The European Union and interregionalism

Fredrik Söderbaum

Introduction

Interregionalism between what is today the European Union (EU) and other regions is no novelty. There is a long history of loose region-to-region relations between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of countries, which has been revised and developed under the new Cotonou Agreement and other EU-Africa frameworks. The EU’s interregional co-operation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also been operational over a long period, dating back to the early 1970s. Since the early 1990s interregional co-operation has been further developed as a key feature of the EU’s external relations, albeit not always with a consistent formulation.

In line with post-Cold War optimism, the bulk of the literature on the topic in the 1990s was often built on the assumption that interregionalism is an integrative process that promotes cosmopolitan values and, as such, constituted a building block of a single multi-layered global governance architecture (Rüland 2009: 1). More recent literature has either become more pessimistic, or has turned its attention to other topics. Hence, the logic, depth and effects of interregionalism in the EU’s external relations remain contested. A great deal of the scepticism is connected with confusion regarding fundamental concepts, which has blurred our understanding of interregional dynamics.

This chapter, therefore, commences with a discussion of the conceptualization of interregionalism and how it is inserted into the contemporary global multi-level governance complex. The next three sections focus on the main counterpart regions with which the EU has interregional relations—Africa, Asia and Latin America—and the variation in interregionalism across three policy areas (trade, aid and security, respectively). The conclusion shows how these different approaches to the empirical reality of EU interregionalism speak back to the academic debate on the status of EU interregionalism in the global multi-level governance complex.

Conceptualizing interregionalism

Interregionalism is still a poorly understood phenomenon in international relations, and there is no consensus over any single definition. As this multidimensional phenomenon develops in
relation to important empirical dynamics, conceptualizing it requires a theoretical toolkit that provides both conceptual clarity and analytical relevance. In a generic sense, interregionalism can be defined as the interaction between two specified regions. Some of the disagreement (and confusion) in the field reflects different understandings and conceptualizations of what the term ‘region’ can be taken to mean in this context, while different understandings of ‘relations’ between regions have been developed.

The most clear-cut example of interregionalism, often referred to as ‘pure interregionalism’, develops between two clearly identifiable regions (often two regional intergovernmental organizations) within an explicit institutional framework. However, pure interregionalism captures only a fraction of contemporary region-to-region relations. This is because, first, many ‘regions’ are dispersed and porous, without clearly identifiable borders, and, further, it is an empirical question whether a given regional organization represents the region and has a high level of regional actorship or agency (see Hettne’s chapter in this book). One therefore needs to go beyond ‘pure interregionalism’ to understand not only the emergence and persistent varieties of interregionalism, but also how this multidimensional phenomenon is inserted within the global governance structure.

The concept of transregionalism is employed to capture dynamics that stretch beyond the narrow interaction between the formal and mainly intergovernmental regional organizations referred to above. Transregionalism, then, refers to region-to-region relations, where two or more regions that are dispersed have weak actorship, and where neither region negotiates as a region; an example is the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Transregionalism has also been used in order to cover so-called transnational (non-state) relations—including transnational networks of corporate production or of non-governmental organizations—again for the purpose of moving beyond conventional state-centrism (Aggarwal and Fogarty 2004a: 5).

Hybrid interregionalism can mean, first, that one institutionalized region interacts with a group of countries from another unorganized or dispersed region. For instance, in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the Mediterranean countries negotiate individually with the EU. Aggarwal and Fogarty (2004a: 5) take the Lomé Agreement as a similar example of hybrid interregionalism, where the EU has trade relations with a set of countries that are not grouped within their own customs union or free trade agreement. As Rüland points out, to some extent hybrid interregionalism has been used as a residual category and covers a wide variety of relationships, such as the continental Europe-Africa process, ‘imagined interregionalism’, and ‘interregionalism without regions’, such as the India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) co-operation (Rüland 2009).

Hänggi uses hybrid interregionalism when one region/regional organization, such as the EU, interacts bilaterally with one great power. Formally, this can be thought of as a ‘region-to-state’ relation, which may not have much to do with region-to-region relations, but it may also come close to or give way to more developed interregionalism in those cases where the single power has a dominant position in its own region; examples are the USA in North America, India in South Asia, or the People’s Republic of China in Asia (Hänggi 2006: 41ff.). Needless to say, such region-to-state relations are not unequivocal, and as Karen Smith (2006b) correctly points out, under certain conditions such relations may also prevent interregionalism from taking place. What this discussion shows is that interregionalism is intimately intertwined with other forms of interaction, such as bilateralism, multilateralism and regionalism.

