

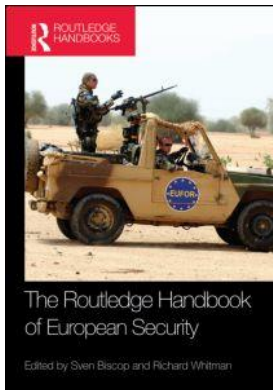
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## **THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF EUROPEAN SECURITY**

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### **The EU and its Strategic Partners**

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# THE EU AND ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERS

## A critical assessment of the EU's strategic partnerships

*Thomas Renard*

Strategic partnerships have become very fashionable. They are blossoming in the post-Cold War era, partly due to their inherent flexibility and ambiguity, making strategic partnerships a central feature of the early twenty-first century diplomatic discourse. Such grand rhetoric can be misleading, however, as strategic partnerships can mean everything – and thus mean little or nothing. Most governments probably do not even realize how many they have signed. Every government has its own definition, and every partnership is a variant in itself. In this globally accepted confusion, the EU is no exception.

Quite naturally, academics responded to this trend with an equally blossoming literature on strategic partnerships – although with delay as well as with a strong focus on bilateral partnerships rather than on the concept of ‘strategic partnership’ per se. In this sense, most of the literature on strategic partnerships is a mere recycling of the existing literature, and there is therefore a profound lack of understanding of strategic partnerships as a foreign policy instrument or as a strategy. There are a few exceptions, however, such as Kay (2000) or Nadkarni (2010), for instance. Recently, some literature has developed with a specific focus on the EU’s strategic partnerships, not only bilaterally but also historically, conceptually and horizontally – i.e. looking at all the partnerships at the same time, and across all dimensions. Some of the leading work in this field was produced by Bendiek and Kramer (2010); Grevi (2010b); Grevi and de Vasconcelos (2008); Holslag (2010); Renard (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011); Sautenet (2007, 2012); and Smith and Xie (2010).

This chapter proposes first a rapid overview of what the literature says on the concept of ‘strategic partnership’. Then it looks more specifically at how the EU interprets strategic partnerships and how it uses them in its external action. Finally, this chapter offers a critical assessment of the existing strategic partnerships of the European Union and eventually makes some suggestions to upgrade (some of) them into *true strategic partnerships*.

## In search of a meaning

### *What is a strategic partnership?*

There is no common understanding of the meaning of strategic partnerships in international relations<sup>1</sup> – not to mention the absence of a common definition. This is increasingly becoming problematic in light of the proliferation of such partnerships in the post-Cold War system. The nascent literature on the topic has recognized the inherent ambiguity of the concept (Kay, 2000; Ko, 2006; Wilkins, 2008; Nadkarni, 2010). It is therefore possible to read in ‘strategic partnerships’ any kind of behaviour, from soft balancing to hard balancing, or from bandwaggoning to hedging. As Jonathan Holslag put it: ‘A strategic partnership is what states make of it. Because international relations theory provides no transparent definition, its significance is limited to the features that its members, rightfully or not, ascribe to it’ (Holslag, 2011: 295).

The literature offers nonetheless some helpful criteria to identify and understand the meaning and purpose of strategic partnerships. First of all, there seems to be a consensus on distinguishing strategic partnerships from alliances (Ko, 2006; Wilkins, 2008; Nadkarni, 2010). Indeed, in comparison to alliances, strategic partnerships are softer arrangements, more flexible and with lower commitment costs. Moreover, strategic partnerships are not necessarily underpinned by shared values, and they are driven by a shared purpose rather than by a common threat.

Various authors have suggested a series of defining elements for strategic partnerships. According to Vidya Nadkarni, for instance, a strategic partnership exhibits the following properties:

- (1) They are formalized in multiple written declarations, statements, agreements, and memoranda of understandings that outline clear policy objectives and attempt to build upon and deepen multifaceted ties;
- (2) they create formal institutional links at various governmental and non-governmental levels, generating multiple interactive channels at the levels of Track I (official) and Track II (people-to-people) diplomacy;
- (3) they set up a mechanism for summit meetings between top leaders that are held alternately in the capital cities of the two countries, with more frequent meetings at the sub-ministerial and bureaucratic levels where officials explore common interests or concerns, often in joint task forces established to address specific issues;
- (4) they work to develop ties between respective military establishments through joint military exercises, having naval vessels make ports of call, and working on confidence building measures;
- (5) they seek to establish a stronger economic relationship; and finally,
- (6) they attempt to foster greater awareness of each other’s culture through youth exchanges and cultural fairs.

