

OPINION

EU foreign ministers should look to 'grand strategy'

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BY THOMAS RENARD

On 2 and 3 September, the 27 European foreign ministers and the head of EU diplomacy, Catherine Ashton, will meet on the shores of the Baltic Sea in Poland. There will be no time to admire the picturesque town of Sopot, however. Although there is no shortage of items to debate these days, with the evolution of the situation in Libya or Syria, discussions should open with an assessment of the EU's relationship with three strategic partners: Brazil, India and South Africa.

This Gymnich sets itself in a broader reflection on the EU's strategic partnerships initiated last year. The objective of this reflection is threefold: institutionally, it is meant to help the high representative and her service to position themselves vis-a-vis the member states in the post-Lisbon architecture; strategically, it aims to determine how the EU can weigh in its relationship with key strategic players; and globally, it sends a clear message that the EU is willing to assume a greater role in international affairs.

In September 2010, the European Council asked Ashton to "evaluate the prospects of relations with all strategic partners, and set out in particular our interests and possible leverage to achieve them." Last December, she presented her first "progress reports" on China, Russia and the US - arguably the three most important partners of the EU. This time, the heads of European diplomacy will centre on three other strategic partners, which have the particularity to form an informal grouping together (IBSA). To complete her task, Ashton will still have to review four more strategic partnerships in the coming months: Canada, Japan, Mexico and South Korea.

After last December, the discussion on strategic partnerships was put on hold, notably due to other arising priorities in the Arab world and in Libya. These dossiers were certainly very important - and Libya will likely be discussed in Sopot - but short-term crises and long-term strategic thinking should be treated simultaneously, not alternatively. In other words, and to paraphrase the famous Kissinger quote: the EU's high representative should answer the phone while preparing strategic notes.

Ashton said that the motto of the reflection on the EU's strategic partnerships is: "fewer priorities, greater coherence and more results". This is true, particularly in the preparation of bilateral summits - and there are many coming up in the next few months, notably with Brazil, India and South Africa. Yet, the reflection on the EU's strategic partnerships goes beyond the mere preparation of bilateral summits. In fact, the reflection concerns the EU itself as much as its partnerships. In other words, the EU's traditional approach to its strategic partners (i.e. "what are the core bilateral issues?") should evolve towards a more strategic one (i.e. "how can strategic partner x be instrumental to the EU's pursuit of its objectives and interests?").

For this evolution to take place, the EU should identify its objectives and interests. The European Security Strategy, adopted in 2003 and reviewed in 2008, is not explicit in this regard. What is the EU's fundamental objective? What are the EU's core interests? In what order of priority? Such questions are unlikely to be raised - even less answered - at the Sopot Gymnich, but one can hope that the foreign ministers (and Ashton) will acknowledge the need to link the debate on strategic partnerships to a broader reflection

at the grand strategic level.

Strategic partnerships face three major flaws. First, they should be designed as (sub-) strategies aimed to pursue and implement the EU grand strategy; but in the absence of the latter, they appear purposeless. If there is no grand strategy yet, there are nonetheless many strategies (on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, growth, etc.) which form altogether the building blocks of a grand strategy. These strategies could provide a temporary direction to the strategic partnerships - and they could be used to assess the relevance and effectiveness of each partnership individually.

Second, strategic partnerships should move beyond mere rhetorical statements. They should become truly strategic in their form (i.e. to be "visible", for instance via the establishment of a strategic dialogue or via a review of the size and composition of EU delegations) and in their substance (i.e. to address strategic issues, beyond traditional trade and economic issues). There is little sign of this so far.

Third, the list of strategic partners should flow from the EU's objectives and interests. The "who" should be conditioned by the "what", not the other way around. Today, the EU has 10 strategic partners - some of them perhaps by accident. On the one hand, this is already a long list. On the other hand, some partners appear more strategic than others, while some other non-listed countries could prove of strategic value based on a clear identification of the EU's interests and priorities. The choice is thus between a consolidation and a revision of the list of strategic partners. But a choice has to be made.

With no clear list, no real substance and no purpose, strategic partnerships appear like an uncertain fleet of empty vessels sailing in the troubled water of multipolarity with no course to follow. To move forward towards true strategic partnerships, the European heads of diplomacy gathered in Poland should address these flaws. From the shores of Sopot, we could perhaps witness the birth of a new "strategic fleet".

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