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The BRICs at the UN General Assembly and the Consequences for EU Diplomacy

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This Policy Paper is the sixth in a series that will be produced by the Jean Monnet Multilateral Research Network on 'The Diplomatic System of the European Union'. The network is centred on three partner institutions: Loughborough University (UK), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE) and Maastricht University (NL). It also brings together colleagues from a wide range of academic institutions within the EU, and includes participants from EU institutions and non-governmental organisations. The aim of the Policy Papers series is to contribute to current debates about the emerging EU system of diplomacy and to identify the key challenges to which the EU's diplomatic system will need to respond in the short and medium term.

The BRICs at the UN General Assembly and the Consequences for EU Diplomacy

Overview

Today's world is increasingly characterized by multipolarity and new emerging powers in the fields of economy, finance, military and politics. In this new global reality having only the American superpower as a partner is not sufficient for the EU, and therefore critical appraisal of the EU's position was highly necessary. At the UN climate conference in Copenhagen 2009 for example, the EU was sidelined by the US and a group of emerging countries comprising Brazil, China, India and South-Africa. Realising that the relations of the EU with these newly emerging economies needed to be given renewed attention, an extraordinary session of the European Council of September 2010 on EU external relations tried to redefine the EU's relations with these newly emerging economies.

This policy paper empirically investigates the BRICs reality at the United Nations (UN), by looking into the voting cohesion between Brasil, Russia, India and China at the UN General Assembly between 2006 and 2009. It examines what this new reality means for the formulation of EU diplomacy towards those countries.

EU relations with the BRICs

Brazil, Russia, India and China - also known as the BRIC countries - are very relevant for the EU and its diplomacy. Despite this relevance currently the EU has no BRIC policy defined as such. However, the EU realizes that effective multilateralism has to be apprehended in a world where power relations have been changing. Therefore the EU has launched strategic partnerships¹ with several third countries including the BRICs, defining these partnerships as building blocks of an effective multilateral order with the United Nations at its apex, as was stressed in the 2008 European Security Strategy Implementation Report.² Over the past decades the EU has also developed a bilateral diplomacy towards each of the four countries separately. The formal relations with these four emerging countries follow largely the same pattern. Generally the legal bases for these relationships are long-term partnership and cooperation agreements or cooperation agreements. These agreements are mostly trade related, but also comprise elements that go beyond trade. Furthermore, all the BRIC nations are granted the status of 'strategic partner' and annual summits (in the case of Russia even biannual), ministerial meetings as well as sectoral dialogues between EU officials and representatives of these third countries take place on a regular basis, contributing to the establishment of institutional frameworks. Nevertheless, despite the broadly similar patterns that these relations follow one can speak of differences in for example background, historical relations and timing between the four relationships.³

Notwithstanding the intentions of increasing convergence among these parties, differences still occur when it comes to the pursuit of a shared vision of the international political system between the BRICs and the EU. The EU prefers legally binding agreements or treaties as the instruments of global governance. It favours multilateralism over more limited arrangements and it does not consider legally binding agreements as an essential assault on national

¹ See for instance Renard, T. (2011). *The treachery of strategies: a call for true EU Strategic Partnerships*. Egmont Paper 45.

² European Security Strategy (2008). 'Report on the implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing security in a changing world,' European Council: Brussels.

³ See for instance Keukeleire, S. & Bruyninckx, H. (2011). The European Union, the BRICs and the emerging new world order. In: Hill, C. & Smith, M. Eds., *International Relations and the European Union 2nd Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

sovereignty. The BRIC nations in contrary have a preference for non-legally binding political commitments. They are not particularly in favour of all-inclusive multilateralism and they generally start from a more realist perspective on sovereignty.

Although the BRICs broadly agree in their views on global governance and the international political system, in terms of GDP per capita, population as well as trade figures one can speak of significant disparities among these countries.⁴ Moreover, competition and rivalry can be noted between some of the BRIC countries.⁵ These differences and divergences support the hypothesis that the potential of the BRIC dialogue being transformed into a firm and coherent bloc is rather limited.