(Nadkarni, 2010: 48–9)

Beyond these technical elements, what makes a partnership truly ‘strategic’? First, a strategic partnership must be *comprehensive*, in order to allow linkages and tradeoffs between various policies. Second, it must be built upon *reciprocity*, short of which it cannot be deemed a partnership at all. Third, a strategic partnership has a strong *empathic* dimension, which means that both partners share a common understanding of their mutual values and objectives. Fourth, a strategic partnership must be oriented towards the *long term*, which is to say that it is not put into question by casual disputes. Finally, a strategic partnership must go beyond

bilateral issues to tackle (with the potential to solve) *regional and global* challenges, because that is its true *raison d'être*.

Strategic partnerships in this sense go beyond bilateral relations and focus on the instrumentalization of the bilateral relationship for broader ends (i.e. regional or global goals). The bilateral relationship per se is not the core *finalité* of the strategic partnership, although the depth and the quality of the bilateral relationship obviously determine the potential of the strategic partnership, and therefore the former remains crucially important to the latter.

### ***Which EU strategic partnerships?***

In previous articles, this author offered a historical overview on the evolution of the EU strategic partnerships, from their origins to this day, based on an analysis of EU documents and on interviews with EU and national officials (Renard, 2010c, 2011). This research concluded that the EU strategic partnerships derived from the Common Strategies – established by the Amsterdam Treaty – and eventually replaced them as the latter disappeared from the Lisbon Treaty. It was not until the European Security Strategy, however, that strategic partnerships were fully acknowledged as an EU instrument of foreign policy ‘to pursue our objectives’ (Council of the EU, 2003c: 13). Yet, as the ESS is mute on the foreign policy objectives of the European Union (Biscop, 2009) the meaning and purpose(s) of strategic partnerships, as well as the list of potential partners were left unspecified. Following the recommendations from the ESS, nonetheless the EU agreed strategic partnerships with a number of third countries. The 2008 review of the ESS did not bring much clarification on the concept (ESS, 2008e).

In September 2010, taking advantage of the new instruments established by the Lisbon Treaty, the 27 Member States debated the EU’s strategic partnerships for the first time ever (Renard, 2011). Although the debate had some institutional purpose – notably to establish firmly the new President of the European Council and the new High Representative vis-à-vis the Member States in terms of relations with important third countries<sup>2</sup> – and some external image purpose – to assert the EU as a global strategic player vis-à-vis emerging powers – it was also a recognition of the need to rethink the long-neglected strategic partnerships. Having such debate was positive in itself, as it forced European leaders to think about the EU’s global role and to confront their views with their European counterparts. The 2010 September European Council even took some steps forward in this debate, initiating a transformation of strategic partnerships from a meaningless *concept* into some kind of foreign policy *instrument*, as its conclusions acknowledged that ‘the European Union’s strategic partnerships with key players in the world provide a useful *instrument* for pursuing European objectives and interests’ (European Council, 2010a: 2; my emphasis). It also encouraged the EU to act more ‘strategically’ and ‘assertively’ on global stage. Nevertheless, for as long as these ‘European objectives and interests’ remain undefined, strategic partnerships will be purposeless: there is no point adopting sub-strategies if there is no global strategy to guide them – no grand strategy.

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, was subsequently tasked to produce ‘progress reports’ assessing the current strategic partnerships and offering new guidelines. In December 2010, she presented some preliminary results in which she identified what she sees as the *motto* of this review exercise: fewer priorities, greater coherence and more results (Sopinska, 2011). Most observers would agree with this motto, but they are also eager to notice changes in how the EU is implementing its strategic partnerships – and these changes are slow to materialize.

