

Communication in EU External Energy Policy: Lessons from the Bilateral Energy Dialogues with Brazil, India, China and South Africa

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Policy Recommendations

- Enhance EU member states' coordination
- Carve out clearly the value added of the EU
- Make smart use of polyphony and diversity
- Stop talking — Listen! And build trust!

The EU energy policy defines common objectives (competitiveness, security of supply, and sustainability) at the EU level, without transferring national energy competences to the European level. In its external dimension, the EU is carrying out an energy dialogue with third countries on a bilateral base, under the umbrella of its strategic partnership. This policy brief focuses on the bilateral energy dialogues of the EU with Brazil, India, China and South Africa (BICS). Communication within the dialogues has to be seen as suboptimal. To tap the full potential of the energy dialogues with the third countries, the following recommendations might be helpful:

- Enhance EU member states coordination and carve out clearly the value added of the EU

The lack of coordination and knowledge sharing between the EU and its member states in relation to their energy dialogues has already been mentioned

above. Agreements and partnerships of the EU and member states towards the BICS in the energy sector are running on parallel tracks and have at times rivalled each other. Member states' cooperation is "just another cup of tea", as one of our interview partners expressed it. Many actors in the BICS engage in cooperation with the EU and the member states at the same time. Thus, a certain preference for the approaches of member states is voiced, as it seems unclear where exactly the value added of cooperation with the supranational institutions of the European Union lies.

“ The dialogue needs to be regarded as a “two-way street” ... to be successful, it is inevitable for the EU to stop talking and start listening. ”

Even after installing the information exchange mechanism, the EU still lacks coordination with information on existing or negotiated international agreements between member states and the BICS. Therefore, it would be advisable for the EU to enhance cooperation with member states. A first instrument could be a review procedure similar to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), wherein member states would peer review their relations with the BICS on a voluntary basis, in order to identify shortcomings and impediments, to develop common goals and synergies, and to harmonize their cooperation practices. Thus, the EU as well as all member states could learn and identify best practices.

In addition to introducing further communication channels among the EU and member states, it would be advisable to involve the latter more systematically in the energy dialogues as well as at a project level. In the China case, for example, the EU and its member states had jointly agreed on the Urbanization Partnership and a dialogue on energy security.

The BICS countries' preference for cooperation with member states often derives from the EU's unclear mandates and "offers" for energy cooperation. Thus, the EU needs to carve out clearly its value added and identify the role it would like to play in energy cooperation with the BICS. For instance, this could be a coordinating role, matching EU member states' expertise with the partner country's interests/demands. The EU could also pave the way for member states' engagement with the BICS in negotiating the regulatory and political frameworks of cooperation. In particular, smaller member states are more likely to orient their actions along the broader scope of EU strategies and engagement. Thus, the EU could play an influencing role in shaping cooperation.

● **Do not count on the „One Voice Paradigm“ - instead make smart use of polyphony and diversity**

The energy dialogues between the EU and the BICS are organized under the umbrella of the EU-BICS Strategic Partnerships. From the EU side, a multiplicity of European actors is involved in a polyphony of voices. From an institutional perspective, different DGs are involved and play a more or less active role in the energy dialogues. This bears both potentials and risks. The institutional fragmentation, as well as the inadequately defined roles and responsibilities, may foster competition between different EU actors involved and this may result in highly fragile forms of coordination. Furthermore, the absence of a clear leading position may hamper cooperation between the EU and emerging powers as strategic partners.

This is a point where the cross-cutting nature of energy issues may also weaken the role of DG Energy, as we can think of constellations where other actors such as DG DevCo, DG Trade, or the European External Action Service (EEAS) may be in a more apt position to meet the interests of both the EU and its partners.

Due to this diffused design of the EU's governance architecture, some actors have to face the risk of being isolated from informal communicative networks and information exchange within the dialogues.

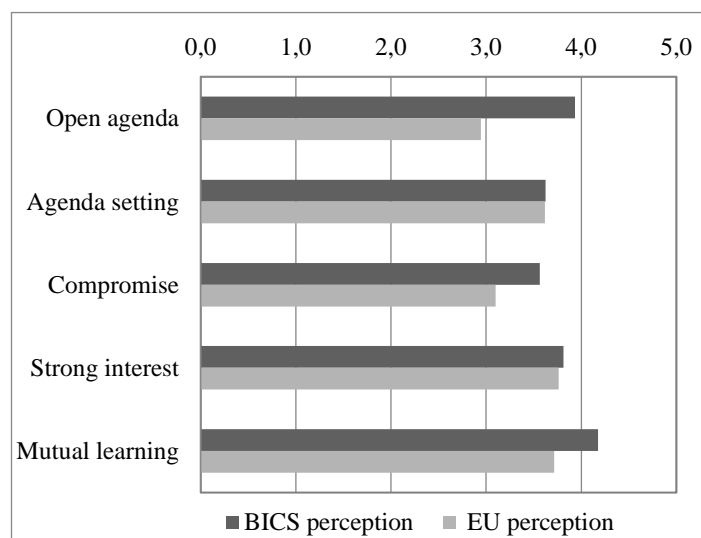
However, the cross-cutting nature of energy issues also suggests that it is not necessary to speak with one voice, which too often seems to be the only paradigm suitable for the EU's external policies, even though such a doctrine might limit the possibilities of EU engagement, as well as its overall mandate. To the contrary, we suggest taking the cross-cutting nature of energy seriously and fully tapping its potential. In this regard, we propose matrix-structured dialogues. Instead of attempting to streamline the dialogues by concentrating the coordination responsibility within one DG, the dialogue could stretch across existing dialogue boundaries. In a matrix-structured dialogue, focused on the most important problems within the Strategic Partnerships, all EU actors within the field of energy could be involved. Thus, under the Strategic Partnerships umbrella, the matrix would overcome the pillarization of EU-BICS communication, leading to tailor-made dialogues with flexible composition and greater problem orientation.

