

## High politics in the ‘Grand Area’

### Can Europeans have global impact in a multipolar age?

*By Thomas Renard and James Rogers*

The European Union must be realistic about what it can achieve today, but this should not restrain its ambitions for tomorrow.<sup>1</sup> Relative to other rising and emerging powers, the European Union’s Member States seem in so many ways to be in decline. China and India are racing up the rankings of economic output and military power, and European power of attraction does not seem to be as strong as it once was. But with still over one quarter of the world’s wealth and an advantageous geopolitical position outside of the likely regions of struggle in the twenty-first century – namely the eastern half of Eurasia – the European Union has great potential to rise and stand as a great power in its own right. Summing up the debate to great power status versus global irrelevance is certainly a form of simplification, but it also bears some truth, because change takes time (particularly in Europe) whereas the rest of the world is moving fast.

Over the past decade, two trends have become more and more manifest: the first is that Europeans (and particularly the ‘baby-boomer’ generation, born between 1945 and the early 1970s) have become increasingly insular as they have slashed military budgets and sought of kind of holiday from global geopolitics. The European generations in power today have focused less on international strategic affairs and more on the internal consolidation and expansion of their own order. This growing European parochialism has been exacerbated by the second trend: the rise of a multipolar world where several other powers have risen or are emerging alongside the United States and the European Union, namely China, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and Brazil.<sup>2</sup> In short, the world of the 2010s is going to be a very different world to that of the late 1990s; and the two trends only serve to emphasise the importance of further European foreign and military policy co-ordination.

In this Strategic Snapshot, we assume that the European Union needs a new vision to cope with the changing global environment – and this vision should take the form of a grand strategy, to define a new role for the European Union domestically and internationally. A grand strategy results from a careful and realistic deliberation among the political, economic, military and cultural leaders within a given political community as to how it might obtain high objectives in fundamental policy.<sup>3</sup> For the most powerful entities, this strategy should aim to organise the comprehensive power of the community – both domestic and internal elements – for some socio-political and economic purpose, namely to provide security for its people; improve their way of life; extend and amplify their reach; and constitute – if possible – a more desirable form of world order, which works to their benefit.<sup>4</sup> It should foresee a place for the use of both civilian services *and* military forces; and, depending on the power and location of the political community in question, it should consider geographic circumstances and offensive-defensive dynamics.<sup>5</sup> It may force the political community to manipulate its adversaries and partners alike, but it should never seek to alienate them, for fear of turning them into embittered enemies.

The trouble is that the kind of strategic thinking necessary for the crafting of a grand strategy has become uncommon among Europeans. After nearly two decades of strategic malaise, Europeans have become conceptually ill-equipped to think and behave like a great power when acting in the world beyond their borders. We therefore make the following suggestions so that the European Union can better cope with the new multipolar situation. These recommendations are less about the domestic institutional changes required for the European Union to act comprehensively, but more about how Europeans must think about their role as a *structural* or *stake-holding* power with their own interests in the outside world.



If the European Union is to develop a grand strategy, there are at least three core elements to which it should pay particular attention: the global relationships, the ‘Grand Area’ and the connexion between the two.

## The global relationships

The European Union must continue to form closer relationships with other great powers at the global level, particularly when worldwide issues are at stake (i.e. issues that have the potential to impact on everyone simultaneously, such as the onset of new cold wars, conflicts between the great powers, climate change and the proliferation of nuclear weapons). Here, clear distinction should be made between two kinds of relationship: the *alliance* and the *strategic partnership*.

The European Union should only form an *alliance* with other powers when their global interests are identical or where extensive and mutual commitments on global issues, including military co-operation, are thought possible and desirable. Traditionally, alliances rely on shared interests and common values, and geared against external forces. Therefore, they are very much linked to a conflicting perception of the international order and might in fact foster or accelerate the trend towards a competitive environment. Alliances should therefore only be sought carefully and selectively, with countries – like the United States – with whom Europeans share fundamental objectives and common values.