As the meaning and purpose(s) of EU strategic partnerships have remained undefined since the beginning, it is not surprising that the list of strategic partners of the European Union appears somewhat odd. Today, in 2011, the EU has ten strategic partnerships with third countries: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as this author has argued before, each strategic partnership has its own rationale: they came into existence for different reasons and followed different patterns. Some became perhaps strategic partners *by accident* (Renard, 2011). Therefore, rather than the ‘special ten’ (Gratius, 2011), the EU’s strategic partners could be deemed the ‘accidental ten’.

### **A critical assessment of the EU’s strategic partnerships**

The second part of this chapter offers a critical assessment of the ten strategic partnerships from four different perspectives: the strategic nature of each partner; the strategic nature of each relationship, in terms of substance and form; and finally, the strategic nature of the EU itself.

#### ***Are all strategic partnerships similar?***

In light of the above list, the first argument is that the ten strategic partnerships are neither identical nor equal.

*Not all strategic partnerships are identical.* Although all these relationships are qualified as 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 USA and Japan – the established powers – are regulated by just a few core documents and a continuous political dialogue. The EU considers these long-standing relationships to be inherently ‘strategic’ for various reasons, and their natural evolution did not require over-formalization. On the other hand, the EU finds it much more complicated to regulate its relations with Brazil, India, China, South Africa, South Korea and Mexico – 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.

*Not all strategic partnerships are equal.* Strategic partners can be categorized as follows. (1) The essential partner: the strategic partnership with the USA seems to be above any other partnership, as the transatlantic relationship is certainly no less important for Europe 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: the 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 they are approached. (3) The natural allies: the strategic partnerships with Canada, Japan and South Korea appear less strategic than those with the USA or the BRIC countries. However, these 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 dwarfed by the other 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).

To a certain extent the many differences among the ten strategic partners are reflected also in the legal status of the relationship. Indeed, strategic partnerships are political statements or can eventually be seen as 'soft law' instruments, but they differ from the legal framework for the bilateral relationship (Sautenet, 2012). A quick overview of the legal frameworks established and under negotiation between the EU and its strategic partners shows a large diversity of frameworks and diverging priorities for each partnership. For instance, whereas all energy is currently directed towards a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia and China, efforts are channelled towards a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the case of India.

### ***Are all these partnerships truly strategic?***

Following up on the first argument above, particularly on the observation that not every partner is equal and that some might be inherently more strategic than others (e.g. because of their military strength, economic weight or geostrategic position), a second argument can be developed: the cooperation of the EU with its partners on international strategic issues is limited at best. It would be unrealistic to expect the EU to cooperate with all its partners on every single issue, for various reasons, including the fact that most issues are significant to only some partners. Moreover, at times, the EU and its partners might have diverging interests, making cooperation difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, there are certain key international strategic issues on which one could reasonably expect the EU and its partners to develop at least a coordinated approach or, better, a cooperative framework. Yet, this does not always seem to be the case.

Three issues illustrate this well. This section focuses on these issues because they are considered particularly important from a European perspective while recognizing that this choice remains somewhat limitative and arbitrary. The three international strategic issues are: the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), conflict management and climate change.

*WMD proliferation.* The EU identified the proliferation of WMD as one of its key security challenges, 'potentially the greatest threat to [Europe's] security' (Council of the EU, 2003c: 3). In principle, the EU shares this priority with all its strategic partners, some of which are strong advocates of a nuclear-free world. This shared concern is often recalled in joint statements on the occasion of bilateral summits, and there even exist established dialogues on these issues with several partners. India appears at first sight the most problematic partner here in the sense that it has refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) yet it is widely perceived as a 'natural partner' of the EU in dealing with new security challenges (Wagner, 2008), including proliferation, which is regularly discussed bilaterally through the security dialogue.

The more we move away from the level of principle to a more concrete level, however, the more we notice a lack of cooperation between the EU and its partners – and even at times some form of clash. In the Iranian case, for instance, the positions of China and Russia are particularly ambiguous and raise significant concerns in Europe. Indeed, both countries seem reluctant to condemn the Iranian nuclear programme, mainly for economic reasons (e.g. investment, arms deals or natural resources), whereas Europe is painfully yet unsuccessfully attempting to lead the negotiations. The negative impact of their ambiguous positions on their international image (and what it means for their relationship with Europe) or on long-term regional stability does not seem to have sufficient influence to make them switch

positions, and Western negotiators seem clueless as to how to involve them more. In the North Korean case, the EU's involvement is very limited, which in itself might be seen as a problem given the high stakes for the region and for global security, not to mention the fact that half of the EU's strategic partners are involved in the six-party talks.<sup>4</sup> In fact, with the exception of Iran, the EU has little or no impact in most key initiatives related to non-proliferation, such as the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the six-party talks or the Indo-US nuclear deal.

