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THE EU-LAC-ASIA TRIANGULATION STRATEGY A NEW BOOST FOR EUROPEAN-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS?

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**The EU-LAC-ASIA triangulation strategy
- a new boost for European-Latin American
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Executive Summary

The political dialogue started almost two and a half decades ago with the so-called ‘San José Process’ is without doubt one of the soundest bases of Euro-Latin American relations. At the beginning of this century, during an internal debate on stronger bi-regional relations and in response to general and structural changes in the international environment, the idea arose to extend this bi-regional dialogue towards a trilateral or triangular dialogue which included Asia as the third player on the stage.

The text presented below questions whether this strategy could be a significant step towards renewed dialogue and a strategic partnership between the two regions. The starting point (first part) is an evaluation of the most important dialogues in Euro-Latin American relations: the dialogue between the EU and the Central American Isthmus (the San José Process), the meetings between the EU and the Rio Group and, finally, the Euro-Latin American Summits. The points of reference of this evaluation are the three different functions which a political dialogue, from a conceptual point of view, must accomplish: agenda setting, rationalisation and institutionalisation. The fact that these functions are only partially fulfilled in bi-regional relations between the EU and LAC is at least partly due to the origin of the dialogue and its politico-institutional logic, both of which limit the room for manoeuvre for renewed dialogue.

Some proposals in this respect are followed in the second part of the Briefing Paper by a description and evaluation of the triangular strategy between the EU, Latin America and Asia. Obviously a strategy of this profile, started in recent years by Spanish diplomats and academics, has to take account of changes in the regional and international environment. A triangular approach which goes beyond a collection of ideas and assumptions and meets the necessary requirements for its political implementation, requires greater efforts in empirical research on the three sides of the triangle and their mutual relations, and free-flowing exchange between this research and the political environment.

Introduction

Political dialogue, one of the three pillars of Euro-Latin American relations (the other two are economic relations – trade and investment – and development cooperation), started two and a half decades ago in San José, Costa Rica and developed in cooperation agreements of various generations, without doubt forms one of the soundest bases of Euro-Latin American relations. Moreover, it is a distinguishing feature that is not included in any of the EU's treaties with Latin American partners. Irrespective of opinion on the value of this dialogue for bi-regional relations, the idea – partially transformed into concrete proposals – recently arose in both academic and political environments, particularly in Spain, of extending this bi-regional dialogue towards a trilateral or triangular dialogue which included Asia as the third player on the stage. At first sight this idea seems tempting and almost a logical response to the new geopolitical world map, in which new emerging players, especially in Asia, are increasingly attracting the attention of politicians, entrepreneurs and academics.

The following study comprises two parts. Section 1 presents an assessment of the three central political dialogues between the EU and LAC: the EU-Central America dialogue, the so-called '**San José Process**' (1.1), the **UE-Rio Group** dialogue (1.2) and the **Euro-Latin American Summits** (1.3). After an evaluation of these three dialogues (1.4) and in response to signs over recent years that they are drying up, some comments are made regarding their limits and political and structural logic (1.4), with suggestions for renewed dialogue (1.5).

Section 2 discusses the origin, basic ideas and issues concerning the implementation of a **triangular EU-LAC-Asia strategy**, taking into account recent changes in the international system and their repercussions on European-Latin American relations (2.1). Some pioneering initiatives of Spanish experts and diplomats hold a prominent position in this debate (2.2). Their evaluation (2.3) brings us to the final question: whether they could be transferred to EU level and what could be the central elements of a pragmatic, realistic and low-profile triangular EU-LAC-Asia strategy (2.4).

1 The political dialogue between Europe and LAC

1.1 The '**San José Process**' – From success story to diplomatic routine

The political dialogue between the European Union and Central America, set in motion 25 years ago, is the oldest mechanism of this type of exchange between Europe and LAC. Launched at the first bi-regional conference on 18 September 1984 in San José, Costa Rica, the San José Process was transformed into a forum which gave a decisive boost to mutual relations. The reason why this process came about was the specific desire of both sides to pacify Central America with their partial strategies: demilitarisation, withdrawal of foreign troops and initiation of dialogue between parties in conflict. It was also intended to promote the democratisation process in the region, which was still in the embryonic stage, as a contribution to political stability and respect for human rights. To strengthen these political aims and link them to long-term socio-

economic development, European leaders mainly set their sights on the integration process (Bodemer 1986, 46 *et seq.*).

The US government openly distrusted the European commitment in Central America, and at times harshly criticised it. This was because of differing perceptions of the crisis on the two sides of the Atlantic. The European standpoint was basically that the Central American crisis primarily stemmed from the structural imbalance in economic and social development, and therefore the European commitment should favour economic and political support. On the economic side, there was the conviction that only development and economic unity would guarantee long-term political stability. Particular attention was therefore placed on supporting development, and especially regional projects under the Mercado Común Centroamericano (MCCA) [Common Central American Market]. On the political side, it was stressed that these same countries would have to resolve their existing conflicts and that the most appropriate European support would take the form of indirect aid, in other words help with peace efforts.

The focal point of the European perception of the crisis, based on social injustice being the central factor of threat, was at odds with the geostrategic argument of the North American government, which interpreted the problems in Central America almost exclusively according to the categories of the East-West conflict and in terms of national security. With this backdrop, the democratisation processes in the region were interpreted as dangerous, as they rocked the *status quo*.

Although some conservative governments in Europe understood to a certain extent the hard line imposed by the Reagan administration towards Central America and warned of the danger that Communist governments were taking root in the United States' back yard, thus, in the event of a conflict, potentially threatening vital supply routes for supplies between the US and Europe, the majority of these governments embraced the strategy of reducing tensions as expressed in the San José Process.

The dynamics and itinerary of the dialogue established in the San José Process were influenced mainly by changes at regional level and in the world economy, and also by the profile of the interests of the forces involved. The **themes of peace and democratisation** made their mark on this first stage of international cooperation. The palpable result of this period was the support for the sub-regional peace process which was concluded with the signing of the Esquipulas II Agreement on 7 August 1987.

After the first conference, the European and Central American foreign ministers met every year in rotation in a European or Central American country, with the intention of expanding bi-regional cooperation in order to contribute to the economic and social development of the Central American isthmus.

The year 1990 marked the start of a new era in the San José Process, reflecting the change in the regional and international environment. For Central America, the end of the Cold War also signified the end of ideological conflicts. Thus the door opened to pragmatic solutions involving negotiation. With the conclusion of peace in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the very difficult transition process in Guatemala also received new impetus. At the beginning of the '90s, the processes of regional and inter-regional change led to **greater emphasis on economic and development policies**. Issues such as economic growth, fair distribution and competitiveness of the Central American economies became the centre of interest. This change in the central point was also highlighted by the fact that the US commitment in the region visibly waned, and the

European Union and its member States now bore most of the burden of support for development.

