

The EU requires a new approach at the United Nations if it is to avoid punching below its weight in negotiations.

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How successful is the European Union at winning support in the United Nations? Karen E. Smith notes that as a significant voting bloc of 28 states, and as one of the primary contributors to the UN's budget, the EU should be well placed to gain support within the UN's decision-making processes. Despite this, EU states have often struggled to gain the approval of other UN members. She argues that the EU should consider altering its diplomatic approach at the UN to help win over potential allies.



The United Nations – specifically its intergovernmental bodies such as the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, where a majority of states determines outcomes – is often criticised for being ‘politicised’. Yet this is simply stating the obvious, as Inis Claude noted decades ago. States want the legitimacy that is bestowed by majority approval of their positions and policies at the UN.

The European Union should be well-placed to earn such approval. It constitutes a large voting bloc (now 28 member states plus several associated countries that tend to follow the EU's lead), and EU member states contribute hefty shares of the UN's budget (38 per cent) and peacekeeping budget (40 per cent). The EU is one of the world's largest aid donors, and is a powerful model – of conflict resolution, of regional integration, and of the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Although the EU is a minority bloc within the General Assembly and Human Rights Council (HRC), its power resources could in principle be wielded to help the EU gain approval for resolutions and positions that it considers important. Yet the EU has struggled to win over a majority of UN states in support of its views.

The EU's difficulties are often attributed to internal obstacles including a lack of unity among its member states. Yet even when the EU does achieve unity and puts forward proposals, it can still be contested, outvoted and isolated. To examine why, I have looked more closely at the responses to the arguments that the EU has used in some recent debates.

In 2010, the EU unsuccessfully requested enhanced observer status in the General Assembly, which would allow EU representatives to speak in debates and make proposals. EU member states had argued that the status was necessary because they had to comply with the Lisbon Treaty, but other UN members did not accept that the EU should have such a privileged position. Opposition to the EU move rested on perceptions that the EU was contravening the legal basis of the UN, seeking to increase its own power to the detriment of smaller countries and other regional groupings, and requesting exclusive privileges that would not be available to others. In other words, the legitimacy of the EU move was contested on grounds of legality (the UN Charter stipulates the sovereign equality of states) and democracy (all states should be able to participate equally in debates). The EU's move would exacerbate Europe's over-representation in international institutions, and strengthen the influence of developed countries in general. Furthermore, the fact that the EU requested a status that would be available only to it rankled other delegates. If the EU demands a special status, then why can't other regional groups?

The EU eventually succeeded in gaining its enhanced status, after more extended consultations with other UN members. In May 2011, the General Assembly agreed that the EU has the right to speak, make proposals, submit amendments and reply to other delegations. In exchange, the EU had to agree that other blocs could have the same rights as the EU, should they request them. In other words, to gain legitimacy the EU had to redraft its request to take into account the concerns about legality (equality of states) and democracy (allow other groups the same privileges).

At the Human Rights Council, the EU has also struggled to convince a majority of member states – including other democracies – to support its positions. For example, in 2008 the EU tried to push for a resolution condemning human rights violations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but after encountering resistance, the EU withdrew its resolution in favour of an African Group text. In 2009, the EU tried to launch discussions on possible human rights violations in Sri Lanka, but again, its draft resolution was shoved aside in favour of a Sri Lankan text.

In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the fact that the request came from ‘outsiders’ and not the African Union (AU) clearly rustled feathers: there was resentment of the EU for butting in. In both cases, many diplomats called for ‘consensus’, for ‘constructive’ engagement, for a ‘non-politicised’ approach, and for a unanimous outcome. In other words, the implication was that the EU was being confrontational, non-cooperative, and seeking to impose its own views on others. The lack of ‘inclusive’ dialogue (implying a consensual and cooperative approach) was bemoaned by many HRC members. Yet both were serious cases of human rights violations, and arguably the EU was correct in drawing attention to them. But it could not convince other countries – even democracies such as Brazil – to support its approach.



Flags of the United Nations, Credit: John & Mel Knots (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Arguments about double standards and hypocrisy infect debates about human rights at the UN, so simply bemoaning this will not improve matters. ‘Southern’ countries admonish western countries for ‘unnecessarily’ picking on some countries for violating human rights – but not criticising their allies or friends. Developed countries point to double standards, and decry ‘selectivity’ – addressing human rights issues repeatedly in some areas (principally Israeli-occupied territories), but not others. With accusations of hypocrisy coming from all corners, the EU’s concerns about selectivity have little traction.

How might the EU improve its ‘record’ at the UN? Certainly, a more consistent and unified approach would help, though paradoxically this could fuel suspicions of the EU as a powerful bloc. More importantly, the EU’s outreach efforts need to be improved as a matter of urgency. The new EU delegations in New York and Geneva should facilitate and engage in more substantive and frequent consultations with other UN member states. In addition, the doubts that non-EU states can have about the EU’s message is an indication that the EU’s rhetoric can ring very hollow.

Above all, a greater awareness of how other UN members receive the EU’s message – regardless of who is delivering it, whether the presidency or the head of the EU delegation or the High Representative herself – is necessary. Ways of altering the message and the way it is delivered so that it resonates more with potential allies should be considered. In a world in which power is more diffused and the ‘north’ is no longer as dominant or central as it was once, smart diplomacy could help win over more delegates and allow the EU to achieve more at the UN.

*For a more detailed discussion of the topic covered in this article see: [Karen E. Smith ‘The European Union and the Politics of Legitimation at the United Nations’](#), *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2013.*

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