A *strategic partnership*, on the other hand, becomes necessary when the European Union is less inclined towards the formation of an alliance, but nevertheless feels that a particular relationship with a foreign power must be elevated above the humdrum of every-day diplomatic channels.<sup>6</sup> As opposed to an alliance, a strategic partnership is not necessarily underpinned by shared values or geared towards an external threat, but is driven by a common purpose(s). A strategic partnership is therefore not a sub-category of an alliance nor an ‘alliance lite’ but more an alternative to it, in the sense that it offers more flexibility and put fewer constraints on the partners. Indeed, in the post-Cold War era, marked by international fragmentation and diplomatic uncertainty, it is not surprising that strategic partnerships have blossomed in the last fifteen years (finding roots in the geopolitically contested Eurasian region), whereas alliances have stalled (notably with a questioning of the *raison d’être* of the Atlantic Alliance). Strategic partnerships offer a less confrontational and more constructive vision for a new global order, al-



though their inherent flexibility and ambiguity limit at the same time their potential impact.

A strategic partnership can be defined as the instrumentalisation of a bilateral relationship to achieve broader ends (regional or global). What makes a partnership ‘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, it must have a strong pragmatic political dimension, which means that both partners share a common understanding of their mutual objectives (but not necessarily sharing the same values); fourth, it must be oriented towards the long-term, which is to say that it is not put into question by casual disputes; and, 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*.

Currently, Brussels has labelled its relationship with ten countries as ‘strategic’ – Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States. Yet, a critical overview of these partnerships reveals that they fundamentally lack substance. In 2010, a review began to determine whether the European Union is able to transform rhetoric into substantive partnerships, in the form of effective (sub-)strategies subsumed to a broader foreign policy strategy – i.e. placed into a grand strategy. The partnerships with China, Russia and the United States, as well as with Brazil, India and South Africa have already been assessed by Catherine Ashton and the twenty-seven foreign ministers. However, concrete outcomes have yet to be decided.

## The ‘Grand Area’

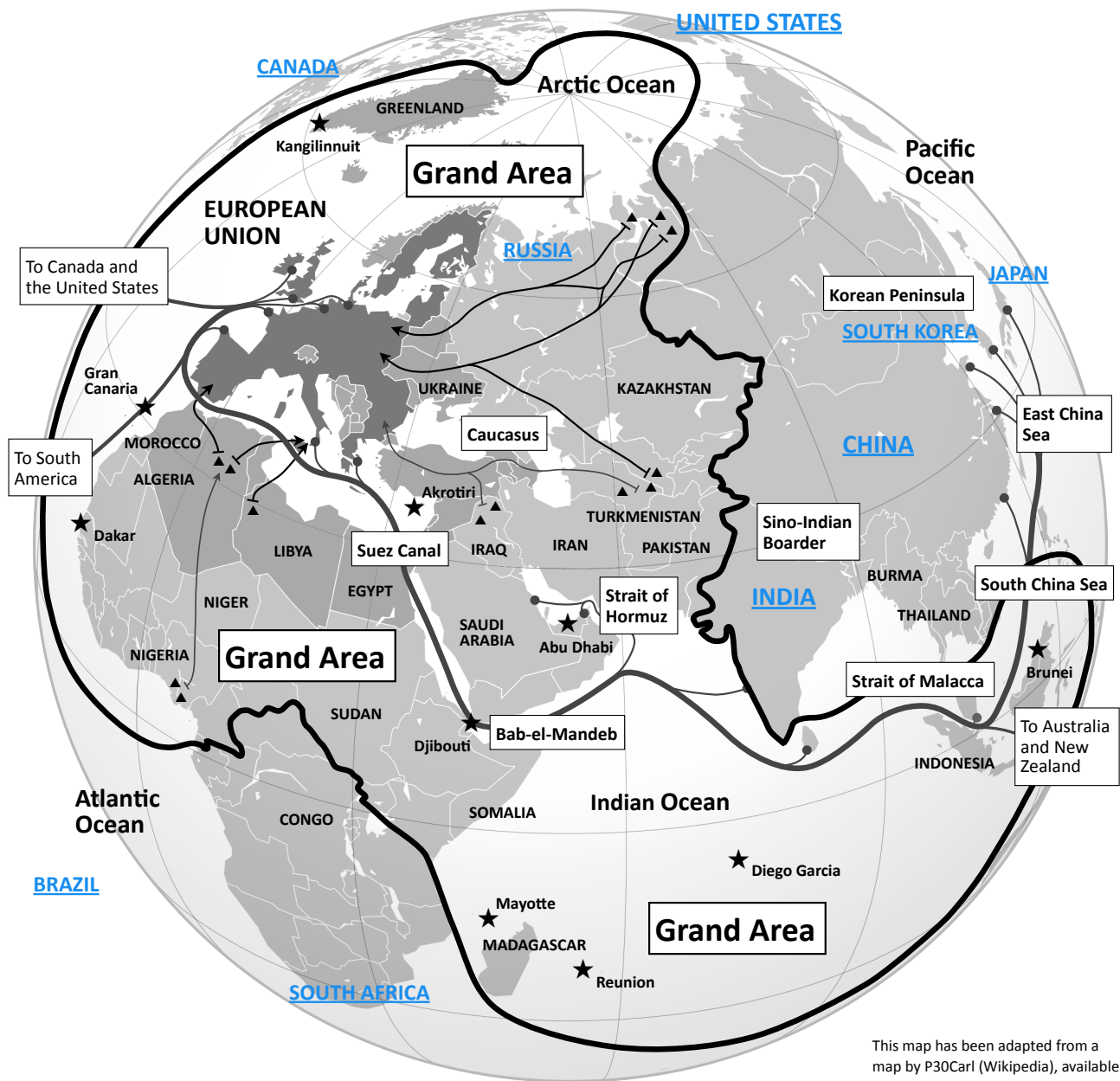
As the European Union becomes a more important geopolitical actor, it will have to acquire greater influence over surrounding geographic spaces that are of critical importance to its political and economic interests. As Map 1 shows, Brussels should identify for itself a ‘Grand Area’ – that is, a zone of geostrategic focus – where Europeans must be able to maintain a secure access to key natural resources for the durability of their economy, as well as a relatively stable political environment.<sup>7</sup> With this objective in mind, either in a formal or semi-formal capacity, the European Union should implement a policy designed to extend and entrench a new geography of European power in such an area. This could take form with the construction of new energy transmission pipelines, railways, trunk roads and military stations, whose aim would be to circum-