The generic concept of bilateralism describes an interaction between ‘actors’. Conventionally, bilateralism is, above all, used to denote activities between two nation-states, yet the fact that the EU is perceived to be part of bilateral relationships calls for an expansion of the concept. Bilateralism can be a means for regions to be seen as actors in world politics. Being an actor, or having ‘actorship’, is not necessarily the same for a region as it is for a nation-state, although
there are of course certain similarities. Rather, the fundamental issue is whether regions have the capacity to act and to pursue co-ordinated, coherent and consistent policies towards the outside world, while having a significant impact on the external environment and the behaviour of other actors (cf. Hettne in this volume). The EU is deeply engaged in a series of bilateral relationships; the most important are with the USA, Russia, Canada, Mexico, China, Japan, Brazil, India and South Africa. There is a complex relationship between bilateralism and interregionalism. In the case of Japan and China (and to some extent Brazil), bilateralism complements interregionalism (the Asia–Europe Meeting—ASEM and Mercosur—the southern common market), whereas the bilateral relations to India exist in lieu of an interregional relationship with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (depending on India’s insistence on bilateralism).

In relation to multilateralism, it is often overlooked that interregionalism constitutes an additional level of interaction in global governance and ‘tends to be regarded simply as a stepping-stone or body of resistance to globalisation’ (see Gilson 2002: xii). For instance, the EU is able to perform as an actor on a variety of levels in world affairs: it enters into agreements with other states (bilateralism); and acts within the United Nations (UN) and The World Trade Organization (WTO) framework (multilateralism); while also engaging in the construction of interregionalism and regionalism. The example of the EU suggests that the relationship between interregionalism and multilateralism is important, but it is also related to other forms of interaction in global governance. It should be recognized that sometimes bilateralism and interregionalism are in competition, but the two can also exist side by side, or even be mutually reinforcing.

Finally, reflection about the relationship between regionalism and interregionalism is underdeveloped in the research field (Doidge 2007). A rather uncontroversial proposition is that regionalism will give rise to interregionalism. However, research draws attention to a more intriguing two-way relationship whereby interregionalism can, at the same time, reinforce regionalism. According to Gilson (2002), for example, the nascent regionalizing endeavours in East Asia have been bolstered by the need for the now 16 Asian countries to provide a collective response to interactions with the EU (see also Söderbaum and Stål Gren 2010a; Alecu de Flers and Regelsberger 2005: 318).

EU-Africa

Interregional relations between Europe and Africa are a patchwork of relationships. There exist different levels of pure interregionalism, between the EU and the individual Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and between the EU and the African Union (AU); and also the hybrid, even ‘imagined’, interregionalism (Holland 2006) between the EU and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific states (the ACP group).

The historical focus in the EU–Africa partnership has been on a special aid-trading relationship with former colonies, and the ACP counterpart more or less lacked regional actorship. Even if earlier interregional accords were officially designed to promote development, the results were not convincing. EU policy-makers are now describing the EU–ACP relations in more symmetric terms, as ‘partnerships’. There is also a stronger emphasis on, for example, reciprocal trade, supporting regionally based economic co-operation and integration, human rights, democracy and good governance. We are facing a major transformation of a historical pattern of interregionalism, in many ways heading towards more pure interregionalism, although the outcome still lacks concrete shape.

Since the turn of the century, intercontinental dialogue and co-operation between the EU and the AU has become an increasingly important feature of interregional relations. The Joint
Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) was adopted at the Second EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon in 2007, and it now serves as the overarching policy framework for intercontinental relations, complementing rather than replacing other frameworks, such as the ACP and the Union for the Mediterranean (former Euro-Mediterranean Partnership). The AU and its commission has a central role in the strategy, and this is the first time that the EU has taken part in a framework dealing with Africa as a single continent. JAES is significant in relation to its intention to create a more overtly political relationship between the two continents. The strategy focuses on eight thematic ‘strategic partnerships’, which reach well beyond the traditional spheres of aid and development:

- peace and security;
- democratic governance and human rights;
- trade, regional integration and infrastructure;
- millennium development goals;
- energy;
- climate change;
- migration, mobility and employment;
- science, information society and space.