In this policy paper the BRIC reality will be explored by assessing the voting behaviour of Brazil, Russia, India and China at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The starting point will be the year 2006, since in that year during the 61st General Assembly of the United Nations the political dialogue between the BRIC countries first started. The UNGA is an important institutional framework when it comes to multilateralism, since it is a forum where 193 sovereign states meet and vote regularly on resolutions affecting the international community.⁶ Nevertheless one has to take into account that the UNGA does not have law-making competences and the resolutions passed by the Assembly therefore should rather be seen as recommendations. In other words, the resolutions that are voted upon are legally non-binding.

BRIC performance at the UN: more than a label?

In this section, the BRIC countries' voting record for each of the six United Nations General Assembly Committees in the period 2006-09 will be examined.⁷ The purpose is to see whether there are differences or similarities in voting behaviour and to assess whether the BRICs are a reality at the UN rather than just a label introduced by investment bank Goldman Sachs in 2001.⁸

First an overview will be given in percentages of total agreement, being the resolutions where the BRICs cast identical votes. Second, the voting distance between this group of countries will be specified. A complete disagreement between the countries will be allocated the score of '1'. A full agreement will be given the value of '0'. Partial agreement, where there is a combination of either states voting 'yes' or 'no' combined with other countries abstaining, will be given the score of 0.5, since it lies in between complete disagreement and complete agreement. This will generate statistics about the maximum extent of disagreement between the BRIC countries. The actual score on agreement among these countries will be related to the maximum distance that is possible. The maximum distance that states can have will therefore be '100'. In the same way, the minimum distance that will occur when there is

⁴ See for instance Cameron, F. (2011). *The EU and the BRICs*. DSEU Policy Paper 3.

⁵ See for instance Godement, F. e.a. (2009). *China and India: rivals always, partners sometimes*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.

⁶ After the accession of South Sudan as of July 2011 the UN has 193 member states.

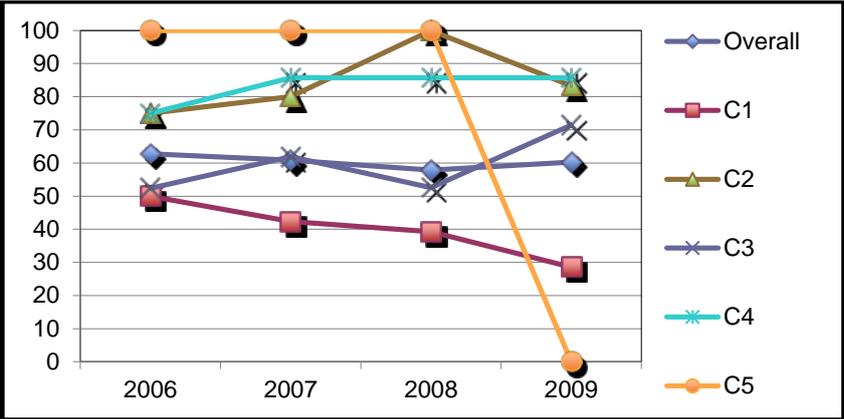
⁷ The UN General Assembly is composed of six Main Committees including the First Committee (Disarmament and International Security Committee), the Second Committee (Economic and Financial Committee), the Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee), the Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization Committee), the Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary Committee) and the Sixth Committee (Legal Committee). Since no resolutions were voted upon in the Sixth Committee in the 2006-2009 period this Committee is not included in this analysis.