*Conflict management.* There are a lot of conflicts and crises of all kinds around the globe that need to be solved. Therefore, one could envision a lot of potential for cooperation among strategic partners. Yet, in practice, cooperation remains very limited. Each government sees the world from a different angle and partners can cooperate when they share similar interests, but can also undermine each other's efforts or, worse, face each other across the front line when their interests clash, hence contributing more to the conflict than to its management. In Georgia, for instance, Europeans found themselves in a direct clash with Russia. Such cases are the most challenging to the concept of strategic partnership. In most cases, however, the problem is not so much one of diverging interests but rather of too little cooperation between the EU and its strategic partners. In Afghanistan, for instance, Europeans have been asking for more active support from China, India and Russia, notably in the civilian field of operations, e.g. related to police training or capacity-building. The reasons behind the lack of cooperation can be manifold (including the result of a strategic decision by some partners to engulf the EU and the US in strategic deadlocks while they can themselves focus freely on other strategic interests) but their constant occurrence is surely a sign of the weakness of the strategic partnership. There are finally other cases in which the EU is cooperating successfully – although to a limited degree – with several of its partners. Yet this cooperation might at times hide another problem, which is that such cooperation can possibly trigger concerns among some *other* partners. In the Gulf of Aden, for instance, the EU is cooperating with several partners (including China, India and Japan) in counter-piracy operations, although an indirect consequence of these operations is the rising concerns in Asia (but also among some in Europe and in the USA) that China is using these operations to develop its blue-water navy, hence destabilizing the regional (and global) security order.

Another way to assess how the EU cooperates with its partners in conflict management is to look at UN peacekeeping operations, where they regularly have the opportunity to work constructively together in the UN framework.<sup>5</sup> In Lebanon, for instance, Europeans (5,050) work alongside Indians (897), South Koreans (369) and Chinese (344) in the UNIFIL mission. Yet the level of involvement with UN peacekeeping operations varies from one partner to another and barely reflects any form of strategic partnership. In terms of staff, for instance, India is the biggest contributor, whereas China and Brazil have significantly increased their contributions in recent years but not yet to similar levels. European Member States contribute a big chunk as well, with over 7,000 men and women. On the other hand, countries like Japan, Mexico, Russia or the USA contribute little to UN peacekeeping operations staff. In terms of financial contributions to the operations, it is a different story. Europe tops the chart, covering over 40 per cent of the total budget, and the USA almost 30 per cent. Japan is another important financial contributor, although its contribution to the total budget in relative terms has diminished by over 35 per cent over the last six years. All the other partners are very small contributors, China covering for instance less than 4 per cent of the total budget and India 0.1 per cent. As the EU and all its partners recognize the legitimacy of the UN, one would expect that a true strategic partnership would translate into greater cooperation and involvement in peacekeeping operations yet practice shows otherwise.



*Climate change.* The EU identified climate change as a global challenge and as a ‘threat multiplier’ (Council of the EU, 2008e: 5). However, the sense of urgency that is very palpable in Europe is not shared by all our partners. Russia, for instance, does not seem particularly concerned with the consequences of climate change (Fischer, 2008). The same could be said about India or China. The Copenhagen conference was a very good illustration of how the EU can be sidelined by its own partners in international negotiations of strategic importance to the EU, as the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) decided to negotiate a separate deal with the USA, keeping the Europeans outside the negotiating room. What was perhaps most remarkable in Copenhagen was that the EU seemed unable to reach out to its strategic partners, despite the fact that – for once – the EU was carrying a single message (Renard, 2010a). This again raises questions regarding the strategic nature of the strategic partnerships.

