



128

OCTOBER
2011

FOR THE EU'S STRENGTHENED ROLE IN THE UN, "SPLENDID ISOLATION" IS NOT AN OPTION

Elina Viilup Research Fellow, CIDOB

In spite of being close to the brink of economic and political meltdown, the European Union sent a muscular delegation to attend the 66th session of the UN General Assembly in New York in newly beefed up role, giving some hope for a more effective international action by the bloc as well as for a much-needed further reform of the UN.

For the first time ever, the Union enjoyed almost all of the same privileges as UN member states. Herman Van Rompuy, for example, in his position of President of the EU Council had the right to address the General Assembly on behalf of the 27 strong block among other world leaders on 22 September. Until the previous week, the Union had been represented by the rotating presidencies on such occasions.

Union member states have historically played a central role in the UN. The bloc contributes around 40 per cent of the UN regular budget and makes substantial contributions to peacekeeping operations and other UN funds and programmes. It also commands one eighth of the votes in the General Assembly and 4 out of the 15 seats in the UN Security Council, and France and the UK hold 2 of the 5 permanent seats with veto-rights. Nonetheless, the role of the Union itself has until now been limited. Despite its particular weight, it has a permanent observer status along with other regional organisations such as the Andean Community or the Council of Europe. Unlike the other regional organisations, however, it is the only non-state party to more than 50 UN conventions, and a full voting member of both the FAO and the WTO.

After intensive and hard negotiations led by Mrs. Catherine Ashton, the practical implementation of the Union's new role was hammered out in the UN resolution 65/275, which was finally approved on 3 May 2011. The new conditions brought about a number of important advantages for the Union, though stopping short of full membership. As only states can become members of the UN, the EU's observer status in the General Assembly remains unaltered but the EU will benefit from a number of privileges which have until now been only reserved for the states. In addition to the right to make interventions among the representatives

of major groups, the Union will have the right of reply and the ability to present oral proposals and amendments. It can also have its communications circulated directly and an ensured seating among the observers. The Union has not been granted neither the right to vote, nor to co-sponsor resolutions or decisions, nor to put forward candidates.

It will remain to be seen if the strengthened institutional role will also translate into a more effective international role for the European Union. The negotiations for the new special role for the Union did not go by without problems. As a result of the internal Lisbon Treaty induced reform process, the Union took the initiative to the UN already in autumn last year but was surprised to find out that it did not have the majority to put it through the General Assembly, mainly due to the negative reaction from other major regional players such as the ACP countries. The main reason for this failure seems to have been the lack of diplomatic groundwork and of explanation of the content of the draft resolution and its implications by the EU delegation. The Union's High Representative was at the time heavily criticised for exposing the Union without proper risk assessment and preparation, and the resolution could finally only pass in May this year as a result of intensive last minute personal legwork by the High Representative. Hopefully this will bring it home to the EU leaders that, in the context of a world where the EU is increasingly loosing its weight and relevance in relation to other national and regional players, the Union cannot and must not take automatic support for its actions for granted and effectively build both on its traditional and new alliances.

The new status for the EU in the UN holds, though, a lot of potential. A good performance can give the EU potentially a very prominent role in the future, if it manages to provide for coordinated and coherent EU positions. The institutional innovations could give the Union more continuity and coherence, not only inside but also vis-à-vis the rest of the world, as Herman Van Rompuy hoped in his speech to the General Assembly on September 22nd this year. This would, however, first and foremost necessitate that the Union remains committed to the international community, as expressly stated in the Lisbon Treaty. "*Les 500 millions d'Européens refusent le repli sur soi, le 'splendid isolation'*", were Mr. Van Rompuy's last words. Although tempting, the Union cannot afford to remain immersed in its internal financial and economic woes, and to retreat to isolation when it can provide solutions to a number of international crisis, not least in its own neighbourhood..

Moreover, could a bigger role given to a regional body at the UN mean that we are witnessing a first baby step toward more reforms in the UN, and thereby a shift in how the global governance is managed? Although the UN has not gone as far as to open the Pandora's box of granting the EU the full UN membership, the door to a greater role for the regions has been opened and could also potentially mean other exciting developments, such as other regional blocks demanding the same status as the EU at the UN General Assembly. The regional organisations, including the EU itself, already enjoy a strengthened role in peacekeeping missions and such a development could be seen as a natural progression.

However, the main, existential question for the EU is whether it wants to be an onlooker in its inevitable decline into irrelevance or adapt to the changing global order and take advantage of this new status at the UN. Whatever the quality and intensity of the EU's engagement and performance -and here everybody will agree with President Van Rompuy's statement- a European "splendid isolation" is not an option.