On the economic side, the EU concluded a trade agreement with the isthmus which covered most agricultural products of the region (except bananas). Finally, a leap in quality led to the signature of a 'third generation' cooperation agreement, the first of this type which the European Union concluded with a sub-region. This agreement, signed in February 1993 at the ninth San José conference of ministers in El Salvador, apart from the usual priority fields of action concerning economic cooperation and development policies, included additional programmes for scientific and technological cooperation, environmental protection and the fight against drug trafficking.

Towards the middle of the '90s, more voices than ever warned against routine and the deceleration of dialogue and advocated reform. The triggering factor was the eleventh conference of ministers on 23-24 February 1995. Three aims were to determine the new stage of the San José Process and at the same time constituted the main bases for cooperation: **consolidation of the rule of law** in the region; **social stabilisation and elimination of inequalities**, and finally, the **integration of Central America in the world economy**.

There were also many changes relating to the mechanisms of dialogue. At San José XII (in Florence, on 25 and 26 March 1996), on the initiative of the European Commission and by agreement with the majority of the Central American governments, it was decided to **change format**: instead of annual meetings at ministerial level, thenceforth there were to be meetings at the same level every two years and meetings with the *troika* in the other year. This facilitated a more thorough preparation of the meetings and so more concrete results.

The themes also changed. The dialogue had started off on security policy. Hence the agenda was fairly clear: to seek mechanisms to overcome the prevailing war situation in the region, while at the same time tackling some of the structural causes that had led to the conflict. On the economic side, development cooperation played a major role as a vehicle to ease some of the social cost resulting from the armed conflict, relegating to a clearly secondary place the debate on trade relations between the two regions. For both parties, it was a question of counterbalancing the bellicose policy of the North American government. For the EU and its member States, this policy was also part of the policy of *détente* implemented in Europe within the framework of the Cold War (Carrera, F., 1995, 287 *et seq.*).

Around the middle of the '90s, the dialogue lost much of its initial impetus and entered a **stagnation phase**. This had much to do with differing interests and expectations on the two sides: for the Central American partners, the discussion on **access to markets outside the region** was the central point, and the issues of cooperation, democratisation, the environment, human rights and social standards were relegated to second and third place. For its part, the EU continued referring the subject of trade (including the PAC) to multilateral frameworks (GATT, WTO), and putting democratisation and cooperation at the top of its agenda with the isthmus. The result was like **a dialogue between deaf people** which led to further weakening of the San José Process.

Since the end of the 20th century, as a reaction to the changing international environment and the so-called 'new challenges', there was a certain **shift in emphasis from inter-regional themes to international issues**, with the underlying aim of strengthening the multilateral and multipolar system as a counterweight to the US claim

of unilateral hegemony. Themes in this respect were the **reform of the Security Council**, the **establishment of the International Court of Justice**, the **fight against drugs and terrorism, humanitarian interventions, peace missions and disarmament**. In addition there was a common language in favour of **representative democracy** (in the face of populist temptations) and the need to tackle more decisively the accumulated **social debt**, a subject which has held a privileged position on the Euro-Latin American political agenda since the Third Bi-Regional Summit in Guadalajara (in May 2004).

Analysts of the dialogue process became increasingly convinced that the form of this (and other) political dialogues would have to change, primarily in relation to the participating players. It was argued that the only way of achieving credible consensus for democratisation would be **to make these players participate in the social organisations** which, going beyond the weak system of Central American political parties, represent the interests of different strata of the region's societies. A tripartite dialogue of this kind could open the way for new consensus, and thus expand the basis for legitimising the democratisation process and offer new opportunities for cooperation. However, although adjustments of this kind provided positive momentum, it now seems clear that the Euro-Central American dialogue will not fully regain lost ground because this political dialogue is no longer the focal point of relations, for the purpose of the peace process and progress in democratisation and economic reform.

It is therefore no accident that for some years now this dialogue **has centred more on aspects of technological and commercial cooperation**. As these are less 'political' matters, more technical levels can be used – such as the Joint Committee and the Trade Forum – which are obviously also lower levels. Moreover, dialogue with the *Troika* is a form of maintaining a dialogue at high level, without involving so many players. But here too, the dialogue is more operative than in past years, especially considering that in the meantime the EU has grown to 27 members. Come what may, in the future as well, both issues and mechanisms will have to be tackled creatively because of the changes that are affecting both regions.

In response to the impasse reached by the San José dialogue and new internal and external challenges in both regions since the beginning of the 21st century, notable changes were made to its content and form. With regard to themes, the Final Declaration and the Plan of Action of the First European-Latin American summit in Rio de Janeiro (in June 1999) issued a long list. In October 2000, both sides reached agreement on just a few (old and new) areas of action. The new ones were cooperation in international forums, the international finance system, gender issues, the information society and training.

To sum up it may be said that as a result of their active participation in the peace process in the region in the early 80s, European countries set in motion with Central America one of the most outstanding active political dialogues in the relationship between the two sub-regions and – as emphasised by the European Parliament in 1997 – one of the major successes of European external policy.

On the basis of this experience with the Central American isthmus, to date no less than eight political dialogues have taken place with different partners.

1.2 The EU's political dialogue with the *Rio Group* and the bi-regional Summits – much ado about nothing?

In parallel with the San José Dialogue which was limited to Central America, at the end of the '80s a second partner for dialogue was formed, the Rio Group, which covered the whole of the Latin American subcontinent. Finally in 1998 this first bi-regional dialogue mechanism was joined by a second: the Euro-Latin American Summits.

In December 1986 out of the Contadora Group (Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela) and the so-called 'Contadora Support Group' (Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay) there emerged the 'Group of Eight', which from 1989 called itself the Rio Group (for details see Milet, P., V.; Ramírez, S., 1999, Van Klaveren, A., 2001).

From the start, the Rio Group maintained close relations with the European Union: firstly (since 1987) by means of informal meetings of ministers within the framework of the General Assembly of the United Nations, which were held each September in New York, and since the 'Rome Declaration' in 1990 in institutionalised form. Since then, the foreign ministers on both sides have met each year alternately in Europe and LAC. They have also held periodical meetings in New York at the time of the Plenary Sessions of the United Nations and additional meetings to discuss specific subjects.

There are **many reasons** on both sides why it is advantageous to maintain this dialogue. For the Latin Americans, dialogue above all means recognition as an interlocutor on an equal footing by one of the strongest economic powers in the industrialised world. At the same time, closer political dialogue with the Europeans serves, for the Latin Americans, to counterbalance the United States' hegemony in the region, strengthen negotiating capability in the international arena and diversify external relations.

For its part, the European Union liked the Rio Group right from the start, all the more so as with the Contadora Process, the Europeans had already unconditionally supported political initiatives for the peace of its founding members. The new dynamics of the Latin American integration process further encouraged the EU to better explain its own integration experiences to the Latin Americans. Apart from the typical political and economic themes of bi-regional relations, the themes of environmental protection, drugs trafficking and security policy were on the agenda.

The issue of **drugs trafficking** included production, trade and consumption. At operative level, the Europeans were mainly interested in substitution of crops intended for narcotics production and preventative actions, in addition to extension of most-favoured nation status and easier access to the European market for a large proportion of agricultural products coming from coca-leaf producing countries.