### ***Are these partnerships designed strategically?***

A third argument that needs to be developed here is that the strategic partnership status has little impact on the structural arrangements of the relationship and on the EU institutional set-up. In fact, interviews conducted in 2009–10, with staff members of the European Commission revealed that people dealing with the strategic partners were sometimes barely aware that ‘their’ country was a strategic partner and in most cases had no clear idea of what a strategic partnership is and what it means concretely. Most interviewees also had difficulties to identify significant differences between dealing with a strategic partner or a non-strategic partner country in their daily routine.<sup>6</sup> According to one respondent, however, a strategic partnership introduced more dynamism internally (more dialogue among EU institutions) and bilaterally (more intense and diversified exchanges).<sup>7</sup>

*Bilateral structural arrangements.* It could reasonably be expected that the establishment of a strategic partnership with a third country would have an impact on the scope and the depth of bilateral structural arrangements. Yet, reality proves otherwise. For instance, the EU has a bilateral summit with all its strategic partners, but this alone does not seem to be a consequence of having a strategic partnership, as it had regular summits with South Korea before the relationship was upgraded and as it also has established regular summits with Pakistan and Ukraine which are not (yet) strategic partners. Moreover, whereas the EU holds a summit with each partner, the pace can vary from biannual (Russia) to annual (Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, South Africa, South Korea and the US) to biennial (Mexico).

An overview of the political and sectoral dialogues between the EU and its strategic partners shows the gap that still exists in the diversity and intensity of dialogues from one partner to another (see [Table 26.1](#)). For instance, the EU rightly has more dialogues with the USA and China than with other partners, covering a broad spectrum of issues, whereas the underdevelopment of dialogues with other partners (e.g. Russia) seems less comprehensible. Of course, it is not only the amount and the scope of the dialogues that should be assessed but also their effectiveness, which should guide their future development. However, the underdevelopment of dialogues with some partners raises questions regarding the strategic nature of the partnership.

Furthermore, in a strategic partnership, one would correctly expect that dialogues cover the broad spectrum of bilateral, regional and global issues. However, with various partners, some issues remain entirely unaddressed (at least within the framework of established dialogues) or under-addressed. More importantly, several partnerships have no established political and strategic dialogues, whereas there is no sectoral dialogue covering security and



Table 26.1 Overview of the EU summits, political and strategic dialogues and sectoral dialogues with its strategic partners (as of March 2011)

Summit	Political and Strategic Dialogues	SD Agriculture and Fisheries	SD Culture, Education and Media	SD Development and Human Rights	SD Environment, Energy and Nuclear Affairs	SD Health, Social Policies and Migration	SD Science, Technology and Space	SD Security and Defence	SD Trade, Economy and Finance	SD Transport and Tourism	Other Sectoral Dialogues	Total Sectoral Dialogues	Total
Brazil	1	–	3	2	3	2	2	–	4	2	2	20	22
Canada	5	3 (1)	1	1	4 (2)	1	2	15 (1)	4	2	2	35	41
China	6	1	3	3 (2)	5	5	3	2 (2)	14	6	7 (1)	49	56
India	4	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	11 (1)	–	2	29	34
Japan	–	–	1	1	2 (1)	2 (1)	1	–	8 (3)	2	2	19	20
Mexico (0.5 (biennial))	–	–	2	1	1	–	1	–	–	–	–	5	5.5
Russia	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	–	8	1	1	21	26
South Africa (biannual)	–	–	1	2	2	3	3	–	1	1	2	15	16
South Korea	–	1	–	–	1	2	3	–	13	–	–	20	21
USA	1	6	2	4 (1)	7 (3)	9 (1)	2	19 (2)	7 (2)	3	1	56	63

Source: Figures collected by the author.

Note: Figures in brackets = the number of High Level Sectoral Dialogues within the stated number of Dialogues.

defence with most partners (except for the USA, Canada, China, and India). As some scholars have shown, the EU's strategic partnerships are still mainly driven and dominated by the economic dimension, mostly trade (Holslag, 2011; Sautenet, 2012). In these conditions, it is difficult to qualify those partnerships as truly strategic.

