



Strategy Wanted: The European Union and Strategic Partnerships

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The European Union (EU) has nine strategic partnerships with third countries, but the rationale behind these is far from evident, and the implementation questionable. Therefore, the *raison d'être* of these partnerships has been largely questioned within Europe, but also by our partners. This brief proposes a critical look at the concept of strategic partnerships, and make some recommendations to EU policy-makers.

A few days after José Manuel Barroso's first ever "State of the Union" speech, in which the importance of EU strategic partners was once again emphasized, and ahead of the 16 September European Council dedicated in part to strategic partnerships, this brief proposes a critical look at the concept of strategic partnerships, from an EU perspective.

A VAGUE LIST OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

There is no official list of the EU strategic partnerships, and probably only a few people could name them all. In fact, depending on the meaning that is given to the partnerships, depending on the audience, or depending on the speaker, the list varies greatly. For instance, in his first foreign policy speech at the College of Europe in February 2010,

Herman Van Rompuy said: "We need to review and strengthen our relationship with key partners. I am above all thinking about the United States, Canada, Russia, China, Japan, India, Brazil"¹. In July of the same year, at a conference in Athens, Catherine Ashton came up with a different list of strategic partners: "We need to invest in partnerships, keeping up the work with our 'established partnerships' such as the US, Russia, Japan and Canada, and focussing too on developing our relationships with powers that are emerging or have emerged, China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia"².

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

It is not entirely clear how the EU reached this list or what is the exact reasoning behind it. Some countries (e.g. the US) are considered to be natural partners of the EU, 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.

A first argument developed here is that the nine strategic partnerships are neither identical nor equal.

Not all strategic partnerships are identical. Although all these relationships are qualified to be a “strategic partnership” in either formal or informal documents, they did not come into existence in the same way, nor are they at the same stage.

On the one hand, the relationships with Canada, Russia, the US and Japan (CRUSAJ) – the established powers – are regulated by just a few core documents and many sectoral dialogues. Despite the use of “strategic partnership” rhetoric during bilateral Summits, there is no official document entitled “strategic partnership” with these countries. The EU considers these long-standing relationships to be inherently “strategic” for various reasons and their natural evolution did not require over-formalisation into one single document.

On the other hand, the EU adopted documents explicitly entitled “strategic partnership” with Brazil, India, China, South Africa and Mexico (BICSAM) – the emerging powers – because it had to adapt to the rapid emergence of these newcomers on the global stage. As the relationship did not evolve as naturally as with the previous category of countries, and as bilateral agreements with them were blossoming in every direction following their emergence, the EU granted them a new kind of reward to maintain a comprehensive framework for the relationship and ensure their continued commitment. In this new mechanism, there is always a Commission Communication endorsed by the Council and then approved at a Summit. Among this category, there seems to be a subtle distinction between the *necessary* “strategic partnership” [“EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities”]; the *established* “strategic partnership” [“An EU-India Strategic Partnership”]; and the “strategic partnership” *as an objective* [“Towards a Strategic Partnership” with South Africa, Brazil, Mexico].³

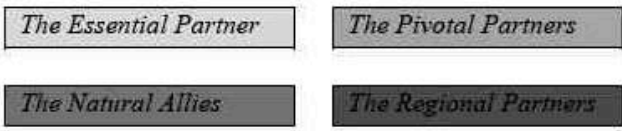
Not all strategic partnerships are equal. Strategic partners can be categorized as follows. (1) The essential partner: The strategic partnership with the US seems to be above any other partnership as the transatlantic relationship is certainly no less important in today’s uncertain global environment than it was in the past. This partnership is essential because little can be done without the support of the American superpower. (2) The pivotal partners: 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. These partnerships are pivotal because they can tip the international balance to the benefit or to the detriment of the EU depending on how we approach them. (3) The natural allies: The strategic partnerships with Canada and Japan appear less strategic than those with the US or the BRIC countries. However, these two countries are not negligible as they are like-minded countries with a significant footprint in international affairs (notably through their presence in the G8 and the G20). (4) The regional partners: Mexico and South Africa are two dwarfs among the strategic partners of the EU although they can bring a certain added value at the regional level (probably more obviously in the case of South Africa than that of Mexico).