On the matter of **security**, which over the years was periodically debated in the bi-regional dialogue, the discussion in the '90s concentrated on issues such as reducing expenditure on arms and conventional weapons, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, conflicts in third countries, conflicts between States, civil wars and terrorism, and also confidence-building measures.

There were few causes of potential tension between the two regions: firstly in 1982 there was the conflict between Argentina and Great Britain concerning the Falkland Islands, and secondly that between Guatemala and Great Britain concerning Belize. In both conflicts, the positions of the two sides led to an understanding. With regard to Cuba and its highly troubled relations with the US, the EU and the Rio Group adopted very similar stances. On the one hand they condemned violations of human rights in

Cuba and expressed the wish to support the transition towards democracy, and on the other they criticised the US embargo policy and the *Helms/Burton Law* (for details see Gratius, S., 2003).

In recent years, as an expression of common interest in peace and security, there has been specific dialogue on **security policies in the broad sense**. It was shown that in spite of the diverging parameters of the situation on which security policies were based, a set of coincidences in both regions facilitates the establishment of harmonious positions. Thus both sides base their defence and security policies on an alliance with the United States, even though the institutional mechanisms and degree of vulnerability differ. Another thing in common is the importance the two sides give to an integration process which, apart from creating free trade areas, aims for a common market and, in the long term, political integration. Both sides are convinced that a broad integration process, defined in this way, necessarily includes a dimension involving security policies. Thus regional integration, democratic consolidation and security are understood as an integral unit (Bodemer, K., 2000).

In view of the importance both sides have recently been giving to the issues of **poverty, inequality and social exclusion**, it is worth mentioning, finally, a decision taken in March 2003 at the EU's XI Ministerial Meeting with the Rio Group. The Joint Declaration gave particular emphasis to the growing importance of **social cohesion** and **democratic governance** in Euro-Latin American relations. At this meeting, the Commissioner Chris Patten proposed making social cohesion the main theme of the Third EU-LAC Summit to be held in Guadalajara, Mexico, in May 2004. In addition, at the proposal of the Brazilian government, it was agreed to give priority on that Summit's agenda to social subjects such as reducing poverty and creating jobs. With regard to the war in Iraq, the implications of which have led to some turbulence both in relations between LAC and the US, and in North Atlantic relations, it should be mentioned that the Rio Group-EU Joint Declaration also referred to this war, expressing confidence in a rapid end to the conflict with minimum loss of human life. The Declaration also emphasised the importance of multilateralism and the central role to be played by the UN during and after this conflict. This Declaration stressed, once again, the firm alliance between Europe and LAC in favour of multilateralism, the prominent role of the United Nations system in the post-Cold War order and the opposition of Europeans and Latin Americans to any attempt at hegemonic unilateralism by the Bush government (http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/la/rio/28_03_=3.htm).

1.3 A critical evaluation of the Euro-Latin American political dialogue according to its central functions

To make a realistic evaluation of the three Euro-Latin American political dialogues discussed herein, we will question below the functions that these dialogues can accomplish from a conceptual point of view, so as to verify whether they have attained them in the political reality. According to recent research by José Antonio Sanahuja (Sanahuja, J.A., 2007, 25-27), the following functions of the political dialogue should be mentioned, to be able to evaluate their implementation in the Euro-Latin American dialogue processes:

(1) Definition and control of the agenda (*agenda setting*).

Both the EU-Rio Group dialogue and the bi-regional Summits **have only partially fulfilled** this function, and have been self-limiting according to the different interests of the parties and the need to reach agreement on common positions with a minimum common denominator. This has meant that ‘burning’ issues such as trade, debt or new security challenges have largely remained off the agenda. This self-limitation firstly typified the EU-Rio Group dialogue. The Summits which started in 1999 in principle did away with limiting themes, and, as stressed by the ‘Salafranca Report’, had to establish a ‘wider political agenda’ which covered politically important and sensitive issues such as security, prevention of conflicts and migration. Accordingly, their political agendas were broader than those of the EU-Rio Group dialogue, and they reflected different interests of the parties and some control of content and scope. The Andean and Central American countries used the Summits to impose some Association Agreements, including on free trade areas, which did not come under the EU’s initial strategy for the two sub-regions. For its part the EU – not in the final analysis as a reaction to the criticism of the ‘supermarket’ of issues at the first two Summits – reduced the number of themes from the Third Summit in Guadalajara and gave clear priority to social cohesion as the pillar of bi-regional political dialogue, not without a certain degree of resistance from some Latin American governments.

The Council and the Commission tried to link this issue with certain instruments for cooperation, while discarding others (the Bi-Regional Solidarity Fund proposed by the European Parliament), and leaving ‘hard’ subjects such as free trade or foreign debt outside the discussion on social cohesion (Sanahuja, J.A., 2007: 26). However, apart from the core theme of social cohesion, the agendas of the Summits and meetings between the EU and the different sub-regions have recently included some big and doubtlessly important issues in bi-regional relations and the international debate, such as regional integration, respect for and defence of human rights, democratic governability, state reform, consolidation of the rule of law and its institutions, the fight against corruption, defence of multilateralism and sustainable development.

(2) Proliferation and significance of the channels and levels of dialogue (*rationalisation*).

Political dialogue takes place in a multifaceted network of institutions and levels, whether inter-regional (Euro-Latin American and Ibero-American Summits, the EU-Rio Group dialogue), regional and sub-regional (Rio Group, EU-Central America, EU-Andean Community, EU-Mercosur) or bilateral (EU-Chile and EU-Mexico).

The harmonisation and agreement of political positions during the four Euro-Latin American Summits (Rio de Janeiro 1999, Madrid 2002, Guadalajara 2004, Vienna 2006) would not have been possible without political dialogues during the previous years. Today, this instrument consists in dialogues of ministerial meetings (EU-Rio Group, EU-Mercosur, EU-Chile, EU-Mexico, San José Dialogue), inter-parliamentarian conferences and dialogue with organisations in civil society and other players such as companies and regional and local administrations. Despite efforts to ensure rationalisation, it has not been possible in some cases to avoid overlapping and duplication of the scope of dialogue. Paradoxically, in other cases there are insufficient

frameworks and it is necessary to resort to traditional bilateral diplomatic channels or *ad hoc* forums, as was the case with the Colombia Peace Process, for example, or social organisations which consider that they do not have sufficient presence.

(3) Efficacy of dialogue (*institutionalisation*).

As shown by the last four Summits and the meetings between the EU and the Rio Group in its history of over twenty years, these meetings ‘are useful for attracting an audience and making the political positions of both parties more visible with regard to the most pressing issues on the international agenda’ – but only the issues discussed are not actually a cause of conflict between participants. However, the dynamics and format of this multilateral commitment and the type of meetings do not permit translation into concrete actions. As a rule, the results of these meetings are much **too general and do not allow concrete agreements to be adopted**. To quote Freres and Sanahuja once more: ‘The multilateral agenda is hardly considered in the preliminary work (of the Summits), and often they only act in a reactive way. The classical mechanisms are still used – diplomatic negotiations in New York or Geneva –, with very little participation from the European Commission, without debates or the taking of positions in the Latin American instances of political agreement, and there is no groundwork at intermediate levels – top civil servants, social or academic sectors – or mechanisms for subsequent monitoring. These facts partly explain the growing scepticism aroused by Summits and in general, this type of multilateral diplomacy’ (Freres, C., Sanahuja, J.A., 2005).