⁸ O'Neill, J. (2001) *The World Needs Better Economic BRICs*. Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper, No. 66.

complete agreement will be '0'. This is the case when all states cast identical votes. The following scale to score the level of cohesion is defined:

- High level of cohesion: Distance lies between 0 and 10
- Relative high level of cohesion: Distance lies between 10 and 20
- Limited level of cohesion: Distance lies between 20 and 30
- Relatively low level of cohesion: Distance lies between 30 and 40
- Low level of cohesion: Distance lies above 40

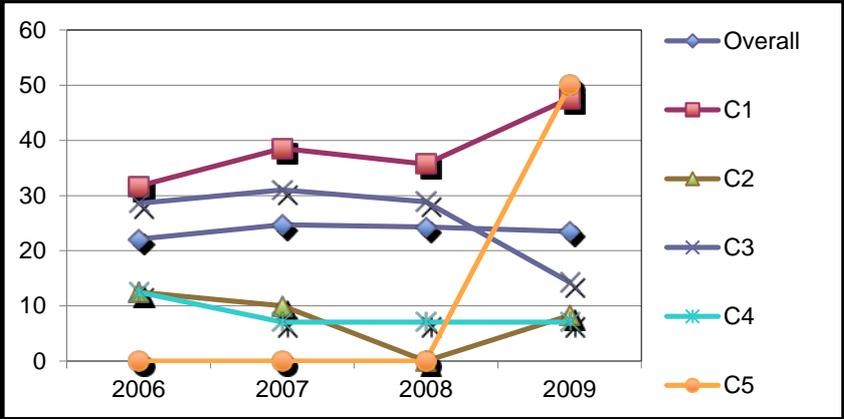
Figure 1: BRIC voting cohesion at UNGA 2006-2009 (% total agreement)



Source: Data

retrieved from unbisnet.un.org

Figure 2: BRIC voting cohesion at UNGA 2006-2009 (Dmax = 100)



Source: Data

retrieved from unbisnet.un.org

The data in figure 1 and 2 do not indicate the existence of a BRIC bloc at the United Nations General Assembly. There is no systematic increase of voting cohesion from the starting point of the BRIC consultation in the year 2006 onwards. As one can see in figure 1 in more than half of the cases there is complete agreement between the BRIC countries, so on the majority of the resolutions they cast identical votes. Complete disagreements occurred several times (5 to 8 times for the 2006-2009 period). Partial disagreement – where some countries vote either 'yes' or 'no' and other abstain or are absent – take place quite often. This means that the BRICs only agree to a rather limited extent on these issues.

What can be said about the distance between the BRIC countries? In the year 2006 the distance between the BRICs was 22.1, in the year 2007 it was 24.7, in the year 2008 it was 23.7 and in 2009 it was 23.5. With the maximum distance with disagreement on all the issues being 100 one can claim that there is a limited level of voting cohesion between the BRICs in the UNGA in general. Moreover, the outcomes of the voting behaviour in these four years only differ by a maximum of 3 points, which means that outcomes are quite consistent.

Between the UNGA committees however several differences can be distinguished. The First Committee of the UNGA deals with issues related to disarmament and international security. From the figures above one can derive the trend of increasing disagreement among the BRICs. Full agreement only occurs in less than half of the cases. Therefore when it comes to disarmament and international security issues the distance between the BRIC nations evolves from 31.7 in 2006 to 38.5 in 2007, 35.7 in 2008 and 47.6 in 2009. As a result one can see this outcome as a relatively low level of voting cohesion, and for the year 2009 even as a low level of voting cohesion.

The Second Committee of the UNGA deals with economic and financial questions. When it comes to the Second Committee of the UNGA it is essential to mention that only a low number of issues was voted upon. In the vast majority of the cases the BRICs cast identical votes, with the lowest percentage of agreement being 75% in 2006 and the highest being 100% in the year 2008. There are no full disagreements here, leading to a measured distance on economic issues varying from 12.5 in 2006 to 0 in 2008. Therefore the level of voting cohesion among the BRICs in this Committee can be scored as relatively high for the year 2006 and high for the period 2007-2009.

The Third Committee is concerned with social, humanitarian and cultural issues. When it comes to issues related to human rights, on the majority of the resolutions voted upon there was a full agreement among the BRICs, though since there were also several disagreements and partial agreements one can conclude there is a limited level of cohesion here. The distance fluctuates around 30, with the year 2009 being an exception with a distance of 14.3, leading to a level of voting cohesion which can be seen as relatively high.

