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Carte Blanche

EU seeks truly strategic partners

By Thomas Renard *

Since work resumed in September after the summer break, the notion of “strategic partnerships” has been one of the primary concerns of the European Union. First of all, Catherine Ashton was in China to meet her Chinese counterpart on the occasion of the “Strategic Dialogue”. One week later, José Manuel Barroso delivered his first “State of the Union” address before the European Parliament, during which he underlined the importance of the “emerging strategic partnerships of the 21st century”. On 10-11 September, European foreign ministers holding a Gymnich meeting at Palais d’Egmont, in Brussels, also discussed the matter. And finally, on Thursday 16 September, the heads of state and government are meeting at Herman Van Rompuy’s initiative to discuss strategic partnerships, in particular those with China and India.

The debate is well and truly under way, with most European foreign policy actors taking part. One remarkable thing, however, is that all undoubtedly have their own definition of the “strategic partnership” concept, and without a doubt all have in mind their own list of potential partners. And for good reason – there is no official list or definition of such partnerships. Under such circumstances, the debate shows all the signs of being difficult. This is all the more true as the EU currently has nine strategic partnerships with: South Africa, Brazil, Canada, China, United States, India, Japan, Mexico and Russia. Eyebrows will be raised with astonishment at the sight of such a list, and readers will find the concept slightly less strategic. Can one really place the United States and Mexico on the same footing? Also, what should one think of the fact that the EU is not seen as a strategic partner by most of these countries, beginning with China and India?

It is quite clear that all strategic partnerships are not *identical*. Some partners are established powers that the EU considers as strategic but with whom the partnership is somewhat informal, mainly due to the fact that relations evolve over the long term. Others are emerging powers with whom the EU has felt the need to adopt a formal document called a “strategic partnership” in order to ensure the continued cooperation of these partners, as their foothold on the international scene gathers pace.

Neither are all partnerships *equal*. The strategic partnership with the United States appears essential and a notch above all the others. The partnership with Russia and China and to some extent with Brazil and India is more complex but just as important to face up to contemporary challenges and to attain the fundamental objectives of European foreign policy (even if these have still, to a large extent, to be determined). BRIC countries are therefore considered key partners. Canada and Japan, on the other hand, are two natural EU allies, being “like-minded”. Finally, given their geopolitical importance, South Africa and Mexico appear more as regional rather than world partners.

The problem of strategic partnerships is first and foremost a problem of definition – but do not think the question is purely academic. Not only does it reveal a deep lack of strategic reflection at European level that it is high time to palliate, but it is also the concept itself which is now being brought into question. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly vital to redefine our relations with the major powers and emerging powers in a world under transition, and the fact that these strategic openings have been handed out has now generated a number of expectations on the part of emerging countries that may once more find themselves disappointed by the lack of (re)action on the European side.

During debates concerning strategic partnerships, at Thursday’s European Council but also at a later date, questions raised are expected to include:

(1) Who are our strategic partners? The EU has nine today and still more tomorrow but

are they all strategic? Is strategic partnership possible with China, India and Japan, which are geopolitical rivals?

(2) What is the aim of such partnerships? Today, the partnerships do not seem to describe other than bilateral relations. Instinct tells us, however, that partnership goes beyond that, and that it is the orchestration of bilateral relations for more far-reaching ends, global objectives.

(3) What do these partnerships imply for bilateral relations? For example, is a bigger delegation needed in the countries in question?

(4) Is it necessary to have a specific mechanism within the European External Action Service to ensure monitoring of all partnerships in order to give them a truly strategic dimension?

The European Council on Thursday will not provide an answer to all these questions but it may mark the beginning of prolonged reflection, on condition that follow-up is ensured, for example in particular by creating a working group composed of political decision-makers and experts.

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