One crucial type of partnership in EU-Africa relations is the much-discussed Economic Partnerships Agreement (EPA), which the EU seeks to establish with geographically more focused regions and regional organizations. The EU claims to be combining trade and aid in a new way in the new EPAs.

The idea is to help the ACP countries integrate with their regional neighbours as a step towards global integration, and to help them build institutional capacities and apply principles of good governance. At the same time, the EU will continue to open its markets to products from the ACP group, and other developing countries.

(European Commission 2004a: 10)

A closer integration of the African countries and regions into the global economy is, in the EU’s official rhetoric, seen as the way for future trading relations as well as a development strategy that is of mutual gain, both for the EU and for the weaker partner regions (European Commission 2004a: 3).

The European Development Fund (EDF) is the main funding instrument for development co-operation under the Cotonou Agreement, although ACP states are also eligible for thematic instrument funding. The EDF is, in turn, funded by the EU member states (it is not ‘budgetized’ within the European Community—EC). The 10th EDF covers the 2008–13 period, with a total of €22,700m. (a substantial increase compared with the 9th EDF, with its initial allocation of €13,800m. for 2000–07) (European Commission 2008e). Regional integration is an increasingly important goal of EU-ACP co-operation. Under the 10th EDF the regional co-operation envelope almost doubled to €1,780m. In terms of regional integration among ACP countries, the Commission has called on the EU to support the five priorities of strengthening regional institutions, building regionally integrated markets, supporting business development, connecting regional infrastructure networks, and developing regional policies for sustainable development.

The fruitfulness of the EU-African interregional relationships, especially in trade and aid, are contested in academia, among policy-makers and in civil society. For instance, Mary Farrell argues that, contrary to official rhetoric, the EU’s partnership strategy and the Cotonou
Agreement reflect neoliberal goals and the extension of economic liberalization in the self-interest of the EU, rather than the normative agenda so often stated in the official discourse. According to Farrell, this reflects 'a triumph of realism over idealism' (Farrell 2006). However, Farrell goes on to assert that although norms and issues such as human rights, democracy, the rule of law and good governance were mentioned in earlier agreements, they are emphasized much more strongly in the recent Cotonou Agreement (2003). The important point is that these are more or less imposed on the African countries, and there are much stronger political conditionalities attached, while violations of these norms can be used for hegemonic control by the EU (Farrell 2006: 22–23). This has also been labelled 'soft imperialism' (Hettne and Söderbaum 2005).

The EU’s international development co-operation in Africa, in particular, accentuates the co-existence of EU development co-operation policy and policies pursued by the individual EU member states, resulting in a rather complex relationship between the EU and Africa, which is marked by a significant contrast between the EU’s official policy discourse and the logic of development co-operation taking place in practice (Söderbaum and Stålgren 2010b). While, officially, the policy of the EU claims to promote EU-African interregional co-operation and regional co-operation in Africa, and to build a common EU development policy, many of the largest EU member states (plus the European Commission) have their own individual programmes for supporting region-building in Africa, resulting in a series of overlapping and sometimes competing donor-driven region-building programmes. The argument here is that the European Commission simply acts as ‘the twenty-eighth’ EU member state, conducting its own aid policies, rather than serving as the hub for donor co-ordination within the EU as a whole (Söderbaum and Stålgren 2010b). Furthermore, the few initiatives that exist for donor co-ordination of regional programmes are, above all, driven by bilateral actors or within multilateral frameworks, such as the Paris Agenda or the UN framework, or in more flexible budget support mechanisms and lead donor mechanisms, severely curtailing the perception of the EU as a collective actor. In other words, there is a long way to go before we can speak of a common EU approach to Africa in the field of development co-operation, regardless of whether countries or regions are counterparts (Söderbaum and Stålgren 2010b).