Thus, we recommend bundling funds and personnel to adopt a method oriented on problem resolution within the energy sphere. However, in each of the cross-cutting dialogues clear roles and responsibilities still have to be identified, allowing more room for manoeuvre for other DGs according to the issue area.

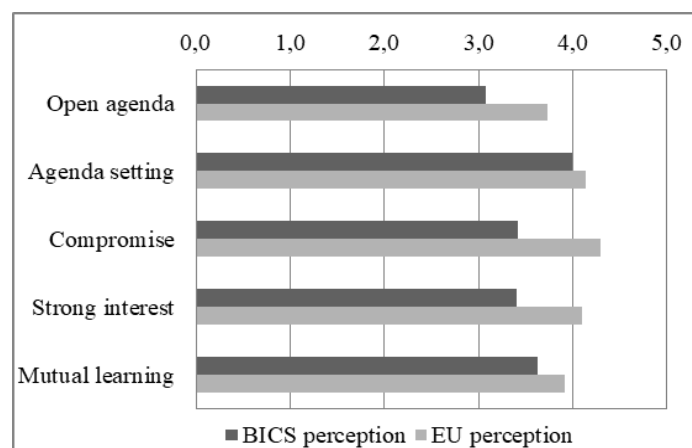
● **Stop talking — Listen! And build trust!**

One of the most important observations of the EU-BICS bilateral energy dialogues is that the partners involved on both sides of the dialogues do not devote sufficient commitment to the energy dialogues. This may be due to a lack of common understanding, which needs to be built based on mutual trust and mutual commitments. The dialogue needs to be regarded as a "two-way street," where both partners have the chance to meet on an equal basis. The partners, therefore, need to enter the dialogue guided by a reflexive political agenda and more flexible mandates. This implies openness in setting and framing the agenda, as well as the capability to reschedule mandates and positions guided by an atmosphere of mutual learning.

Perceptions of BICS' properties as a dialogue partner*



Perception of the EU's properties as a dialogue partner*



*Means of all answers; 1 = "Strongly disagree"; 5 = "Strongly agree"

Source: EnergyGov, Darmstadt, 2014.

In a world of increasing energy demands by rising powers, resource scarcity, and competition over resources, energy cooperation with the other large "consumer" states is crucial for the European Union. For this kind of approach to be successful, it is inevitable for the EU to stop talking and start listening.

The European Union is often regarded by its partners as one of the most inflexible and inefficient energy policy actors. Brazilian actors highlighted the EU's approach of arriving at the negotiation table with an already predefined agenda. Furthermore, getting changes made to documents that require the consent

of the EU member states is so difficult, that cooperation partners describe the EU's manner as a take-it-or-leave-it one. Rather than just speaking, and dominating interaction, the EU should learn to be a more careful listener. For any dialogue to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, each side has to know and understand the other's interests and concerns. We, therefore, recommend the deployment of European Commission staff and/or specialized consultants to capture the different voices in third countries. This would promote the mapping of stakeholders and actors involved, as well as the creation of constructive proposals to vitalize the energy dialogues and to achieve more tangible results. However, as an energy dialogue will have limited overall impact, it is recommended to manage expectations carefully. It is also recommended to engage in learning and innovation, which can be fuelled by knowledge management and sharing within the dialogue and/or cross-sectoral networks.

This image is reflected in our survey on perceptions of the EU's and BICS' properties as dialogue partners. In their self-perception, the EU actors in the dialogue tend to view the EU as an active agenda setter, emphasizing high compromise-building qualities and an interest in the other negotiation partner, which is also visible in the openness for mutual learning. This very positive self-image must be juxtaposed with the BICS' perceptions of the European actors. The public actors in the four emerging powers agreed that the EU acts as an agenda setter. Although they do not consider the EU a dominant promoter of interests, they do note that the EU is not particularly eager to compromise or change its positions. In addition, they would not subscribe to the claim that the EU is acting with an open agenda. Instead, some respondents from India and China stated that the EU was occasionally acting with a 'hidden agenda'. Importantly, the self-perceptions of each of the BICS countries were that they have an open agenda, whereas the EU views this property rather critically. The same holds true for compromise. Thus, it is also crucial for all actors involved in the dialogue to create a trustful and open cooperation atmosphere. Joint projects with tangible results may help approach this aim.

References

These recommendations were developed within the research project “Challenges of European External Energy Governance with Emerging Powers”, funded by the “Europe and Global Challenges” initiative of VolkswagenStiftung, Compagnia di San Paolo und Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. Nadine Piefer was involved in the formulation of these recommendations while she was research associate at TU Darmstadt, but left the scientific community and is now working at OECD. Comprehensive analysis and recommendations are published in:

Knodt, Michèle/Piefer, Nadine/Müller, Franziska 2015 (eds.): Challenges of EU External Energy Governance towards Emerging Powers, Ashgate.

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Acknowledgement

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA17119 ENTER, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

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Funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union