in light of the emergence of new global powers and of a geopolitical shift towards the Pacific. But the EU can now look forward.



The EU had a unified position at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh (Photo: Adam Sacco)

One of the key challenges of this decade will be to see how the West, and more specifically how the EU will deal with this rising multipolarity. Indeed, it is in the interest of the EU – not to say a matter of survival – to promote an international order based on systemic and rule-based multilateralism because the EU is simply unable to play realpolitik with other global players.

However, not all forms of multilateralism are favourable to the EU. For instance, the formation of ad hoc bilateral or multilateral alliances could potentially be damaging to Europe. A G-2 between China and America, for example, would slowly but inevitably make the US lean towards Asia, and render Europe increasingly irrelevant.

So, here is the obvious question: how do we get to an effective multilateral order? There is no clear-cut answer, but our intuition tells us that we should start with what we already have, with special attention to the latest developments, including the recent upgrading of the Group of 20 industrialised countries (G20) from ministerial to head of state level.

This was largely seen as a positive signal by emerging countries, indicating that they are now considered as key players in dealing with global challenges. This recognition was most welcome in New Delhi, Beijing and Brasilia.

Somehow, the displacement of the G8 by the G20 was also positive for the EU, at least for two reasons. First, Brussels is officially the 20th member of the G20, while it was only the 9th member of the G8. To many, this might only be a symbolic nuance, as in both cases the EU has the same "rights" and "obligations" as the other members minus the right to chair and host summits and therefore no capacity to fully shape the agenda.

But in international politics, rhetoric and the choice of words are never innocent. This means that the G20 is arguably a recognition of the "emerging" or "global power" status of the EU in international affairs as much as that of China, India or Brazil.

Second, the EU might show a more united front within the G20 than within the G8 because past experience has shown that pre-summit cooperation and coordination was greater ahead of G20 than G8 summits. Since the level of meetings was upgraded to heads of state and the agenda enlarged, there is even a visible trend towards more internal cooperation, on the basis that a stronger European voice is needed in a forum where Europe represents only one fifth of the participants (as opposed to half in the G8).

Indeed, ahead of the Pittsburgh summit, the EU gave a positive signal by releasing a communiqué stating the common "agreed language" for the Summit, containing declarations on development, climate change and energy security. A stronger and more united European front will send a positive signal to our strategic partners.

Nonetheless, regarding the role of the EU in the G20, two important questions remain open:

(1) Who will represent the EU at the next G20 Summit in Toronto next June? The Treaty of Lisbon is not clear on who will replace the President of the Commission and the rotating Presidency. Whether it is Herman Van Rompuy or Catherine Ashton who accompanies José Manuel Barroso to Toronto might send a symbolic signal. But whoever is designated needs to strengthen European coordination within the G20 and to ensure coordination with the External action service (EEAS) which should receive more authority in terms of foreign policy planning, including regarding global challenges and strategic partnerships.

(2) How do we link the new G20 up with effective multilateralism? If the empowerment of the G20 was a good option available to make sure emerging powers feel involved in the resolution of today's global challenges, it can only be a transitory phase pending a broader reform of the global multilateral architecture. If we want Russia, China, India or Brazil to abide by the rules of the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund or the United Nations, we have to strengthen (and eventually reshape) these institutions.

However, such reform will take time and a lot of difficult political decisions. In the meantime, the G20 can be used as a proxy to formal organizations provided it is globally accepted that it is only a temporary fix and that it does not replace but complements the UN Security Council.

The development of the G20 as a temporary proxy for global institutions is a necessary exception to "effective multilateralism" because in today's multipolar world most issues are globally interrelated, requiring enhanced cooperation and coordination among countries worldwide. Due to its composition (all countries of significant importance are represented) the G20 constitutes at this time the best available forum to effectively discuss global challenges and ways to solve them.

However, the EU must make sure that the decisions taken during the G20 comply with the international rules and are linked with and implemented through the permanent international organizations, such as UN agencies.

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