To be fair, **a large proportion of these weaknesses have their logic** and one cannot simply blame the dialogue participants. The wide range of subjects reflects the need to take account of the diversity of interests (and political sensitivities) of the parties involved. As a reminder, the bi-regional dialogues involve 27 European countries and about the same number of Latin American partners. The lack of intermediate mechanisms and specialised dialogues is justified by the argument that personnel is lacking at both Community level and national government level. In addition there is the concern (not openly admitted) that if the issues discussed very generally at ministerial or presidential meetings of Summits lead to concrete results, this may limit the room for manoeuvre at the Community and/or Member State levels or oblige (politically, not legally) civil servants at both levels to deal with their implementation.

1.4 The origin of political dialogue and its politico-institutional logic as explanatory factors of its limited content

To understand the limited content of the dialogue at both EU-Rio Group level and Summit level, it is worth looking at the origin of political dialogue and its politico-institutional logic.

Political dialogue arose, as Ramón Torrent recently documented in detail, in 1990-91 at the time of the Common European Economic Space (CEES) agreement reached with EFTA countries, and acquired the **function of justifying**, in the eyes of the Commission, **the participation of member States in joint agreements**. It is this politico-institutional function which explains the very birth of political dialogue as an aspect of bilateral relations of the Community and its member States with third

countries. From then on dialogue became a ‘sort of system which differentiates between “joint” bilateral agreements and those in which only the Community participates’ (Torrent, R., 2005).

With regard to relations with LAC, it was in the intra-Community debates on the EU-Mercosur agreement (1995) where it was decided to introduce political dialogue into the agreement (an issue where the competence of the member States was not in question), to facilitate acceptance by the Commission’s legal department of the fact that the member States were also party to the agreement together with the Community.

This history of the origin of political dialogue and its politico-institutional logic largely explains its nature and restricted content. The dialogue only covers those activities which take place within the institutional system of the Union, but are not carried out by the Community. Torrent’s not very encouraging – but in my view realistic – conclusion is as follows: ‘The EU’s political dialogue (with third countries), except for very few exceptions, is fated to produce declarations with the representatives of third countries whose range of issues is inversely proportional to their capacity to establish priorities and find solutions for significant problems’ (Torrent, R., 2005: 20 *et seq.*). According to Torrent, the consequence of its institutional nature is that in the political reality no one feels responsible for political dialogue and the Commission views it with great distrust, in which it is partly justified. The author concludes: ‘Political dialogue has just largely been transformed into a mixture of work load on the one hand, and on the other hand routine which follows a model of international commitments already acquired from holding meetings and consequently producing declarations. Each government should take this activity seriously during its months of rotational presidency of the Council, and at least keep it in shape. However once the presidency is over, political dialogue for each government will resume its appearance of a routine work load ... **If the political importance of political dialogue in international relations is very small, its importance in the strictly internal legal-institutional context is instead significant**’ (Torrent 2005:21).

In spite of this critical judgement and the fact that the limitations of dialogue and the difficulties of implementing joint commitments remain a challenge, it would be exaggerated and unfair to say that political dialogue has no political value. Its fundamental political role in inter-regional relations is based on the fact that: (1) it prepares and formulates the agenda for the development of European-Latin American relations¹; (2) it constitutes a continuous and institutionalised network for exchange and for establishing and agreeing political positions in non- (or hardly) controversial areas; (3) it offers a forum of exchange and mutual knowledge, which includes political representatives of all the countries in both regions; (4) it can contribute to reducing the imbalances existing between the two dialoguing parties, and finally, (5) it motivates participants to clearly set out their position concerning certain problems and issues (in which, according to its long experience of pooling interests, the EU is more successful than LAC). In short, **it is largely symbolic politics, but – and this should be remembered – it is still politics.**

¹ This applies mainly to inter-parliamentary dialogue

1.5 Towards renewed dialogue – some suggestions

Bearing in mind the regional and international context and the determining factors referred to in the above paragraphs, and focusing on a renewed, more flexible, effective and forward-facing political dialogue, the following would be recommended;

- to review a large quantity of dialogues and focus them more according to the priorities of both parties;
- start a systematic effort (with the corresponding funds) on the part of LAC institutions to gather a wealth of experience of dialogues and pass it on horizontally to achieve better insertion in each programme (Freres, C., 2007,104);
- in view of the fact that both bi-regional Summits and Ibero-American Summits are dominated to a certain extent by European players: to make clear to Latin Americans that they must make more effort if they wish to have a more symmetrical relationship, i.e. a strategic relationship with their counterpart;
- create a more structured mechanism of monitoring and implementing agreements in the inter-summit period. Following the example of the Ibero-American Summits, this could be an *Acting secretariat* which includes all the organisers of the previous Summit and the following Summit;
- give the Summits greater visibility and a higher profile;
- coordinate the Group of Latin American Ambassadors (GRULA) with the EU directorates and give more importance to the bi-regional meetings of cooperation leaders started in 2002;
- to promote sectorial and transverse dialogue, for example, on cross-border cooperation, peace and security, migration, social cohesion, drug trafficking, democracy and human rights, climate change and sustainable development, democratic governance – a subject of special interest in the Andean region – and other issues of shared interest;
- as a contribution to government structures in LAC: promote technical exchange, following experiences in OECD committees and training in SIGMA programmes;
- increase inter-parliamentary dialogue, especially within the recently-created Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat) and link it more closely to official forums;
- increase dialogue with civil society organisations (e.g. ALOP) – businesses (Business Forum), SMEs, trade unions, local bodies and universities (OBREAL, among others) – and link it more closely to activities at official level (Freres, Ch.; Sanahuja, J.A., 2005:59 *et seq.*);
- bring dialogues as a whole closer to the requirements of regions and countries and their citizens and link them more with decision-making circles;
- try to close the gap between rhetoric, declarations and the institutional structure, including Summit diplomacy. This means putting an end to selective bi-regionalism, i.e. the EU's practice of giving preference to more attractive counterparts such as Brazil, Chile and Mexico to the cost of the rest of the region;
- take into account the growing differentiation and heterogeneity of the sub-continent, which implies giving political dialogue a new format, a new profile. This firstly means having, in addition to group-to-group dialogue at EU-Rio Group meetings, some bilateral dialogues (with Brazil, Mexico and Chile), and secondly means extending thematic cooperation to areas which permit complementary action with intensification of exchange at bilateral level (Maihold, G., Zilla, C., 2005: 7);

- on the one hand be cautious about the sale of models, including the ‘model’ of the European benefactor State, and on the other hand include more resolutely the debate on the reform of this model and its better adaptation to a globalised world (in this respect see Bodemer, K., 2007); and finally
- include in the dialogue changes in the relationship of both sides with the external world, their greater responsibility in world policy, the increased options for the Latin American partners because of the growing political and economic presence of China, and the formation of a South-South axis.