*Institutional set-up.* It is striking so far that the strategic partnerships have had no impact on the institutional organization of the EU, more particularly on the structure and composition of the EEAS. For instance, in the current organization chart,<sup>8</sup> there is no person in charge of strategic partnerships (together or separately). The lack of importance and visibility given to the strategic partnerships in the EEAS organigramme is another sign of the lack of concrete follow-up on the establishment of strategic partnerships. The unfortunate result will likely be continuous problems of coordination and cooperation among different services of the EEAS (e.g. in following a coherent strategy with all partners), among different EU institutions (e.g. ensuring a coordinate approach with relevant Commission DGs, such as DG Trade or DG Dev, and other relevant bodies), and between the EU and its Member States (e.g. a link between the EEAS and the national ministries of foreign affairs), not to mention coordination and cooperation with the partner itself. This absence of coordination mechanisms will only make it harder – if not impossible – to develop a truly strategic approach towards EU partners. To solve this problem partly, Giovanni Grevi (2010b) has proposed the creation of ‘focal points’ within the EEAS to ensure coordination within the EU, and between the EU and its Member States.

An overview of the EU delegations in strategic partner countries confirms the general absence of logical institutional reform following the establishment of a strategic partnership (see Table 26.2). For instance, all delegations without exception remain critically understaffed (particularly in comparison to the Member States' local embassies) despite the strategic importance of these countries and the new functions devolved to the delegations following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty (e.g. the role of coordination and information-sharing among the 27 embassies previously undertaken by the rotating presidency), which would normally require significantly more human and financial resources, whereas delegations have so far maintained their pre-Lisbon size. Even in the current format, there are incomprehensible discrepancies among the 10 delegations, as their size varies from fewer than 20 (South Korea and Canada) to over 100 (Russia and China). Furthermore, being now relabelled ‘EU delegations’ instead of ‘delegations of the European Commission’, the composition of these delegations could and should have significantly changed, opening more space for diplomatic and security staff (e.g. a military attaché) in line with the new competences and responsibilities of the delegations (Emerson *et al.*, 2011).

Table 26.2 Staffing of EU delegations in strategic partners (as of March 2011)

	Brazil	Canada	China	India	Japan	Mexico	Russia	South Africa	South Korea	USA
<i>EU staff</i>	21	5	70	44	15	23	65	25	7	36
<i>Local staff</i>	29	13	40	51	35	15	65	40	10	49
<i>Total staff in EU delegation</i>	50	18	110	95	50	38	130	65	17	85

Source: Figures collected by the author.

The half-hearted implementation of the Lisbon Treaty so far has led to the daunting task for EU delegations to do more with the same, unsurprisingly resulting in dissatisfaction from most Member States and from many third countries, including some strategic partners. As a result, foreign capitals increasingly turn directly towards the national embassies, mainly from the big Member States, hence sowing the seeds of more fragmentation, contrary to the initial goal of the Treaty.

### ***Is the EU a strategic partner?***

A final argument developed here is that the EU is often perceived as the weak end in the strategic partnerships. Indeed, looking at the world from Washington, Beijing, New Delhi or Moscow, the strategic value of the EU can be questioned in light of its discrete profile on many issues of prime strategic importance, including for Europe (think for instance about the popular uprisings in the Arab world). As a matter of fact, several strategic partners have proven better at dividing Europe than at acting strategically alongside Europe to tackle global challenges (see e.g. Fox and Godement, 2009). To be frank, Europeans have very often rendered their task easy.

Giovanni Grevi lists some of the reasons to explain why the EU is not seen as a strategic partner:

Strategic partnerships require unity of purpose, focus, sometimes hard bargaining, a flexible negotiating posture and always political authority. It is fair to say that today's pivotal countries, whether established or rising powers, question whether the EU is endowed with these attributes, except on some trade issues.

(Grevi, 2010b: 8)

Digging further into some of these reasons, the lack of coordination between the EU and its Member States is deemed to be one of the biggest constraints on the EU's strategic actorness. Member States, particularly big ones, will maintain for a long time some form of national preferences in terms of foreign policy, but hopefully further developments of a truly *common* CFSP will narrow the gaps and tensions between national interests. One of the key objectives of the EU today is to push the CFSP forward by injecting small doses of rationality, good sense and coordination at the core of European foreign policies, in order to make the EU a more credible and perhaps more powerful actor. An EU speaking with one voice is unrealistic in the short to medium term, at least as a generalized practice, but it remains an ideal Europeans must strive for in the long term. An EU bearing a single message, on the other hand, seems more realistic in the short term and is already a general practice in less sensitive issues. Whether this single message is the right one or not is yet another issue.