The EU-Africa Peace and Security Partnership has three priority actions: to enhance dialogue on challenges to peace and security; to achieve full operationalization of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and to achieve predictable funding for African-led peace support operations (which has received the bulk of the funding). According to EU guidelines, each operation to be financed from the African Peace Facility (APF) will have to be initiated by the AU or the sub-regional organization. The APF has been used to fund the AU Missions in Sudan (AMIS I and AMIS II), the AU Mission for Support of the Elections in the Comoros (AMISEC), the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the Multinational Force of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, CEMAC (FOMUC), staff recruitment and training in the regional economic communities (RECs), and for capacity building of the Peace and Security Department of the AU (see Söderbaum and Tavares 2009). Despite the fact that the budget initially was earmarked, the Peace Facility ultimately disbursed up to €375m. until the end of 2007. Aware of the need to increase its financial commitment, in April 2006 the EU agreed to provide €300m. under the 10th EDF so that the APF could continue its activities for another three-year period (2008–10).

It has been argued that the EU’s involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is an important test case for the EU’s conflict management capacity. The EU’s involvement in the regional conflict configuration in the Great Lakes region is multidimensional, and it has tried to strengthen the UN and the AU, as well as its own EU-based peace operations, using military as well as civilian peace instruments, and working through multilateralism, interregionalism and a
EU-bilateral and traditional bilateralism. Although the EU-led Operation Artemis can be seen as a relatively successful, although limited, interregional response, it has been argued that the EU has adopted an unassertive interregional approach to conflict management in the Great Lakes region (Smis and Kingah 2010). The reasons for this are both internal and external to the EU. The internal factors include, for example, a lack of co-ordination and poorly defined policies within the EU, poor funding, and a deeper neglect of African crises. The external factors are related to the nature of the conflict itself, and the roles and interests of other actors; for example, conflicting interests among African states, competing regional configurations and regional organizations, the role of third countries, and vested corporate interests.

**EU-Asia**

EU interregionalism with Asia has existed for many years, mainly within the framework of EU and ASEAN dialogue. The EU’s relations with South-East Asia have gone through three phases (Grimm 2010a; also see Robles 2004). The first phase (1967–80) was informal and loosely structured around ASEAN. The second phase (1980–94) was largely driven by geopolitics, with aid relations with South-East Asia increasing rapidly during these years. Internal and external events in the early 1990s again changed the relationship between the EU and South-East Asia, from which emerged the EU’s Asia strategy in 1994, and the establishment of the ASEM framework several years later.

The Asia Strategy signified the growing importance placed on these relations on the EU side, and reflected the EU’s awareness of Asia’s increasing economic and political weight on the world stage. The Asia strategy focused mainly on trade and economic relations, but also included a political dimension, aiming to contribute to stability, the consolidation of the rule of law, and human rights in Asia. An updated version of the strategy in 2001, ‘Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships’, had the stated objective of ‘strengthening the EU’s political and economic presence across the region, and raising this to a level commensurate with the growing global weight of an enlarged EU’ (European Commission 2001c).

The ASEM process is loosely structured around three pillars:

- The political pillar, including dialogue on international and regional developments, the multilateral system, security and anti-terrorism co-operation, weapons of mass destruction and non-proliferation issues, human rights, environmental issues and migration.
- The economic pillar, including dialogue on trade facilitation, trade security, investment issues, trade and development, regionalism and multilateralism, and financial crisis management.
- The social/cultural/intellectual pillar, including dialogue on cultural diversity and co-operation between cultures and civilizations. An important actor here is the Asia Europe Foundation, which remains the only permanent ASEM ‘institution’, and which has been active since 1997 in promoting intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the two regions.

According to Gilson (2006), ASEM should be understood as a post-Cold War phenomenon and a ‘new’ type of interregionalism. A wide range of issues is included within the ASEM framework, but the agenda tends to be ad hoc and flexible. Over the years, the scope of dialogue within ASEM and through EU-ASEAN meetings has expanded to include an array of issues, such as concerns with human rights, international crime and terrorism, and environmental degradation. At the same time, the EU has continued bilateral negotiations with individual Asian countries, particularly with China, Japan and India.
The ASEM process is characterized by a high level of informality and a loose, non-institutionalized structure. This has been viewed as both a strength and a weakness—one hand allowing for meaningful non-confrontational interaction on sensitive issues, but on the other leading to less than optimal efficiency, allowing for an uncontrolled proliferation of ‘initiatives’ that often fail to materialize or are seriously downscaled once the summits are over. As ASEM is a political and non-legal process its outcomes are not binding. Although the many declarations and statements produced within the process arguably contribute to the formation of common positions, there is also a concern that the forum is unable to move beyond ‘declaratory’ diplomacy (Keva and Gaens 2008). Alfredo Robles (2008) is critical of much of the research on ASEM, including the notion that ASEM is to be understood as a manifestation of two regions acting jointly to perform specific functions at an ‘interregional’ level. According to Robles, ASEM is better understood as ‘dialogue’ between two groups of states from two different regions.