A STRATEGIC DISTINCTION

In order to better illustrate the distinctions made above between the nine strategic partnerships with third countries, this brief resorts to a 3 by 2 matrix, differentiating between the level of strategic importance of the partners on one axis and the level of formalisation of the partnership on the other axis (see Figure 1). Hence we make a clear distinction between the importance of EU “strategic partners”⁴ (vertical axis) and the formal “strategic partnerships” that the EU has concluded (horizontal axis). All the nine countries in the matrix are the so-called “strategic partners” of the EU. However, this brief argues, in reality some

Figure 1: The Matrix of EU Strategic Partnerships

	Informal Partnerships	Formal Partnerships
Superpower	The United States	
Great Powers	Russia	China
Leading Powers	Japan Canada	India Brazil Mexico South Africa



partners are more strategic than others and a distinction should be made between them.

Formally, a strategic partnership acts as a sort of umbrella for the relationship, as it offers a comprehensive framework for the two partners, and raises the level of the dialogue (to Summit level). These partnerships appear in the right column of the matrix.

Such strategic partnerships create a privileged relationship with rapidly emerging global players, as they seek to develop a feeling of mutual confidence between the EU and the partner through bilateral consultation and coordination. Such privileged relationship is likely to strengthen bilateral cooperation on sensitive issues of global or regional concern. The establishment of such privileged relationship is crucial as the nature of the relationship with emerging powers has fundamentally evolved in the last decade in spite of the fact that most of these relationships are quite old (we celebrated 35 years of EU-China relations in 2010).

There is also a more immediate consequence to announcing such a strategic partnership: it automatically raises the status of the third country, which is to say that the EU recognizes the growing importance and influence of the strategic partner, but it also acknowledges its new responsibilities and obligations as a global player. Such strategic partnerships are both cause and consequence of an intensification (or densification?) and a diversification (e.g. proliferation of sectoral dialogues) of the relationship, resulting in a deepened coordination at the EU level among relevant DGs and between the Commission and the Council.

However, these formal strategic partnerships encompass only half of all strategic partners of the EU. One could even argue that they include several countries that are not particularly strategic to the EU. In any case, the strategic nature of those documents is questionable and implementation often limited.⁵ Hence, we should distinguish the formal strategic partnerships from what could be called a “true strategic partnership”,

or eventually a “grand strategic partnership” in reference to a potential EU grand strategy, yet to be elaborated.⁶

A true strategic partner can be defined as a key global player which has a pivotal role in solving global challenges – in the sense that the EU cannot hope to solve these issues without the positive contribution of that partner – and which is centrally important to enhance effective multilateralism globally – e.g. by coordinating our position with those strategic partners in multilateral forums. The strategic partnerships in this sense go beyond bilateral relations and focus on the instrumentalisation of this bilateral relationship for broader ends.

However, as illustrated in Copenhagen, not all our strategic partners share the EU’s global priorities or our effective multilateral approach to global challenges.⁷ A key objective of these strategic partnerships should precisely be to avoid an infinite repetition of the Copenhagen scenario by encouraging a stronger relationship built around shared objectives in a long-term perspective. This idea of shared objectives might be more productive than the one of common interests and values, as the latter is more likely to lead to clashes with our partners. Indeed, the emphasis on values – as important as it is to maintain on the bilateral agenda – will inevitably remain a continuous source of tensions, whereas common interests may in practice equally lead to cooperation and competition. Therefore, “shared objectives” appears to be a more constructive concept. The point is not to erase the value dimension from our foreign policy however, but rather to opt for a less direct and perhaps more constructive approach of value promotion, in which our values will be slowly accepted as a result of shared objectives, not as a result of unilateral EU pressure.

The list of our true strategic partners should flow from an assessment of the strategic importance of third countries to achieve the core EU foreign

policy objectives. Given that a grand strategy still needs to be elaborated, it is rather difficult to come up with the most adequate list of true strategic partners. However, the US, Russia and China will undoubtedly figure on the list, although for different reasons. India and Brazil are likely to make it to the list as well. The discussion remains open for the other partners.