Another major reason for the EU not to be considered as a strategic partner by its counterparts is that it is an unpredictable actor due to its lack of grand strategy. If the EU is unable to identify its interests and its values and articulate them coherently in a strategy, then strategic partnerships are simply meaningless and useless to both parties.

In a broader perspective, the challenge for the EU is to be considered as a strategic partner, a notion with clear *realpolitik* resonance, while promoting a Kantian vision of the world through its so-called normative power (Laïdi, 2005). There is an inherent tension within the EU between modernist and postmodernist visions of the world (Cooper, 2003), leading to ambiguous rhetoric and hybrid foreign policy, and always resulting in confusion. This

tension in itself is not a problem; the source of the problem lies in the EU's fundamental incapacity to channel this tension into a coherent and constructive global vision.

### **Towards true strategic partnerships**

Strategic partnerships are only strategic in name, for now. A 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. In addition, as the previous section of this chapter demonstrated, strategic partnerships are not so strategic when looked at up-close for a variety of reasons, including (1) not every partner is equally strategic; (2) the EU is not cooperating with its partners on most truly strategic issues; (3) the strategic partnership has no structural or institutional impact on the relationship; (4) or, finally, the EU itself is simply not considered a strategic partner in many cases. As other authors have observed: 'The use of the label "strategic partnership" in fact functions as a rhetorical façade which masks the reality that the EU has failed to transform the relations' with other global powers into strategic partnerships (Keukeleire and Bruyninckx, 2011: 389).

Despite this lack of strategic thinking, there were sensible reasons to establish strategic partnerships in the first place. First, the partnerships started to take shape with the 2003 ESS, that is to say after the invasion of Iraq – a jolt to Europeans, who realized that the transatlantic alliance cannot tackle and solve all global challenges, in view of our potential strategic dissensions. In this context, the EU needed to reaffirm the importance of the transatlantic relationship, while opening the possibility of new strategic partnerships with rising powers. Second and related to the first, in the context of rising multipolarity and interdependence, the EU needed to address the emergence of new powers in order to ensure their commitment to solving today's challenges, and to deepen and strengthen partnership today in order to better address tomorrow's challenges. Third, strategic partnerships were a reaction to the failure of the EU's interregional and multilateral approach to international affairs, as well as to the frustrations arising from the stagnation of bilateral relations with emerging powers. The partnerships then appeared as an alternative to reinvigorating European diplomacy in an international context of return to *realpolitik* in which bilateral approaches seem to dominate international relations, even in multilateral forums. Finally, strategic partnerships constitute an attempt to assert the growing importance of the EU over the national diplomacies of the Member States, not least because according to the Lisbon Treaty, the EU now has the tools and legitimacy to act in the name of Europe vis-à-vis third countries.

These four reasons were certainly compelling enough to launch strategic partnerships, and they remain more relevant than ever. Having this in mind, the demise of the concept is simply neither desirable nor recommendable, although strategic partnerships should certainly be reviewed. Herman Van Rompuy understood this and translated it into a catchy yet right-on phrase: 'We have strategic partnerships, now we need a strategy' (Van Rompuy, 2010b). This author would add: we need a grand strategy for the EU to identify its interests and objectives, *and* a (sub-)strategy at the partnership level to pursue them strategically.

In fact, in a purely rational world, any sub-strategy should logically flow from a grand strategy. And the list of strategic partners should only come at the end, as the 'who' should be conditioned by the 'what'. Yet, the European Union operated in reverse order. This fact is inevitably creating confusion for everyone – in Europe and beyond – but it does not