2. The EU-LAC-Asia triangulation strategy: origin, basic ideas, implementation

2.1 The context: recent changes in the international system and their repercussions on European-Latin American relations

(1) An influential development of the international system in the '80s and '90s, apart from **progressive globalisation** in the areas of finance, production, trade, information and communication, was the **increased dynamics of multilateral cooperation at regional level**, through the creation of new initiatives and the continuation of previous experiments. Regional cooperation has acquired ever increasing importance in foreign and economic policy, and is promising to become a structural characteristic of the emerging ‘world order’, although still poorly defined. Outside Europe, the new regionalism (open) assumed a more concrete form in the Americas, i.e. North and South America, and also the Caribbean. With the North American Free Trade Agreement (NATA) and Mercosur, economic cooperation was institutionalised, while positions on foreign policy were coordinated, albeit still in embryonic form, via the Rio Group (Milet, P.V., 2001). It was also attempted to revive the former experiments to integrate Central America – with ambiguous results (Bodemer, K.; Gamarra, E., 2002) and the Andean Region (Bodemer, K., 1996), giving them renewed importance after decades of paralysis. In short, these regional and sub-regional initiatives at the end of the '90s acquired previously unknown substance, generating both new forms of political coordination and consensus and increased inter-regional trade and cooperation between companies.

(2) The international orientation of LAC acquired a new slant in the '90s, in that the region not only continued to play a very active role in international policy and also made efforts to increase it, but it also, faced with the end of the East-West conflict, **tried to diversify its foreign relations even more**. To North-South relations dominated by the US, Europe, and to a lesser extent Japan, **a South-South component was added**, strengthening relations with the Asia-Pacific area. The key players in this respect were mainly the Latin American countries on the Pacific coast such as Mexico, Peru and Chile (Faust, J.; Mols, M., 1998). Since the '90s these countries established closer relations with Asia, finding new impetus after overcoming the impact of the severe financial crises between 1997 and 2002 (in Asia 1997-98, Russia 1998, Brazil 1999 and finally Argentina 2001-02).

(3) The end of the East-West conflict brought many changes in terms of **European-Latin American relations**. From 1989-90 both sub-regions entered a ‘**process of self-**

examination', not as a last resort, but with a view to better confronting the new international challenges. The EU and its member States were obliged to support their neighbouring countries in a difficult process of political, economic and social transformation (the so-called 'European Neighbourhood Policy' took form), put an end to a war in the former Yugoslavia and define a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Latin America, on the other hand, during the early post-Cold War years felt more a victim of the international situation than a co-player in the new international environment. Its room for manoeuvre was affected negatively by at least three phenomena: the disappearance of an alternative model to the current capitalism, a loss of autonomy and negotiating capacity, and finally a lack of internal consensus at regional and national level.

(4) Although all the countries of the region advocated liberal democratic systems, and following the recipes of the so-called 'Washington Agreement' (partly voluntarily, partly under pressure from international financial agencies) they opened their markets to international competition and modernised their economies, European countries did not offer them equivalent greater access to their markets, nor did they substantially increase their development aid and direct investments. The US, however, strove under the two governments of Bush Sr. and Clinton to achieve a balanced relationship with LAC as its 'natural' area of geopolitical and economic influence, replacing the ideological partnership of the past with one of interests, based on the pillars of free trade, liberal democracy, investments and – most recently since the attack on the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington – security –, the latter reduced in Bush's new security doctrine (June 2002) to the war on terror (Bodemer, K., 2005).

(5) A fifth element of the new international environment since the '90s is the **formation of blocs in Europe and in the Americas:**

- Under the undisputed leadership of the **US**, the only super power, the American continent tried to integrate increasingly under the slogan of 'open regionalism' or 'new regionalism'. The US hoped that, with the implementation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the countries south of the Rio Grande, together with NAFTA, would become the most important area for products and investments, exceeding those of the European Union. However, these hopes were dashed with the failure of the FTAA in the Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata in 2005.

- Unlike the Americas, no hegemonic power has been established in **Europe**; instead a process of increasing supranationalisation has taken shape as a result of institutional reforms. The successive EU enlargements since the middle of the '80s increased its economic and political weight, but also its heterogeneity. In addition to very large economic differences (income per capita, purchasing power, etc.), there are significant differences in values, cosmopolitanism and also external interests. In some cases this has led to difficulties in reaching decisions within the union, including a coherent policy towards LAC. Not only is there an institutional crisis, most visible in the debate on the Constitutional Treaty, but there is also a crisis in the European socio-economic model, reflecting the complicated adaptation to globalisation pressures. Many places have seen the start of a process of dismantling elements of the welfare state, which hitherto has been a sign of Western Europe's identity. This debate is not without consequence in terms of social cohesion, a central theme in the Euro-Latin American dialogue since the Guadalajara Summit. It remains to be seen, as these trends are expressed in the

international context, whether the EU will develop, in the words of Christian Freres and José Antonio Sanahuja, into an 'introspective' player which limits itself to managing its internal interests or a 'civil' or 'soft power' with active global reach (Freres, C., Sanahuja, J.A., 2005).

As a consequence of this development on both sides of the Atlantic, both the Latin Americans and the Europeans gave priority to their complex internal agendas. Little time was left over after this 'inward facing' attitude and only modest financial resources were reserved for foreign relations.

(6) At no time did Latin America and the Caribbean occupy a high-priority position in European foreign policy. This situation did not change even after the Cold War. If Europe could offer something of value, such as its integrationist experience, non-discrimination, institutionalisation, multilateralism and preference for the peaceful solution of conflicts within the framework of international law, such 'offers' had more to do with internal development in the EU than with specific interests in the region (Whitehead, L., 1992:140). The result is that, since the start of the new century, the comparative advantages of the European-Latin American partnership consist mainly of greater international cooperation (Gratius, S., 2002:9).

2.2 The first conceptual and practical steps towards a triangular relationship – Spain's pioneering role

The triangulation concept is used to indicate the interaction between three regional blocs, in this case Europe, LAC and Asia. Even though the blocs of a triangle may compete in some cases and cooperate in others, the essential feature is the existence of shared interests and current or potential relations between them. As Spain is the European country with the closest political, economic and cultural links with LAC, it is no coincidence that the idea of triangulation between Europe, LAC and Asia was first put forward by Spanish diplomats and academics. Examples of the links between Spain and LAC as points of the triangle are the Ibero-American Summits, their linguistic identity, the very close cultural exchange, the similarity of cultural expression, population migrations between the two shores of the Atlantic, and Spanish investments in LAC. In turn, links between LAC and Asia are increasingly strong in the economic context, with a spill-over effect into politics. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum comprising 21 countries including Mexico, Peru and Chile, and the Latin America-East Asia Cooperation Forum (FOCALAE) which also includes Latin American countries, are forming a growing political dimension and offer new possibilities for tripartite dialogue.

