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## **[Comment] Searching for a Brussels Machiavelli**

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The European Union is rarely depicted as a strategic actor in the realm of foreign policy. This is not due to lack of capabilities, but rather to a lack of leadership and grand vision to turn its formidable resources into something else, something called power.

To transform resources into power, the EU needs to become "more strategic in [its] thinking", as already recommended by the European Council in its 2008 report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy.

Such strategic thinking is almost against the nature of the EU. Neither a Machiavelli nor a Bismarck has yet emerged from Brussels. Nevertheless, the EU has no other choice: in today's changing environment, marked by a shift in the distribution of global power and a growing uncertainty regarding the coming order, the EU cannot just sit and wait, or it will be sidelined or worse, marginalised.

I do not know whether Machiavelli's Prince stands in a prominent place among the Haiku collections in the personal library of Herman Van Rompuy, but the European Council president did well to call for an extraordinary meeting of the EU leaders on 16 September to debate foreign policy, with a focus on strategic partnerships. Indeed, the EU cannot possibly become a strategic actor without further developing its relations with other global players.

But this positive initiative will undoubtedly prove to be challenging, not only because the EU is uneasy about strategic debates, but also because the concept of strategic partnerships is particularly unclear, even in the minds of EU officials.

To begin with, there is no official list of the EU strategic partnerships, and probably only a few people could name them all. There is also no definition of what strategic partnership means. This leads to ambiguity regarding the nature and the objectives of the partnerships but also regarding the list of strategic partners.

How can the EU pretend to have strategic partnerships without an agreement on what it means and on who are its strategic partners? Make no mistake, this is not only a conceptual problem raised by an academic; it demonstrates a true lack of strategic perspective on the EU side, putting the concept at risk and throwing discredit on the EU's capacity to act as a strategic international actor.

Moreover, now that strategic partnerships exist, they generate expectations on the part of third countries, both those that have been granted the strategic status and those that aspire to it.

A careful review of EU documents, however, reveals that the EU has – or is working on – nine strategic partnerships with third countries: Canada, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, China, India and Japan.

A quick look at this list will raise some questions. Certainly not all strategic partnerships are identical. Some partners are established powers which the EU considers to be inherently "strategic", but with whom partnership is rather informal. Others are emerging powers with which the EU felt the need to agree a formal document called "strategic partnership" in reaction to the rapid emergence of these newcomers on the global stage.

Not all strategic partnerships appear equal either. The strategic partnership with the US appears essential and above any other partnership. Our strategic partnership with Russia and China, and to a certain extent with Brazil and India, is more complex but almost as important to cope with contemporary global challenges and achieve core EU foreign policy objectives. Hence, the BRIC countries are pivotal partners. Canada and Japan are two natural allies of the EU. As for South Africa and Mexico, they appear to be more regional than global partners.

The next logical question, no less challenging for EU leaders to discuss, would be: what do we aim to do with these strategic partners? Too often these strategic partnerships are isolated from each other as they are seen through a bilateral or regional lens, instead of being looked at in a global framework.

This is not to say that it is possible to have a "one size fits all" approach to strategic partnerships, but there could be some common elements to each partnership for which horizontal coordination would be required, for instance reform of global governance, halting nuclear proliferation or tackling climate change. The problem, however, is that there is a lack of horizontal dialogue at the EU level, thus denying the strategic partnerships a truly strategic dynamic. The External Action Service, the new diplomatic body of the EU, could become part of the solution to this problem, but this will largely depend on its implementation and only time will tell.

At the end of the day, it is unlikely that the EU will answer all the questions raised during the debate. What really matters though is that this discussion marks the dawn of a revival of strategic debates within the EU and not its twilight. Machiavelli might well be secretly hiding in Brussels after all.

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