necessarily invalidate existing partnerships. Indeed, some reflection on the EU's strategic objectives and interests is already taking place at the informal level. Moreover, the EU has already adopted many topical strategies – on terrorism, WMD proliferation, internal security, neighbourhood or growth – which together form the *building blocks* of a grand strategy. Paradoxically, progressing in reverse order might be a necessary evil for the European Union to move forward, but it has clear limitations as well: through the adoption of these strategies, the EU increases expectations from other global actors, which can thereafter only be disappointed by the lack of European commitment. Nonetheless, these building blocks could become a useful instrument to assess the *relevance* and *effectiveness* of the existing strategic partnerships (Is Country A a *necessary partner* to fulfil the objectives of Strategy Z [relevance]? Is Country B an *effective partner* in the pursuit of the objectives of Strategy Y [effectiveness]?). A broader reflection connecting all these *building blocks* together is, however, still necessary to a more coherent European foreign policy (e.g. how does the ESS support the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, and vice versa?). Such reflection should guide future developments of the strategic partnerships.

Working simultaneously on various strategic levels is a daunting task. It is certainly not the best way to proceed, but it is the European one. The existence of strategic *building blocks* renders possible the complementary development of a grand strategy and strategic partnerships. Time has come to get things started. Strategic partnerships are on the table and have created expectations which can only be disappointed at a high cost – that of becoming irrelevant in the twenty-first century multipolar world. The European Council gave a clear mandate to the High Representative to review the strategic partnerships. Yet, after the preparation of three interesting 'progress reports' assessing the partnerships with China, Russia and the USA (European Council 2010b),<sup>10</sup> the review process was abruptly interrupted by other external events – Arab uprisings, Libya – monopolizing the attention of Catherine Ashton and her service. After a (too) long pause, three additional 'progress reports' on India, Brazil and South Africa were eventually discussed during the September 2011 Gymnich in Sopot, Poland. Discussions were substantial, with some very concrete suggestions from various Member States. Yet, some diplomats complain of the lack of 'operationalization' of strategic partnerships.<sup>11</sup> Another complaint relates to the absence of clear indications regarding the next steps to be taken (e.g. what is the purpose of 'progress reports'? Will the EU have 'progress reports' on all ten strategic partners?).

As important as the events in North Africa and the Middle East are, the EU cannot lose sight of its long-term interests. Brussels should naturally be reactive to major events in its neighbourhood or even beyond, but it needs a broader vision to become increasingly proactive and become a significant pole among others in a multipolar world. Jo Coelmont captured this in the following manner: 'while the EU is playing ping-pong, the [other major powers] are playing chess' (quoted in Biscop, 2009: 12). And as George Bernard Shaw once said: 'The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not to react' (quoted in Youngs, 2010: 208).

With this proactive purpose in mind, the EU should develop a grand strategy to give a clear direction to its foreign policy, and design true strategic partnerships to pursue it. *True strategic partnerships* should therefore be seen as a sub-strategy, subsumed under a grand strategy, aimed at developing the EU's relationship with some key third countries in accordance with its global objectives and interests.

## Notes

- 1 We specifically refer to international relations here, as the term ‘strategic partnership’ is commonly used in other fields, such as in the business community.
- 2 Discussion with EU officials, Brussels, 6 July 2011.
- 3 The EU also has five strategic partnerships with two regions and three organizations: Latin America and the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and the Middle East (we should note, however, that the strategic partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, agreed in 2004, is no longer the reference document in our relationship with that region since we now have other arrangements, such as the Union for the Mediterranean), the UN, the African Union and NATO. However, the objectives of these partnerships seem different from those with third countries and they should therefore be treated separately. In any case, they will not be addressed here.
- 4 In addition to North Korea, the other parties are: China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the USA.
- 5 All figures are from March 2011. Available at: <<http://www.un.org/fr/peacekeeping/>>.
- 6 Interviews with over 30 staff members of the European Commission conducted in Brussels between 4 June 2010 and 7 July 2010.
- 7 Interview with a staff member of the European Commission, Brussels, 24 June 2010.
- 8 Official organization chart as of 1 April 2011, <[http://www.eeas.europa.eu/background/docs/eeas\\_organisation\\_en.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/background/docs/eeas_organisation_en.pdf)>.
- 9 Interview with a member of the Cabinet of Catherine Ashton, Brussels, 11 February 2011.
- 10 China, Russia and the USA are arguably considered the three most important partnerships of the EU. The decision to review these partnerships first reinforces this impression.
- 11 Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 21 September 2011.