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## **[Comment] EU's strategic partnerships lack content**

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Effective multilateralism is a key principle of European Union foreign policy: only in co-operation with others can the EU's objectives be achieved peacefully, notably with emerging powers such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, commonly known as the BRICs.

Although they often have different worldviews and competing objectives, all are increasingly interlinked economically, and all are confronted with the same global challenges.

To engage with these global actors, the EU has created a new instrument: strategic partnerships. The actual strategy behind these is far from clear however.

A major problem is the vagueness of the concept. Apart from various annual meetings, it is not clear what strategic partnership entails. Which common objectives and joint actions are to be pursued, in which policy areas? At the moment, merely having a partnership appears more important than its content.

Which countries qualify for strategic partnership? The EU has or is now negotiating strategic partnerships with seven "emerging" States: Brazil, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and South Africa.

Most of these countries undeniably exercise regional leadership or are a significant player for one specific global issue. But is this sufficient to make them a strategic partner? Can Mexico and South Africa really be put on an identical level with China and Russia?

The danger is to overstretch the concept, creating an amalgam between important relationships and strategic relationships. "Strategic partnership" has become a fashionable term, but is becoming emptied of real substance.

The EU should conduct a thorough assessment of its interests in the various regions of the globe and clearly define its objectives towards them. At the same time, it should prioritise actions to tackle the global challenges. On many of these issues – climate, migration, energy – the EU already has elaborate policies: these must be integrated into its broader foreign policy framework.

**Fewer European seats in international institutions**

Furthermore, the EU must sharpen its view on how best to organize the multilateral architecture. In order to be effective and legitimate, multilateral institutions must be adapted to take into account the growing importance of the "emerging" global actors.

Can the EU, which is clearly over-represented, contribute to such reforms while making its own representation more effective, compensating for the loss of European seats by speaking much more with one voice? Which are the EU's preferred multilateral forums? The EU cannot afford to dither, for things are moving fast, as the rise of the G20 demonstrates.

The EU should identify shared interests with each strategic partner, in order to establish in a number of policy areas effective practical co-operation with those strategic partners that share EU interests in that specific domain, with the ultimate aim of institutionalising those forms of co-operation and linking them up with the permanent multilateral institutions.

Such a pragmatic approach of coalition-building and practical co-operation, on very specific issues to start with, can expand into broader areas, including with regard to values.

While it is unlikely that we will see China at the forefront of democracy promotion, it has an economic interest in promoting the rule of law, if only to ensure that the mining concessions it acquires are not simultaneously offered to someone else.

Such a process would allow the EU to gradually and consensually increase the minimal standards to which everyone should adhere, thus slowly but surely strengthening the recognition of the universality of values.

Two types of partners may eventually emerge: those with which the EU establishes co-operation in a comprehensive range of areas – probably Russia, China and India; and those with whom co-operation focuses on a more limited range of issues or regions.

In order to promote European unity, strategic partnerships should establish the EU as the unique interlocutor on a series of key issues, hence limiting the margin of manoeuvre of individual member states.

Without strategy, the strategic partnerships will quickly become irrelevant. With a strategy, they can become very effective instruments of a united European foreign policy.

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