The Fourth Committee deals with special political and decolonization questions. The Fourth Committee is especially interesting since two of the BRIC countries (Brazil and India) have a colonial past. On the vast majority of the resolutions the BRICs cast identical votes. Moreover, there were no disagreements in this Committee between the BRICs in the 2006-2009 period. The distance therefore was relatively low, being 12.5 in the year 2006 and 7.1 in the years 2007, 2008, 2009. The level of voting cohesion for the Fourth Committee therefore can be seen as relatively high for the year 2006 and high for the 2007-2009 period.

The Fifth Committee is concerned with administration and budget issues of the United Nations. As was the case with Committee Two in this Committee only rather a limited number of resolutions with votes occurred on the agenda in the 2006-2009 period. One can see in figure 1 that except for the year 2009, 100% cohesion between the BRICs was managed, leading to a distance score of zero, the lowest distance score possible, leading to the highest level of voting cohesion possible. These findings though are not really surprising, given the tradition of consensus in this Fifth Committee.

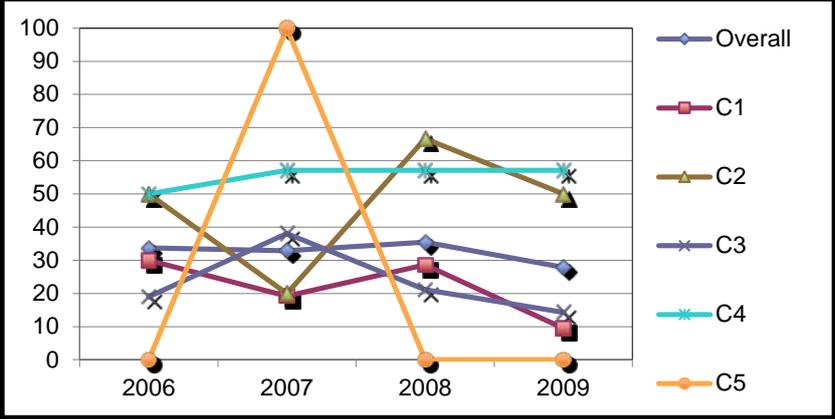
At this point, some critical remarks should be made on the methodology deployed and the outcomes of this research. The analysis above of the voting patterns is quantitative and therefore only limited conclusions can be drawn. The scope of research is restricted to four years only, which makes it rather difficult to distinguish long-term trends. Besides that, only a significant minority of roughly 20 to 30 percent of the resolutions passes the UN General Assembly with a vote, meaning that the vast majority of the UNGA resolutions are adopted without vote. Additionally, such analysis might overlook the fact that cohesion between BRICs is part of a much broader cohesion among (most of the) UN members, hence diminishing the specific significance of the BRIC countries in this cohesion. Still, despite these caveats the BRICs' extent of voting cohesion can be a useful indicator of their mutual relations. Moreover the point that despite the fact these countries started cooperating in the BRIC framework there was no significant increase of voting cohesion in the period studied remains valid.

The BRIC reality at the UNGA and the consequences for EU diplomacy

The above findings demonstrate that one can barely speak of a BRIC reality at the UN General Assembly and they support the hypothesis that the potential of the BRIC dialogue being transformed into a firm and coherent bloc is rather limited. The question of interest in this policy brief is what the consequences are for EU diplomacy. One can indeed question whether these countries are the like-minded partners the European Union is looking for? In this second part of the paper, the EU and BRIC countries' voting record for each of the six⁹ United Nations General Assembly Committees will be examined, in order to get a better insight into the differences and similarities in voting behaviour between the Union and its potential partners.

When it comes to human rights issues for example Gowan and Brantner argue that “the EU increasingly votes as one but the rest of the world has not followed; support for the EU positions at the UN is steadily decreasing.”¹⁰ Moreover, when it comes to the point of agenda setting they state that on human rights issues “the UN is increasingly being shaped by China, Russia and their allies.”¹¹ This follows the trend of increasing assertiveness of the emerging powers.