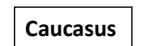



# Map 1

## The European Union's 'Grand Area' and Strategic Partners



This map has been adapted from a map by P30Carl (Wikipedia), available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License.

### Legend

-  Maritime communication line with spur and port
-  Gas transmission pipeline
-  Planned gas transmission pipeline
-  Strategic flashpoint
-  Gas producing region
-  European military station
-  Wider neighbourhood

### STRATEGIC PARTNERS



vent and/or protect the numerous strategic choke points (such as the Caucasus, the Gulf of Aden and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca) through which European imports and exports must inevitably pass and enforce a general European political presence. The key to the success of this project resides in the building of constructive and mutually beneficial partnerships with local actors to ensure the sustainability of this 'Grand Area'. Recent events in the Arab world remind us that these strategies must be designed carefully, finding the right balance between short-term and long-term interests.

To some extent – given its position as the world's biggest commercial and industrial power – the European Union's 'Grand Area' should cover the whole planet. After all, it is within the top five trading partners of almost every country in the world, either as an importer of raw materials and manufactured goods, or as an exporter of high-technology and luxury produce. However, from a strategic perspective, a geostrategy that covers everywhere is impossible: apart from the fact that it would extend over everything and therefore nothing, resources are limited – particularly during a time of austerity – meaning that preferences must be made. What is more, some areas of the world are relatively stable, or matter to Europeans less than others do. In the current time, South America is relatively safe and, given the latent power of two Member States – Britain and France – in that arena, manifested through their overseas territories and naval and air stations, Europeans have the means to access it swiftly, should a crisis break out. Likewise, the North Atlantic zone is also relatively secure, being squashed between the United States and Canada to the west, Greenland and Iceland to the north, and the European Union itself to the east.

Thus, it seems most likely that in the twenty-first century, the European Union's 'Grand Area' will – of political and economic necessity – cover the debated and debatable ground around the rimlands of Eurasia. This space stretches roughly from Suez to Shanghai – perhaps as far as Seoul. These two/three cities are less absolute points but pivots that form a wider geostrategic axis. The northern half of Africa is also included, as is Central Asia, as well as the Indian Ocean, including eastern Africa, the Middle East and South-east Asia. Further, as climate change exacts a toll on the Arctic region, Europeans will be forced to concentrate their resources there too.