For decades now Spain has held a leading role in Euro-Latin American relations. A glance at the hard figures of the economic exchange, especially investments and cooperation, between the Iberian country and the Latin American subcontinent make this claim understandable. In view of the fact that Spanish governments – of different political colour – often do not distinguish greatly between their bilateral interests and European interests, it is not surprising that the Spanish authors who touched on the theme of triangulation did not put much energy into clearly separating a Spanish focus from a European focus.

An informative source in this respect is a document drawn up in 2004 by Manuel Montobbio, an ambassador and doctor of political sciences. The author, at the time of

the publication an Ambassador on Special Mission in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, published in December 2004 an essay entitled '*Triangulando la Triangulación. España/Europa – América Latina – Asia Pacífico*' ['Triangulating the Triangulation. Spain/Europe – Latin America – Asia-Pacific'] published by the CIDOB Foundation in Barcelona (Montobbio, M., 2004).

The author's starting point is the contrast between on the one hand the especially strong Spain-LAC relations, distinguished in particular by the system of Ibero-American Summits and Spanish investments in the region, and on the other hand a limited and inadequate relationship between Spain and Asia-Pacific with a structural problem of insufficient reciprocal knowledge (Montobbio 2004:7). As for LAC – Asia-Pacific relations, the author notes a process of strengthening and development on both sides, but not yet sufficiently explored and made use of by Spain. Signs of this are, among other things, the establishment of the Latin America-East Asia Cooperation Forum (FOCALAE), an extensive network of economic and trade agreements, and also the increasing mutual interest on the part of China and LAC in strengthening relations, demonstrated in 2004 by a busy flow of State visits, including that of the Chinese President, Hu Jintao, to Argentina, Brazil, China and Cuba at the time of the First Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Montobbio sums up the current position of relations between Spain, LAC and Asia by reviewing the ground covered within the framework of this triangle to contribute to the fulfilment of the paradigm of triangulation.

Seen from a Spanish perspective, Montobbio's study proved particularly fitting at a time when the Spanish government drew up the 2005-2008 version of the Asia-Pacific Plan. This plan gave special emphasis to the triangulation strategy which, according to the authors and Montobbio, promised a geometry full of potential. Basing part of his analysis on exploring the opportunities presented by the triangulation model in economic, political and cultural environments, Montobbio emphasises the need also to promote this strategy in the context of development cooperation, communication media and the possibilities offered by the virtual world via the Internet.

On the **economic level**, Montobbio recommends the triangular use of the economic and investment presence of his country in LAC as 'attractive for promoting the establishment in Spain of Asian companies interested in double reach, towards Spain and the European Union and towards LAC', as an 'element for projecting Spain's image in Asia-Pacific' and as a 'factor for attracting investment and economic projects'. Finally, the diplomat advocates projecting triangulation in basically economic multilateral forums such as APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting), introducing the Latin American economic agenda in ASEM (Montobbio; M., 2004: 11).

With regard to **political triangulation**, the author is less firm in his analysis and limits himself to raising a few open questions, distinguishing between the bilateral and the multilateral plan. The former involves introducing the agendas mutually, and in the second the challenge is to do the same in multilateral forums and organisations. Montobbio also wonders whether it would be advantageous for Spain to initiate a political dialogue between the Ibero-American Community and FOCALAE on the shared values which constitute the former's heritage and Asian values. Finally, Montobbio reflects on the possibility of creating a new mechanism or forum, formal or informal, with the specific aim of tackling the triangulation problem.

With regard to **cultural relations**, according to Montobbio, deserving special interest is the spread of Spanish in Asia-Pacific, and the possibility of joint actions between Spain and LAC for its promotion and spread in this region. In addition there should be a suitable grants policy and efforts for arranging research and study programmes on Asia-Pacific in Spain and LAC.

Montobbio is convinced that apart from economic and political fields, any aspect of international relations can be triangulated. He therefore recommends exploring the possibilities of promoting cultural triangulation, for example within the cultural dimension of FOCALAE (Montobbio, M., 2004:13). Another element of the cultural context could be a joint programme for translating significant and outstanding works of culture and the political and socio-economic reality of the three points of the triangle, the fruits of which could form the triangular Library, in two versions or directions: Asian works translated into Spanish and Spanish works translated into Asian languages. Additional initiatives in the cultural area could be triangular research, triangulation of academic studies or programmes (curricula, degree and post-graduate programmes in disciplines such as international relations, economics, political science, sociology and humanities), the creation of chairs in or for the triangulation, like the Jean Monnet chairs or UNESCO chairs, and, finally, programmes for inter-university cooperation and lecturer exchange (Montobbio, M., 2004:22-24).

In the **development cooperation** sector, the wide and detailed experience and extensive network of offices and delegations that Spain has in LAC could be used by Asia-Pacific donors interested in acquiring experience, devoting funds and becoming established as voluntary workers in LAC.

As for the **communication media**, which is crucial in overcoming the lack of mutual knowledge, both Spain and LAC should confront a structural problem of insufficient correspondents in Asia-Pacific (Montobbio, M., 2004:14).

All in all, the document tries to offer initiatives for working out how to proceed in a way that would consolidate this process and increase the practical benefits of the privileged position of Spain in LAC, with which it maintains close relations, and extend this to Asia, a continent with which the Iberian country has so far held far more modest relations.

The conceptual contribution of ambassador Montobbio forms part of and should be interpreted in the context of a Spanish initiative which was already launched at the start of this century. The first step in this respect was the approval of the Asia-Pacific Framework Plan in 2000. Since 2001, the Spanish government has advocated Triangulation with Asia-Pacific and LAC through the joint work of Casa de América (in Madrid) and Casa Asia (in Barcelona). For this, since 2001 'Casa Asia Triangulation Days. Spain, LAC, Asia' have been taking place, in which special attention is given to cooperation between the three points of this triangle from a multidisciplinary perspective, with analysis by specialists on the subject. The reports on the first organised days have been edited into a book with the emblematic title: '*La cuadratura del círculo: posibilidades y retos de la triangulación España-América Latina-Asia Pacífico*' [Squaring the circle: possibilities and challenges of the Spain-Latin America-Asia Pacific triangulation], compiled by Pablo Bustelo and José Ángel Sotillo². One of the aims of triangulation, according to its initiators, is 'to use the links and relations

² Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata 2002.- The schedule of the days can be found on Casa Asia's Web site: <http://casaasia.es/triangulación/cast/main.htm>.

achieved by Spain in LAC to overcome the weaknesses which arise even today in the fulfilment of this mission, in terms of both economics and culture and education in Asia-Pacific' (<http://www.casaasia.es/triangulacion/cast/presentacion.html>).

The (so far six) Triangulation Days – the first were organised directly by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in Casa de América, then in institutionalised form alternately in Barcelona and Madrid – generated a continuous forum of debate and discussion with the support and permanent contact of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). As a result of this participation, programmes have been agreed which, with financing from the Bank and coordination by Casa Asia, strengthen the existing relationship between Latin American institutions and Asian centres. Moreover, the processing, updating and preparation of information linked to Asia-Pacific from Spain has generated a large base of data and contacts which is now available on Casa Asia's Web site. A specific medium-term goal of Casa Asia is to bring into operation a Permanent Observatory with digitised data, as a contribution to the triangulation agenda.