Figure 3: BRIC and EU voting cohesion at UNGA 2006-2009 (% total agreement)

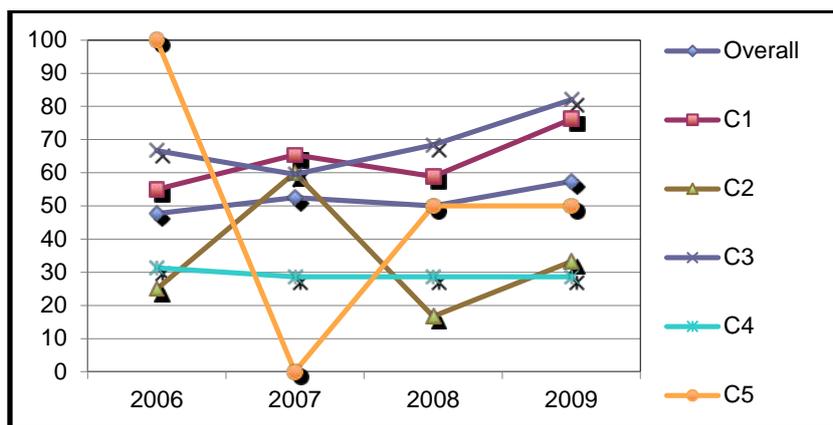


Source: Data

retrieved from unbisnet.un.org

⁹ Since no resolutions were voted upon in the Sixth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly in the 2006-2009 period this Committee is excluded in this analysis.
¹⁰ Gowan, R. & Brantner, F. (2008). *A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations, p. 7.
¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 1.

Figure 4: BRIC and EU voting cohesion at UNGA 2006-2009 (Dmax = 100)



Source: Data

retrieved from unbisnet.un.org

Is there cohesion in the way these two groups of countries voted? As one can see in the figure above overall there is a relatively low level of identical votes cast. As a consequence, in quite a lot of cases full disagreement occurs between the countries of the Union and the BRICs. In all the years besides the year 2006 there are more complete disagreements between these two groups of countries than there are complete agreements. Besides that one can also speak of a high level of partial (dis)agreements. Thus, for the year 2006 (partial) disagreement between the BRIC countries and the EU countries exists in 57 of the 86 cases. For the year 2007 this number is even higher: In 53 of the 79 resolutions with vote there was partial disagreement. Furthermore, in 2008 this was the case with 49 of the 76 resolutions and in 2009 it was 49 out of 68.

So what can one say about the distance between the EU member states on the one hand and the BRIC nations on the other? In the year 2006 the distance was 47.7, in the year 2007 it was 52.5, in the year 2008 it was 50.0 and in the year 2009 it was 57.4. Since the maximum distance that can be achieved is 100 one can conclude that the distance between the member states of the Union and the BRICs is relatively high. Can one derive a trend from the 2006-2009 period? One can observe a fluctuation of the outcomes, with 47.7 as the lowest distance and 57.4 as the highest. Therefore one can conclude that only a low level of voting cohesion exists between the emerging countries and the EU.

Are these findings surprising? One might question that, despite the commitment of the EU member states to act as a coherent group, this is only the case in roughly 70 percent of the UNGA resolutions voted upon. Additionally, the EU member states are divided in their opinion towards for example Russia and China.¹² Furthermore, and as already noted, the BRIC countries can hardly be seen as a coherent group and lack the capability of transforming the BRIC dialogue into concrete actions as a cohesive bloc. Since to a certain extent complete and partial disagreements between these countries occur, this means that one cannot really speak of a consistent set of countries. That the combination then of these two country blocs leads to a low extent of voting cohesion cannot really be seen as surprising.

