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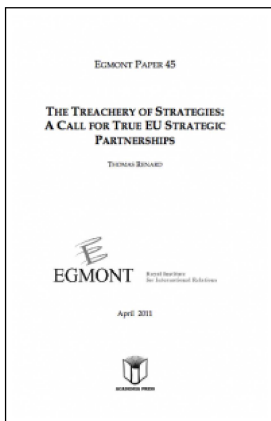


Run by the [Group on Grand Strategy](#), European Geostrategy is a blog that aims to discuss the foreign, security and defence policies – as well as the geopolitics and geostrategies – of the European Union and its Member States.

The treachery of strategies

12:38, 12 April 2011

By [Thomas Renard](#)



In September 2010, the European Council discussed for the first time the European Union's strategic partnerships, a foreign policy concept that was until then unknown to most people – including European officials. This discussion was certainly needed in these times of geopolitical upheaval. The global shift of power from the Atlantic to the Pacific forces the European Union and its Member States to fundamentally rethink their foreign policy with a strong focus on great and emerging powers; otherwise they are at risk of falling into global irrelevance. The 2009 Copenhagen climate conference was just a [foretaste](#) of what global irrelevance could mean. The recent events in the Arab world have proved again that Europe is not at ease with contemporary challenges, including in its own neighbourhood.

To cope with the coming multipolar world, the European Union should invest time and energy in its relationships with great and emerging powers, i.e. in the so-called strategic partnerships, because the more the world becomes globalised and interconnected, the more Brussels will be confronted with them – a confrontation that can lead either to cooperation or competition. Given that all international actors need one another if they are to cope with issues as crucial as climate change, nuclear proliferation and sustainable development, cooperation should be privileged over competition. [Current events](#) in the Arab world – as important as they are – should not distract the European Union from its vital long-term strategic interest: secure a relevant status in the coming multipolar environment dominated by great powers.

In 2011, the European Union has ten strategic partnerships with third countries: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States. However, it is not entirely clear what the exact reasoning is behind this list. Some countries (e.g. the United States) are considered to be natural partners of the European Union, whereas others (e.g. China and Russia) are considered simply to be too big to ignore. As for the other countries on the list, the strategic rationale is far less evident. Their inclusion sometimes seems to be more the result of political and institutional games than of a true strategic reflection, hence leading to an 'accidental' list of strategic partners.

The objectives that the European Union is supposed to pursue globally through its strategic partnerships are left entirely undefined. What are Brussels' global interests and priorities? How can these interests and priorities be pursued? What is the role of the strategic partners (cooperation or competition) in the pursuit of these interests and priorities? The 2003 [European Security Strategy](#) remains mute on these fundamental questions, as it says more about how to do things than about what exactly to do. Strategic partnerships thus unfold as instruments empty of meaning and substance, with no clearly defined strategic direction.

Strategic partnerships are only strategic in name, for now. An historical overview of documents and debates shows the total absence of strategic rationale behind the elaboration of strategic partnerships since the very beginning, with no definition of the concept or of its fundamental objectives, and an ad hoc selection of partners. This process of astrategic thinking led to a repetition of past failures as the European Union is now facing similar problems as it was ten years ago with the Common Strategies, from which the partnerships derived, namely the difficulty to turn rhetoric into concrete policies of strategic value vis-à-vis our partners. Indeed, strategic partnerships are not so strategic when looked at up-close for a variety of reasons, including that: firstly, not every partner is equally strategic; secondly, the European Union is not cooperating with its partners on most truly strategic issues; thirdly, the strategic partnership has no structural or institutional impact on the relationship; and, finally, the European Union itself is simply not considered as a strategic partner by other powers in many cases.

Thus, the recent revival of debates on strategic partnerships is a positive step forward and that a strict implementation of the important conclusions of the 2010 September European Council is now awaited. It is time to reflect on the European Union's global interests and priorities in search of its grand strategy. *True* strategic partnerships could then be regarded as (sub-)strategies of the European Union vis-à-vis great and emerging powers. Further recommendations for the European Union and its Member States could then follow, to turn the existing strategic partnerships into true strategic partnerships:

- Review the European Union's institutional set-up, in line with the strategic nature of the partnerships, e.g. by establishing a cell dedicated to the strategic partnerships within the External Action Service, or by developing the European Union's delegations in terms of size and composition to reflect the strategic character of the relationship.
- Review the European Union's internal arrangements, notably ensuring a greater coordination between it and the Member States vis-à-vis strategic partners.
- Review the bilateral arrangements between the European Union and its strategic partners in order to acknowledge the strategic importance of the relationship, e.g. by establishing comprehensive and effective strategic dialogues as well as sectoral dialogues on security and defence, or by developing a culture of cooperation on strategic issues.
- Review the multilateral arrangements, according to the European Union's preference for effective multilateralism, e.g. by boosting coordination and conflict mediation mechanisms within multilateral forums between the European Union and its strategic partners.

These recommendations should enable Brussels to develop more credible and effective strategic partnerships, providing Europeans with a clearer and louder voice in the twenty-first century.

- To read Thomas Renard's Egmont Paper, please [click here](#).



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4 Responses to "The treachery of strategies"



Jaanika Erne says:
[12 April 2011 at 9:49 pm](#)

Egmont Paper 45 begins with the words: 'In September 2010, the European Council discussed for the first time the European Union's (EU) strategic partnerships', but how did you name the aims behind the accession of Turkey before?



Thomas Renard says:
[13 April 2011 at 8:06 am](#)

Dear Jaanika,

Thank you for your comment. First, to be clear, the first sentence means that the European Council (not other European Union bodies) discussed for the first time (the concept of) strategic partnerships, which had never been discussed as such. I apologise if this was not clear enough, but I think it is clear enough in the Egmont Paper.

Now, regarding Turkey, I do not think Turkey was ever coined a European Union 'strategic partner', for Turkey aims to enter the European Union and therefore searches for a pre-accession status. In fact, the 'strategic partner' status could even be detrimental to its candidacy I would argue, for it would make it enter a completely different category of countries... On the other hand, Catherine Ashton in September mentioned Turkey on her list of potential strategic partners, which was indeed very confusing but is also the result of the recently more assertive foreign policy of Turkey.



Syd Morgan says:
[13 April 2011 at 9:39 am](#)

Thomas, you write that 'Catherine Ashton in September mentioned Turkey on her list of potential strategic partners.' Implicitly suggesting that Turkey is not / no longer is / or she doesn't want it to be a pre-accession state?



Thomas Renard says:
[13 April 2011 at 10:07 am](#)


Dear Syd,

Well, I cannot be in Mrs. Ashton's head, so I am not sure how much she actually realised what offering the 'strategic partner' status to Turkey would mean for its accession status. In fact, mentioning Turkey in this list brought much confusion about the future of European-Turkey relations: are we still in a negotiation phase for Turkey to enter the European Union or are we now negotiating with a regional power increasingly assertive on some issues?

My feeling is that strategic partnership and accession are incompatible approaches, for the first one considers Turkey as an external actor with long term potential for cooperation on regional and global issues, whereas the second approach considers Turkey to be a neighbour and foreign policy towards it is built around accession process rather than regional and global management.

Now, if anything, the case of Turkey highlights the confusion between the term 'strategic partner' that many are tempted to use and abuse in diplomatic circles, and the instrument of '(true) strategic partnership' which is envisioned as a sub-strategy of Brussels to pursue its interests worldwide.

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