ASEM is frequently stated to be interregionalism among ‘equals’. The EU has declared that the EU-Asia partnership is a meeting place, where much can be gained from dialogue and exchange of best practice, and that ‘there is no single “European model” of social governance’ (European Commission 2001c: 17). These statements show, in comparison with EU-ACP interregionalism, first that the EU places comparatively little emphasis on conditionality, good governance and human rights towards Asia, and second that the EU’s views differ regarding the opening of free markets and free trade depending on the counterpart. However, Gilson is correct in her claim that it is important to acknowledge the Western norms embedded in the ASEM institutional structure, and that the EU is establishing interregional institutions in order to convey its own norms and interests (Gilson 2002). Such behaviour implies a strategic use of norms, and it is best understood in the context of economic competition on the global level. Gilson argues that ASEM is used by the EU to strengthen economic interests in East Asia (specifically by co-opting the business community into the formal structures of ASEM), and in promoting the global profile of the EU (Gilson 2006).

Notwithstanding the instrumental use that the EU makes of the relationship, the general attitude to the Asian partners is one of accommodation, symmetry and respect. There is, for instance, no insistence from the EU that Taiwan should be a member of the ASEM process. Likewise, Myanmar (Burma) has remained a particularly contentious issue in EU-ASEAN relations. Although the EU cancelled planned meetings with ASEAN because of concerns over the Myanmar Government’s poor human rights record in the late 2000s, the EU’s overall approach to Asian partners is one of diplomatic pragmatism. This pragmatism is rather different to the much more aggressive stance towards the ‘weaker’ African countries.

**EU-Latin America**

In diplomatic relations between Europe and Latin America there has been a strong emphasis on a shared culture, which is clearly somewhat rhetorical. Europe’s relations with Latin America were intensified in the 1990s, after a long period of neglect or a focus on individual countries and Central America, where in the 1980s Europe clearly distanced itself from the USA in its view of the regional conflict as being north–south rather than east–west.

The EU’s priorities towards Latin America are defined in the Commission Communication from 2005 on a ‘Stronger Partnership between the European Union and Latin America’. Continued support to regional and sub-regional integration is an important theme in the Communication. Today the EU engages in annual ministerial meetings with the EU-Rio Group foreign ministers meetings and the EU-LAC summits. At the sub-regional level, the EU
maintains interregional partnerships with most relevant regions in Latin America, such as the Andean region, Central America and Mercosur.

The origins of the partnership between the EU and Mercosur are in trade relations, and this aspect continues to be particularly strong, through an interregional free trade agreement, with quotas only in agriculture and some other sensitive goods. Gradually, however, interregional co-operation has spread to emphasize other sectors, such as economic co-operation and development co-operation, as well as political dialogue and ‘shared’ norms and values. Telò claims that such interregionalism can be considered ‘as a civilian option which could make the EU and the regional partners abroad able to provide a contribution to a global change and a better regional governance’ (Telò 2006).

However, both the depth and the impact of the EU’s interregional relationship with Mercosur have remained contested. One authority in the field—Sebastian Santander—reveals a more multi-fold picture, arguing that there is clearly a norm- and value-driven agenda which seeks to establish mutual gains for both the EU and Mercosur, especially through interregional trade, but that this is emerging hand-in-hand with greater economic self-interest to bolster the EU’s presence and access to fast growing economies (Santander 2006). It can be argued that the EU has a high degree of rhetorical commitment to free trade, but it maintains its high non-tariff barriers with regard to agricultural products, where the weaker Mercosur partners have the most to gain.