Between the UNGA committees, one can however distinguish several differences. In the First Committee of the UNGA that deals with issues related to disarmament and international security both the BRICs and the Union's member states cast identical votes on only a limited number of resolutions. The percentage of disagreement between the two blocs fluctuates

¹² See for instance: Fox, J. & Godement, F. (2009). *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations and Leonard, M. & Popescu N. (2007). *A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.

between 40% in 2006 and 61,9% in 2009. The distance between these two groups of countries varies from 55 in 2006 to 65.4 in 2007, 58.9 in 2008 and finally 76.2 in the year 2009. Therefore one can conclude that when it comes to international security and disarmament issues, the level of voting cohesion between the Union's member states and the BRICs is low.

The Second Committee of the UNGA focuses on economic and financial questions. As mentioned before only a relatively low number of resolutions was voted upon in the Second Committee. The percentage of agreement varies from 20% in 2007 to 66,7% in 2008. The level of distance differs from 16.7 in 2008, which can be seen as quite low to 60 in 2007, which can be seen as high. The results of figures 3 and 4 show that hardly any trend can be derived. The distance results show that in 2006 there was a limited level of voting cohesion, in 2007 it was low, in 2008 it was relatively high and in 2009 it was relatively low.

The Third Committee of the UNGA touches upon social, humanitarian and cultural issues. In the majority of the cases no identical votes were cast. The lowest percentage of disagreement was reached in 2006, namely 52,4%. The highest was 78,6% in 2009. Therefore the level of voting cohesion on human rights issues is low. This can be underlined by the distance scores being 66.7 in 2006, 59.5 in 2007, 68.4 in 2008 and 82.1 in 2009.

The Fourth Committee is special since as mentioned above it touches upon decolonization issues. This is rather interesting in the BRIC-EU case since Brazil was a former colony of Portugal and India was a former colony of the United Kingdom. As can be seen in figure 3, in 50-57.1% of the cases both the BRICs and the Union's member states cast identical votes. Only in a rather limited number of cases can one speak about a full disagreement. The measured distance fluctuates around the 30, leading to a relatively low level of voting cohesion between the EU and BRICs in the year 2006 and a limited level of voting cohesion in the period 2007-2009.

The Fifth Committee is concerned with administration and budget issues of the United Nations. As was the case with Committee Two, in this Committee only a rather limited number of resolutions with votes occurred on the agenda in the 2006-2009 period. From the results, as can be seen in figure 3, one can hardly derive any trend or conclusions. The only thing that can be said is the outcomes differ like day and night. In 2006 there was 100% disagreement, in 2007 100% full agreement and in both 2008 and 2009 100% partial agreement between the EU member states and the BRIC countries when it comes to administrative and budgetary issues. About the level of voting cohesion in this Committee therefore barely anything can be said. This can be seen as rather remarkable, since usually Committee 5 is characterized by the tradition of consensus.¹³

Given the relatively low extent of voting cohesion among the BRICs and the EU member states the relationship between both parties can hardly be noted as one of "like-minded partners". The member states of the European Union act as a coherent group in approximately 70 percent of the resolutions put to a vote and the BRIC countries can only to a certain limited extent be seen as a coherent group as became clear in the previous section, so the fact that the combination of these two country blocs then leads to a low extent of voting cohesion cannot really be seen as surprising.

However, regardless of the question whether the BRIC nations vote and act cohesively at the UN General Assembly, for EU diplomacy a focus on only a rather limited number of countries might not be sufficient. The United Nations General Assembly is a political arena that is characterized by the principle of one country one vote, leading to the political reality that a majority of the 192 UN states needs to vote in favour of a resolution in order to let it pass. As

¹³ Worthwhile mentioning is that the critical remarks made in the previous section on the used methodology also apply to this entire paragraph.

