

A strategic Union to cope with the multipolar challenge

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The EU's Herman van Rompuy and José Manuel Barroso and Russia's president Vladimir Putin at the 4 June 2012 EU-Russia Summit in St Petersburg. Photo: The Council of the European Union 2012

BRICS, IBSA or BASIC are just a few of the many acronymic clubs of emerging powers. They seem to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. They demand recognition of their new status but they decline any responsibility attached to it. They challenge the Western model and its values, but they fail to present a credible alternative. They push for a reform of the multilateral system but they disagree beyond that general formulation. In the meantime, global challenges continue to mount and intensify under the combined pressure of globalization and interdependence. And the resolution of these challenges is complicated by the absence of global leadership, a result of the transition to a multipolar world. Welcome to the twenty-first century.

How can Europe cope with the multipolar challenge? Europe must act collectively in order to “punch its weight” on the global stage, as it is often said. The empowerment of the European Union (EU) appears therefore as a rational choice, not an ideological one. If one accepts this premise, the question then becomes: what strategy for the EU in the multipolar age? In times of prolonged internal crises (political, socio-economic, democratic, etc.) the EU’s external projection can no longer rely on the promotion of its “model”, which has hardly ever been a strategy at all anyway. Alternatively, the EU can aim to fill the global leadership void, but two challenges stand in the way: the EU’s own (in-)ability to lead and the reluctance of other global powers to accept European leadership (which is seen as *passé*). A third option remains available: building a “strategic Union”, that is to say a semi-autonomous actor (vis-à-vis Member States) consciously articulating its capabilities with a view to pursue clearly identified objectives. This option might seem unrealistic to some. But it is not. In fact, it is already in the making.

Strategic partnerships with established and emerging powers are being developed as instruments of such a “strategic Union”. Yet they remain imperfect, incomplete or elusive instruments, as acknowledged by

practitioners and scholars alike, perhaps with the exception of the transatlantic partnership. Improving this instrument is therefore necessary to strengthen the Union overall. But how? At the partnership level, each individual strategic partnership must be broadened and deepened at the same time. It must be broadened because a strategic partnership is global and comprehensive by definition, and thus it goes beyond trade and other bilateral issues that now usually dominate them. It must also be deepened to establish effective dialogues and the necessary trust between partners. At the strategic level, more fundamentally, it is the concept of “strategic partnership” that needs to be redefined and reviewed, along three major axes.

1. Strategic partnerships are an instrument, and as such they must serve a clearly identified purpose. The problem, however, is that the objectives of the EU’s external action remain ill-defined at the global level (the European Security Strategy offers little guidance indeed) as well as at the regional and thematic levels. A better definition of the EU’s objectives at these various levels and a better definition of the role of strategic partnerships in this context would therefore be desirable.
2. Strategic partnerships should be made compatible with and conducive to the EU’s stated ambition to promote “effective multilateralism”. The rise of bilateralism and *multilateralism à la carte* has been the overwhelming response to the crisis of global governance, to the detriment of the EU’s preference for an effective multilateral order. Strategic partnerships, albeit a bilateral instrument, can be used as a pragmatic tool to reconcile this trend with the overall objective of effective multilateralism, through closer cooperation with pivotal players within international organizations. Strategic partnerships could then be defined as omni-enmeshment of selected players in a smart web of bargaining, agreements and structural connections, with a view to strengthen the multilateral system.
3. Eventually, it all boils down to coordination. Strategic partnerships are comprehensive by definition and as a result they raise a difficult challenge in terms of coordination between the EU and its Member States, as well as within EU institutions. Most Member States have their own policy, not to mention their own strategic partnership, with EU partners and there is therefore a constant effort to be made to ensure that national and European policies reinforce rather than undermine each other. Within the EU itself similar efforts must be made to coordinate policies between the various institutions. This is a key challenge for Ashton and her service.

Confronted with a profound identity crisis, the future of Europe still appears uncertain. As some have observed, it looks from the outside as if Europe is currently under repair, at the image of its headquarters on the Schuman roundabout in Brussels. But nobody can wish for an indecisive Europe. European citizens want growth and jobs; they want a Europe that creates opportunities and defend their interests. The US, China, India and others want a strong and reliable partner, to do business with but also to cope with pressing global challenges. A “strategic Union” should therefore be a global desire, not just the project of a few Europeans. And strategic partnerships should pave the way.

Tags: BRICs, partnerships, EEAS

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