Santander (2009a) shows that EU-Latin American interregionalism is affected both by international/systemic factors and internal factors of both regions. Two main external factors have contributed to a permanent weakening of the EU-Latin American strategic project since the beginning of the 21st century. During the 1990s it was often emphasized that the EU-Mercosur link was partly driven by the EU’s aim to compete with and be a counterweight to the USA, both in Latin America and globally. There is, therefore, a competition between EU-Mercosur interregionalism, and the attempts by the USA to create US-centred trade agreements in the Americas and around the Pacific region. However, the USA has gradually turned away from Latin America since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, and the US-centred trade agreements are no longer seen as threats to European interests. As a result, the EU has significantly downgraded Latin America in its external agenda.

The political radicalization in Latin America, lead by President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, has also affected the EU’s external relations. As a countermeasure to Latin American radicalization the EU has strengthened its bilateral ties with Brazil, as was encouraged in the 2005 communication of the European Commission (European Commission 2005c: 5). Moreover, the EU’s new emphasis on a bilateral approach has not been received favourably by most other Latin American countries, and as they also try to reach individual agreements with Brussels it has also tended to increase the fragmentation and rivalry on the continent. However, some EU countries are now supporting the idea of bilateral agreements in place of interregional associations.

Interregional aid and development relations with Latin America show a slightly different pattern compared with the trade pattern. The EU’s interregional development co-operation in Latin America reveals how the latter’s previously marginal role in the EU’s development policy has changed, such that today the EU constitutes the most important donor in the region (Haglund Morrissey 2010). The EU, through the Commission, has been involved in a series of ‘pure’ interregional relationships with various regional and sub-regional organizations in Latin America. While many EU countries have shown a limited interest in the region, the Commission has stepped in to act on behalf of members as a collective representative. On some occasions the Commission has been a broker between competing national interests within the EU. The EU’s role in sustaining various forms of interregionalism in the field of aid in Latin America, in
combination with its role in facilitating co-ordination within the EU, has strengthened the perception of the EU’s actorship since the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, the Commission’s inability to assert its position, except where there are few competing actors, contributes only marginally to the EU’s actorship in a broader sense. The fragmented administrative responsibility within the EU’s institutions in the field of international development co-operation has severely limited the EU’s actorship and internal coherence. The division of responsibilities for external relations within the EU Commission is problematic. The most obvious example is that the Directorate-General (DG) of External Relations is responsible for development co-operation with Asia and Latin America, whereas DG Development is in charge of aid in the ACP countries.

The Colombian conflict is the main example of the ambiguities of both EU actorship and the EU’s policy of interregionalism. The case of Colombia illustrates the multiplicity of actors that lie behind the abstract notions of ‘Europe’ and even the ‘EU’, and the challenges that this poses for the EU as a unified actor. Much of the explanation behind the failure of the EU to act in a unified way lies in competing (or a lack of) national interests, combined with under-developed European analytical capacity to enable a shared understanding of the regional character of the conflict and of appropriate conflict management strategies (de Lombaerde et al. 2010). An additional obstacle is the fact that the EU has no regional counterpart to relate to other than the Andean Community, which has proven to be dysfunctional in dealing with the Colombian conflict. This reveals once again that functioning interregionalism depends on regional actorship of both regions.

**Conclusion**

This chapter suggests a variation in the way the EU conducts its foreign policies towards different counterpart regions and in different policy areas. Far from being locked into a specific foreign policy doctrine (such as ‘pure interregionalism’), the EU pragmatically uses any type of policy that it has at its disposal that appears to be most suited to a given objective. In this regard, the EU increasingly behaves as an actor on a variety of levels in world affairs, working towards a truly ‘global strategy’ (Farrell 2010) or perhaps ‘complex interregionalism’ (Hardacre and Smith 2009).

Some explanations for the variation in interregionalism may be found in the EU’s varying level of actorship, and the ways in which the EU formulates and executes foreign policy. Whereas the EU often speaks with one voice—for instance in trade policy—EU policies towards the outside world tend to be more ambiguous and pluralistic in other policy areas, such as aid and security, where decision-making is either ‘shared’ between EU institutions and EU member states, or is based on national and intergovernmental policies. As seen in the case of aid and security, sometimes there appears to be little in the way of an articulated EU policy, and the member states pursue their own national policies outside of the EU framework. This has very important effects on the pattern of interregionalism.