demonstrated in 2010 the EU is sometimes unable to muster a broader coalition of like-minded partners, since on the 14th of September a EU bid for more rights at the United Nations suffered a surprising defeat. This could even be seen as a wakeup call since even some of its so-called strategic partners cast opposing votes.¹⁴ It stressed the importance of a widely accepted alliance that is a necessity for making EU diplomacy work in the policy practice. It demonstrated that the EU should take more account of the interests of others in order to safeguard its own. This is particularly true as in the slipstream of some individual BRIC nations other smaller Latin American, African or Asian countries often follow. Gaining the support of one or more BRIC countries will often also lead to the support of other Latin American, African or Asian states, as these often adopt positions close to those of BRIC or other major emerging countries (and particularly Brazil, India and South Africa) as a point of reference for determining their own position when casting a vote in the UN.¹⁵

Concluding recommendations

This policy paper has focused mainly on two questions. First, an empirical examination of the BRICs reality at the UN was made in order to get a better insight into the level of voting cohesion between the four BRIC countries at the UN General Assembly between 2006 and 2009. Second, the consequences of this reality for the formulation of EU diplomacy towards those countries were examined.

As demonstrated above the data in this policy paper do not indicate a BRIC reality at the United Nations General Assembly. There is no systematic increase of voting cohesion from the starting point of the BRIC consultation in the year 2006 on. Cooperation in the BRIC-framework has only reached the level of a loose cooperation among the four emerging countries. Consequently, the potential of the BRIC dialogue being transformed into a firm and coherent bloc can be described as rather limited. It is highly unlikely that the 2011 accession of South Africa to the BRIC grouping will overcome this issue. On the contrary, the inclusion of another emerging country with a divergent background, economy, GDP and population will most probably make cooperation even more complex. However, an assessment whether this is really the case goes beyond the scope of this policy paper.

Nonetheless, the lack of a true BRIC reality as well as the fact that the BRICs are not always like-minded partners of the EU does not mean that these countries individually are irrelevant for the European Union. The observation that the world as well as the economical and political reality is changing still holds and the BRIC countries simply cannot be ignored in this new international context.

Concluding, the following policy recommendations are made.

- Since the hypothesis that ‘the potential of the BRIC dialogue being transformed into a firm and coherent bloc is rather limited’ is confirmed in this policy paper, EU diplomacy should continue to focus on bilateral relations with each of the BRIC countries.
- When it comes to acting more cohesively at the UN General Assembly there is room for improvement of EU diplomacy. The first purpose to achieve is an increasing EU coherence. As mentioned before the EU coherence at the UN General Assembly is

¹⁴ Phillips, L. (2010). *EU bid for more rights at UN suffers surprise defeat*. EUObserver 15 September. Eventually in May 2011 the EU gained the special observer status with 180 countries voting in favor, 10 countries absent and Syria as well as Zimbabwe abstaining.

¹⁵ Keukeleire, S. (forthcoming). *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. For an overview of the extent that third countries cast identical votes with the EU on human rights issues at the UNGA, see Gowan and Brantner (2010) p. 4.

generally around 70%, which means that in a significant minority of the resolutions EU member states do not cast identical votes. Moreover, EU member states are divided in their opinions towards for example Russia and China. In order to act as a strategic partner and a coherent bloc itself the EU should overcome these internal divisions.

- Yet EU navel-gazing should be avoided. To overcome this and to increase the extent of voting cohesion with leading third countries, the EU should take more into account the interests of other parties in order to safeguard its own - particularly since in the slipstream of some individual BRIC nations other (Latin American, African and Asian) countries often follow. This could contribute to tackling the problem of decreasing support for EU positions at the UN.

The Diplomatic System of the EU Network, funded by the European Commission's Jean Monnet Project, brings together three partner universities with a strong tradition in the study of European integration in its international context. The lead partner is Loughborough University, and specifically its Department of Politics, History and International Relations and Centre for the Study of International Governance. The other partners are Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, from Belgium, and Maastricht University, from the Netherlands. Each partner is responsible for key events and a research strand. In addition selected experts drawn from EU and Member State institutions and from relevant sections of civil society will be invited to participate in selected network activities.

Nothing in this paper should be construed as representing the views of any EU or national institution, including those represented in the network itself. For further information about the network and its activities, please visit <http://dseu.lboro.ac.uk>.