We should foresee that these strategic partnerships will be variable in their content, with some global objectives common to all partnerships and some other global objectives tailor-made for each partnership, depending on the particular added-value of each partner. In terms of common global objectives, we could envision for instance the promotion of effective multilateralism, an element at the core of the ESS, although this will not be unproblematic given that most strategic partners “support multilateralism in a selective way, in so far as it fosters their interests”⁸.

Regarding tailor-made objectives, the list could be long for each partnership, and we will mention here just a few illustrations of how the strategic partnerships could be used to fulfil some EU grand objectives. We could for instance envision an enhanced cooperation between the EU and the US over global financial stability now that we have experienced the devastating effects of a global financial crisis. The EU and China could work together on a common approach to sustainable development in Africa, in line with the UN millennium goals, given that there is a growing awareness that a sustainable Africa is in the interest of Chinese and European long-term investments. The EU as one of the biggest financial contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, and India as one of the biggest troops contributors to UN peacekeeping operations could work together in improving UN crisis management mechanisms, hence making a better use of their resources. The EU and Brazil could work together in combating narco-traffic, with an emphasis on West Africa where drug trafficking destroy any chance of

development and stability in the entire region. The list could go on.

However, while following its grand objectives through strategic partnerships, the EU should not show an excess of naivety. Firstly, it should recognize that there will be major hindrances to promoting a common approach to issues and challenges shared by all strategic partners, as some of them have hardly reconcilable positions, e.g. China and India on Security Council reform, but also given the growing normative disconnect between the EU and some of its strategic partners.⁹ Secondly, the EU should also recognize that working together with one partner could trigger negative views among other partners, or worse, harm the bilateral relationship. For instance, cooperating with the Chinese Navy to secure maritime routes in East Africa certainly fits into the perspective of strategic partnerships, but it triggers intense worries in Japan and India, which see the deployment of the Chinese fleet as a real-life exercise and a threat to the regional balance of power in Asia.

The subtle distinction operated in this brief between “formal strategic partnerships” and “true (or grand) strategic partnerships” is fundamental for the EU to find its place in the international system: identifying its true strategic partners is part of the process for the EU itself to become a true global strategic player.

TOWARDS EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

At a crucial juncture in history marked by Europe’s declining weight in the global order and by a global climate of economic difficulty, EU member states could actually see an opportunity for more cooperation rather than less, and invest in the EU’s capacity to become a true global strategic player. If member states realise that their power as individual nation-states is threatened by changes they are powerless to stop, this could be a strong incentive for further cooperation at the EU level. If

consensus can be reached and the EU can show its partners the added value of engaging with the EU as a whole rather than with its parts, that will go a long way toward ensuring effective strategic partnerships in the future.

Time has come for the EU to think and act strategically. This brief has shown that despite its strategic rhetoric, the EU still lacks genuine strategic thinking. Discussions over strategic partnerships will offer a good test, although a test that the EU can hardly afford to fail, for the stakes are too high in today’s inter-polar environment. The EU needs true strategic partners, just as much as a more strategic EU is needed globally. The road will be long and bumpy, of course, but the way back looks even worse.

One can legitimately hope that the 16 September European Council will address some of the issues related to the strategic partnerships. However, many fundamental questions will remain unanswered. Perhaps, the set-up of a special working group composed of policy-makers and experts could be envisioned to address them. The following is a list of recommendations for the EU (and the working group eventually) to consider in future discussions on EU strategic partnerships.

- The EU should first and foremost reflect on the meaning and purpose of strategic partnerships, starting with establishing a clear distinction between the different types of strategic partnership identified in this brief. A very general definition of “strategic partnership” could be the following: It is about instrumentalizing our relationship with true strategic partners (*to be identified*) in order to reach a set of grand objectives that go beyond bilateral goals (*to be identified by a grand strategy*) within a long-term framework.
- The list of true strategic partners need not be made public: the issue is a matter of prioritization, not one of creating new documents. We should not sign new agreements

with our strategic partners or come up with something such as “grand strategic partnership” documents. These partnerships need to remain informal to become really effective: flexibility, adaptation, reciprocity, tradeoffs and compromises constitute the core of such partnerships.