2.3 Evaluation of the Spanish initiative and its possible transfer to European level

There is no doubt about it: the Spanish initiative with regard to a possible Spain/Europe-LAC-Asia Pacific triangulation in political, economic and cultural fields, initially brought about because of the very small economic, political and cultural presence of Spain in Asia-Pacific (see Bustelo, P., 2001), is worth acknowledging and evaluating positively, both conceptually and with regard to its potential for political implementation. This initiative stems from both exclusively Spanish interests and the perception of an international environment in the full swing of change. The former include memories drawn from the triangulation concept in past centuries, when figures such as Elcano, Loyola, Ruy de Clavijo, Antoni de Montserrat, the Manila galleon or, on the Asian side, the chart of Admiral Zheng He's fleet, unknowingly opened the way for globalisation (Soto, A., 2005). This historical reference is now linked to the conviction, widespread in the Peninsula, that this country has large shortfalls in its relationship with Asia, that the country is the priority partner of LAC and the door/bridge to the EU, and is therefore virtually a natural platform for a Europe-LAC-Asia triangulation.

Seen from a **European perspective**, these exclusively Spanish arguments in favour of trilateralisation are outweighed by those which comprise the new strategy as a response to **more structural changes in the international environment** which are affecting not only the EU and its member States, but also their Latin American partners. The following are among the most important changes:

- Since the '90s, globalisation has increased and has produced vary rapid changes in inter-relations between countries and regions. The rise of new players, both constructive (NGOs) and destructive (terrorist groups), which before were more on the fringe of international events, has increased unpredictability and brought a feeling of uncertainty and lack of consensus which cloud the new era.
- New regional powers have arisen in the South, which have expanded and diversified their external relations and demanded more power in international bodies. The terms used to refer to these players vary between 'large developing countries', 'emerging countries', 'intermediate countries', 'anchor countries' and 'regional (leading) powers',

for example BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). New inter-regional forums or organisations have also been set up, such as IBSA, ASEM and APEC. These new players and platforms have profoundly changed the world geopolitical map in which European-Latin American relations are included.

- The resurgence of South-South relations has firstly increased the room for manoeuvre, especially for the most powerful countries in the South, and has secondly restricted the margin for others, widening the gap between rich and poor, powerful and weak, influential and 'voiceless'. In general, international relations are increasingly complicated by the entry of new players, the erosion of certain rules of conduct and the fragility of global governance.

- All countries, both in the North and in the South, have to find answers to the rise of the so-called 'new security challenges'; terrorism, the trafficking of drugs, arms and people, organised crime, public insecurity, the energy crisis and the increasing volatility of the international financial system – all in a situation of decreasing tax revenue –, the fragility of institutions of democratic governance and the drastic increase in prices of basic products;

- The other facet of globalisation and a strategy for confronting it constructively is 'new regionalism' and inter-regionalism. The latter has taken three forms: (a) inter-regional relations in the strict sense, normally based on a more or less institutionalised dialogue (such as the San José Process and the EU's dialogues with the Latin American sub-regions); (b) 'trans-regional' relations, i.e. platforms of coordination or harmonisation (the Euro-Latin American Summits, ASEM and APEC); (c) a more hybrid method, in other words relations between regional groups or organisations and a third country (EU-Mexico, EU-Chile; EU-China, EU-India). As Jürgen Rüländ has reminded us, inter-regionalism can accomplish various functions: balancing, institution strengthening or building; rationalisation of external policies, agenda setting, and finally construction of collective self identity (Rüländ 2001: 6-9).

Growing inter-regionalism is proved by both EU-Asia relations and Latin America-Asia relations. Both relationships have been substantially strengthened in recent years, as demonstrated increasingly by the literature (see some titles in the bibliography). With regard to the EU and its external priorities towards the Third World, a clear regional and thematic differentiation may be observed: Africa, which is currently experiencing a new situation with the EU's CFSP, is receiving the political attention of Europeans mainly because of its extreme poverty, its endemic instability (failed States) and – recently – because of its energy resources. The Middle East is also cause for concern for the EU and its Member States because of its political instability, the terrorist threat and its status as oil supplier, while in Asia, Europe is focusing its attention on trade and investment. This picture explains what many observers have pointed out in recent years: Latin America, with the exception of Brazil as a regional power, finds itself increasingly on the periphery of decision-taking on the international scene and of the European CFSP. The region is neither economically nor politically the centre of concern (or attraction) for the EU.

For Latin America, not least because of its geographic position, its priorities lie with its large neighbour in the North, the US. Central American and Caribbean countries in particular have no other option. The countries of southern Latin America have more room to manoeuvre as for decades they have had close links with European countries and in recent times have taken advantage of their greater distance from the US

to increasingly diversify their external relations and strengthen links with Asia, in particular China, India and South Korea, and with Africa in South Africa.

In the face of changes in the international and regional environment, the Spanish triangulation proposal, including some of its concrete proposals, appears at first sight to be an **innovative strategy**, because:

- it (seriously) takes into account the recent development in the international environment and the growing economic and political weight of Asia, especially the leaders of this region, China and India;
- it offers the opportunity to get to know these countries and their representatives better at political, economic, cultural and scientific level, get to know their way of thinking, and include them in the debate on the major transverse themes which occupy the three regions;
- a trilateral dialogue at different levels on priority themes of the international and inter-regional agenda (for example security, human rights, climate change and sustainable development, social cohesion, democratic governance and biotechnology) can lead to the establishment and implementation of agreed rules and thus be a valid step forward on the road towards global governance.

There is also a **set of factors which dampens premature optimism for the trilateral strategy**:

- Euro-Latin American relations are structurally already highly complex and political dialogues between the two regions are so numerous that any additional player on the stage tends to block or – at the very least – thwart the participants.
- In spite of attempts at integration, the three regions are increasingly heterogeneous and politically, economically and socially fragmented. This hinders any attempt to agree on positions and speak with one voice. Also, if the EU restricts a possible trilateral political dialogue to only some interlocutor countries, for example the most powerful or – in the Europeans' terminology – the strategic partners (in Asia: China, India, Japan and South Korea, and in LAC: Brazil, Mexico and Chile), there is the risk of upsetting the other countries, mainly those who are second in line, i.e. Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia in Latin America; and Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand in Asia.
- Recent research has shown that the power resources of the so-called strategic partners do not always correspond to the West's expectations and that the level of acceptance of these countries as political stabilisers by their neighbours leaves much to be desired (Tokatlian, J., 2007; Scholvin, S.; Mattes, H., 2007).
- A productive dialogue requires minimum consensus, a shared basis of conviction, and a core shared political culture. This exists both within Europe and between Europe and LAC, for example regarding subjects such as human rights, representative democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression and international law. The situation in Asia in this respect is very different.
- In the culture of dialogue, there is a gap between Europe and LAC on the one hand, and the Asian countries on the other. While Europeans and Latin Americans are used to 'calling a spade a spade', Asians tend to hide any discrepancy with their interlocutor behind polite set expressions. This makes open and fruitful dialogue difficult. In addition, the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs, one of the basic principles in ASEAN countries for example, but also in China, limits the range of possible subjects for dialogue.