It is not surprising that key policy-makers, especially from the European Commission, emphasize that the making of the EU as an efficient and legitimate global actor across all areas of foreign policy—including development policy and security—calls for a strengthening of the EU’s central institutions, instruments and policies, where the Commission must, so the argument goes, play a leading role (Bretherton and Vogler 2006). However, such attempts at the centralization and communitarization of decision-making and policy are contested.

For instance, development policy was formally introduced as an area with (complementary) EU competence with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. Yet the institutions of the
EU (the Council, the Commission and the Parliament) have been largely unsuccessful in developing a common EU development policy, representing the member states and the EU as a whole. The much talked-about European Consensus on Development is mainly rhetorical and not implemented. Since aid and development policy is one of the areas of EU action subject to shared competence, individual EU member states can, and do, continue to conduct international development policy according to national priorities and preferences. According to Grimm, a complete communitarization of international development co-operation is not politically desirable for many EU member states, and would presumably be of questionable value for developing countries (Grimm 2010b). This helps to explain the lack of interregionalism in the field of aid.

Apart from the EU’s internal institutional machinery, the EU’s policy mix depends very much on the counterpart. This chapter argues that this variation in interregional relations is linked to questions of relevance and power. With weaker ‘partners’ the EU dictates far more of the conditions for interregional co-operation. Although the EU is highly committed to free trade in its official rhetoric, it maintains its high non-tariff barriers for agricultural products, where the weaker partners would otherwise have the most to gain. These asymmetric partnerships are particularly evident in the EU’s interregional (and bilateral) partnerships with Africa, and to some extent also with Latin America (Söderbaum and van Langenhove 2006; Söderbaum and Stålgren 2010a; Hettne and Söderbaum 2005). The relatively stronger and economically interesting East Asian region benefits from access to European markets, and the region is generally invited to participate in equal or symmetric partnerships with the EU. There is little conditionality attached to East Asian relations, but also less aid, which reflects the EU’s response to an increasingly powerful region.

In other words, much like other global actors, including the most powerful EU member states, the EU’s actions are characterized by the pursuit of power, combined with the manifestation of various regional and national identities. The nation-state logic is still active. Going beyond the EU’s official strategies and policy statements (which invariably contain a strong, but perhaps misleading, egalitarian flavour), the EU is strongly concerned with establishing itself as a global actor and with gaining political power in a realist sense. From this perspective the EU is a familiar species in international relations. Yet, as far as the EU’s use of power is concerned, it is clear that the EU has dealt with the external world in a different manner from that of an ordinary ‘great power’ driven by geopolitical interests. This is because the civilian, or ‘normative’, power employed in the EU’s own region-building is also being projected in its external relations as the preferred world order model (Telò 2006; Linklater 2005). The emergent outcome is, in spite of all the contradictions, a pattern of global governance with its own distinctive characteristics, and with the potential of becoming a world order characterized by a horizontal, institutionalized, multi-polar structure of regions co-operating in a spirit of multilateralism. Such a regionalized, multilateral world order characterized by different sets of interregional relations could be called ‘multiregionalism’ (Hettne 2005).

From a world order perspective, the EU’s fundamental problem is that in a Westphalian world dominated by nation-states, it will always remain a special and somewhat isolated case. Powerful nation-states (such as the USA) will continue to do business with individual European nation-states, and in doing so will undermine the deepening of the European integration process as well as increased interregionalism in the global system. In a post-Westphalian, post-sovereign world order, in which regions may ascend to a level of recognition and actorness similar to nation-states, the EU would be less isolated as a regional polity. To the extent that the EU acts as one unified actor and that other regions deal primarily with the EU rather than with individual member states, this will further spur regional co-operation as well as interregionalism around the
world, with important implications for global governance. In this sense, interregionalism both creates and legitimizes regional actors, including, perhaps most significantly, the EU itself. Regionalism and interregionalism are deeply intertwined, in both a positive and negative sense.

Notes

1 See also Farrell’s chapter in this volume.
2 See also Gilson’s chapter in this volume.
3 See also Dri’s chapter in this volume.