- The EU should also reflect on the concrete implications of having a strategic partnership for the implementation of its foreign policy. Should the EU have a bigger delegation in grand strategic partner countries e.g.? Should the EU have a more specialized staff in relevant units and delegations? Should the EU have a military attaché in those delegations? Etc.
- All strategic partnerships should have a certain amount of common elements that relate to the grand strategy of the EU, even if that grand strategy is only an informal one, all we need to know being the fundamental objectives of EU foreign policy. But each partnership should entail a tailor-made part in order to take the best of each partner for achieving fundamental foreign policy objectives.
- In order to become a true strategic partner, the EU should think thoroughly about the added value it can offer to its strategic partners over its individual member states: what advantage do strategic partners have in dealing with the EU rather than with member states? This will require for the EU to show more coherence in its foreign policy, but also for it to grow more assertive by focusing on its strengths, such as its economic power. This will further require more coordination with member states, especially given that some of them also have strategic partnerships of their own with EU strategic partners. France, Germany and the UK should not abandon their own policies towards China because it is a strategic partner of the EU. However, member states should make sure that their policies are coherent with EU policies, or at least that they do not hamper EU grand objectives.

- Finally, the EU should think about the tradeoffs it is willing to make with its strategic partners in order to achieve its fundamental foreign policy objectives. Indeed, strategic partnerships are not only about EU interests, they are also about the interests of our partners, and about where the interests of both parties meet. This kind of trade-off exercise will not be easy, especially given that most of our strategic partners have a much more instrumental vision of the partnerships, yet it is a necessary condition to make the strategic partnerships work. The EU’s staunchly upright stance on human rights e.g. presents problems in its relationship with the United States, not to mention Russia, China, and India. The EU will accordingly need to develop a new approach, less confrontational and more constructive, and not judge each case within a vacuum.

Endnotes

- ¹ Van Rompuy, H. 2010. *The challenges for Europe in a changing world*. Speech at the College of Europe, Bruges, 25 February 2010.
- ² Ashton, C. 2010. *Europe and the world*. Speech at Megaron ‘The Athens Concert Hall’, Athens, 8 July 2010.
- ³ Sautenet, A. 2007. The current status and prospects of the ‘strategic partnership’ between the EU and China: towards the conclusion of a partnership and cooperation agreement. *European Law Journal*, 13(6), 699-731.
- ⁴ We use here a rather classical distinction between superpowers, great powers, and leading powers. A superpower dominates in all dimensions of power. Great powers have a pivotal influence in all dimensions of power and have the capacity to contribute to the international order. Leading powers are stronger in some dimensions of power than others, dimensions in which they are able to trigger international initiatives. Ranking powers is always a difficult and controversial exercise, and this ranking makes no exception.
- ⁵ Bendiek, A., Kramer, H. 2010. The EU as a would-be global actor: “strategic partnerships” and “interregional relations”, in *Europe and new*

leading powers: Towards partnership in strategic policy areas. Edited by J. Husar, G. Maihold, S. Mair. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

⁶ Biscop, S. (ed.). 2009. *The Value of Power, the Power of Values: A Call for an EU Grand Strategy.* Egmont Paper 33. Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations; Howorth, J. 2010. The EU as a global actor: Grand strategy for a global grand bargain?. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48(3), 455-474.

⁷ Renard, T. 2010. Le Syndrome de Copenhague. *Revue Défense Nationale*, 731.

⁸ Grevi, G. 2008. The rise of strategic partnerships: Between interdependence and power politics, in *Partnerships for effective multilateralism: EU relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia.* Edited by G. Grevi and A. de Vasconcelos. Chaillot Paper 109. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 152.

⁹ Holslag, J. 2010. *Europe's normative disconnect with the emerging powers.* BICCS Asia Paper 5(4). Brussels: Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies.

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