- The foreign policy of China, the most powerful emerging country in Asia, is dominated by strictly economic interests and is concentrated on the supply of raw materials and on winning new markets for its processed products. China follows a non-intervention policy, and so contrary to the cooperation policy of the EU in its external policy towards fragile or failed states (especially in Africa), refuses to be influenced in any way, for example on the subjects of migration, democratic governance, human rights and corruption. This policy strongly conflicts with the EU's conditioned cooperation and external policy.

2.4 Conclusions and options

2.4.1 Aspects of a pragmatic, realistic and low-profile trilateral strategy

- The most promising arena for triangular cooperation is without doubt political dialogue. This is also the least risky, as it does not go beyond rhetoric and it does not oblige its participants to implement what has been agreed. As mentioned above, however, this not very encouraging interpretation does not exclude making every effort to increase the efficacy and real impact of dialogue.

- With regard to APEC, the EU and its member States could, in a triangular perspective, develop the Latin American dimension or the relationship with the EU or the relationship with the ASEM process.

- It would be appropriate to introduce the relationship with Asia into the Summits and EU-LAC relations and the latter relations in the ASEM process, both in their agendas and in their programmes or those of the institutions which promote them, such as ASEF (Asia-Europe Foundation) for company-to-company relations between Asia and Europe.

- Finally, it would be a step forward at an appropriate time to arrange a joint meeting between two or more of the existing inter-regional forums, for example between the Ibero-American Summit and FOCALAE, APEC and ASEM.

2.4.2 Final observations – and a warning

The triangulation concept is neither an integral, nor a rigid nor a definitive concept; rather, in the words of Augusto Soto, it is an **'open code system a Linux of ideas'** (Soto, A., 2005). It is an **'idea (still) in process'** (Bustelo 2002). Its transformation into a realistic and promising strategy requires further reflection and research, as it is a highly complex subject with many players and many variables to be taken into account.

So far it has been Spanish politicians, civil servants and academics who have reflected most about triangulation and who have implemented some mechanisms in this respect, such as the Days organised by Casa Asia in cooperation with Casa de Américas. These initiatives are a valuable contribution to a serious debate at EU, Commission and European Parliament level, which has not as yet got off the ground. It is therefore **beneficial for Spain to keep pedalling so that the bicycle does not fall over**. Other EU member States which have so far not taken any interest in this 'bicycle' do not have the right to complain about the Spanish initiative. However, it would be **an error either to equate the Spanish position with regard to triangulation simply and without further thought with the European position, or to claim a starring role for Spain**. It would also not be realistic, or at least it would be premature, to take it for

granted that Spain is the bridge between LAC and Asia; sometimes – as emphasised in an interview by Jacinto Soler Matutes, co-author of a study on triangulation from the point of view of Spanish companies – the reverse is true, i.e. that LAC is the bridge between Asia and Spain (Soler Matutes, J., 2007).

The basic idea of Spain's role in the triangulation lies in the hypothesis that the Iberian country becomes a kind of intermediary between Asia, and in particular China, and LAC. In the words of Jacinto Soler Matutes: 'Spain must strengthen its presence in its natural markets, such as (...) LAC, so that Asian companies would have the incentive to gain market quota by passing through Spain' (Soler Matutes 2007). This strategy implies that these companies will use Spain as a platform, a subject which – as shown by empirical data – is influenced by logistical and tax factors and human resources.

The limited role the Iberian country could play on the Europe-Asia side is clearly shown in the field of economics. The idea underlying the argument in favour of Spain playing a bridging role between Asia and LAC takes advantage of Spain's privileged position and economic presence in Latin American countries to benefit from the growing eagerness of the Asian economies for its natural resources. But a glance at the sides of this possible triangle shows that in no case are they comparable in size. The figure which is closest to the current situation is the rectangular triangle. The longest side, the hypotenuse, joins Spain to LAC with cultural, linguistic, political and economic ties. The latter tie, the wave of Spanish investments in strategic sectors of the region (energy, communications, transport), is the strongest. The longest cathetus of the triangle joins South-East Asia to LAC and has become fundamentally important from the economic point of view. Above all the large economies such as China and India demand more and more South American energy, raw materials and food. In return, Asian investments are made in some South American countries, mainly in the mining sector and in infrastructure. Only China has promised Latin American presidents investments worth 100 thousand million dollars, of which to date only a small amount has been made. Finally, the shortest side of the triangle joins Spain to South-East Asia.

Spain's balance of trade with Asia is very negative for the Iberian country, which cannot offer much to Asian countries. And the political connections between Spain and Asia are structured mainly through the EU via summits of presidents of the EU and Asia in the *Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM)*.

In a globalised world, nearly all transactions are carried out directly between the countries of origin and destination, without the need for bridges. It is therefore not surprising that the Asians (and especially the Chinese) and the Latin Americans usually view triangulation with some scepticism. The basis for triangulation beyond political dialogue and a symbolic policy is still too weak. There are ideas and possibilities, but these fall far short of a triangular strategy, without even mentioning the likelihood of its implementation.

Centring this debate only on Spain's role does not take into account that in other EU member States there are also initiatives with regard to the points of a triangulation and their interconnections in the political environment (ministries, political foundations, cooperating NGOs) and the academic environment, i.e. some university and non-university research centres and Think Tanks dedicated to Area Studies and Comparative Area Studies³).

³ A single example of this in Europe is the *German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA)* in

A first step would therefore be to find out about the existing knowledge on the three sides of the triangle and for politicians and experts to debate the meaning, political practicality and political costs and benefits of a triangulation strategy on this basis. Only this would be progress in a situation where European, Latin American and Asian matters are discussed in the political arena both at European level and by Member States – according to the logic of ‘bureaucratic policy’ – almost always separately, in spite of their actual interdependencies resulting from accelerated globalisation.

Hamburg. GIGA is an inter-disciplinary institute and combines four regional institutes (Latin America, Asia, Africa and Middle East); it has three pillars – documentation, research and political advice – and combines *Area Studies* with *Comparative Area Studies* (see the Web site: www.giga-hamburg.de).

Annex

1. Abbreviations

ALOP	Association of Latin American Development Organisations
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEF	Asia-Europe Foundation
ASEM	Asia Europe Meeting
BRICS	Brazil, India, China and South Africa
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEES	Common European Economic Space
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIDOB	Centre for International Relations and Development Studies
EU	European Union
FOCALAE	Latin America-East Asia Cooperation Forum
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GRULA	Group of Latin American Ambassadors
IBSA	(Forum between) India, Brazil and South Africa
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LACA	

MCCA	Central American Common Market
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OBREAL	Observatory of EU-Latin American Relations
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SIGMA	Support for Improvement in Governance and Management in Central and Eastern Europe
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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