To use a strategic analogy, the 'Grand Area' is to the European Union as the overlapping fields of fire once were to a star fort during the gunpowder age; that is, they form a 'residual zone' where events and movements must be monitored and influenced for the safety of the citadel. These overlapping fields of fire are also dependent on proximity: the first is the European Neighbourhood, where the European Union must become the prime interlocutor and establish a political presence that overshadows any other (com-



peting) power. The other zone is the wider area, where European power will at times compete and at times co-operate with other large countries, especially in spaces where they have relatively greater interests. Paradoxically, while they are of supplemental interest vis-à-vis the European Neighbourhood, it is in the ‘debated’ regions where the European Union will have to focus its attention, lest it allows itself to get forced out by the interests or greater determination of the other large powers.

## **Global relationships and the ‘Grand Area’**

The European Union should look to draw together its global partnerships and its geography of power within the ‘Grand Area’ to maximise expectations of peaceful change. In an increasingly ‘post-American world’, the United States is neither able nor willing to maintain order everywhere – and certainly not on its own.<sup>8</sup> In some parts of the world, this might be of little concern to the European Union, but in other places it will directly impact on European interests. The European Union might therefore need to intervene actively in its own neighbourhood, but also in the wider ‘Grand Area’. Brussels might at times act alone (preferably with regional or global approval, e.g. with a United Nations mandate); at other times it might act in co-operation with its allies or strategic partners; at times it may negotiate to limit tensions with its own strategic partners in zones of mutual interest; and at other times, it might need to act as a mediating actor to solve conflict among other great powers.

In this sense, the key questions for the evolution of the European Union’s grand strategy are: how can Brussels co-operate with its allies in the ‘Grand Area’ to maximise their influence and retain the geopolitical order? Indeed, will new allies be required? How can Europeans co-operate and/or co-ordinate with their strategic partners to ensure mutual benefits or at least avoid their undermining European policy within the ‘Grand Area’? How can Europeans amplify a sort of ‘Monroe Doctrine’ within their own ‘exclusive space’ – i.e. the European Neighbourhood – where Brussels expects unrivalled influence? And how is it possible to transform potentially competing interests into shared interests within the wider ‘Grand Area’, particularly in regions where tensions are likely to grow in the coming years, not least as more and more actors emerge on the stage?

The Atlantic Alliance between the European Union, the United States, Canada, Norway, Iceland and Turkey will remain the anchor of each power’s grand strategy well into the twenty-first century. However, Europeans may also need to look to new allies, not only



to entrench their existing alliances, but also to utilise a new architecture to safeguard their power in the ‘Grand Area’. At one and the same time, regarding the strategic partnerships: it may be necessary to sub-divide them into two components: firstly, those partnerships with other great powers – like China and India – where the focus would frequently concern the highest level of politics and economics on a consistent global or extended-regional level; and secondly, those partnerships with leading regional powers – such as Russia, South Africa and Brazil – where the relationship would be less globally-focused and more concerned with regional or functional aspects of policy.

The ultimate aim of the global partnerships in the ‘Grand Area’ must be to reduce the pressure in the region’s strategic flashpoints, such as the Caucasus, the Middle East, Eastern Africa and South-east Asia (and beyond the ‘Grand Area’, but adjacent to it, East Asia, including the South China Sea and the Korean peninsula). In this sense, it will become increasingly vital for Brussels to court specific ‘lynchpin states’ and regional powers like Turkey, Georgia, Iraq, and Nigeria, whose position has geopolitical implications for the future of European energy supply and/or which could move away from the political or economic interests of the European Union to pursue a more autonomous and potentially less-friendly approach of their own.

## Conclusion

The European Union still has much work ahead of it. Its strategic partnerships must still be filled with greater substance; and it must place greater emphasis on the geography of its own power in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the Member States – increasingly small as they are in an ever growing world – have to decide whether they are going to work together more robustly under the umbrella of the European Union, or whether they are going to pull in different directions, to the loss of all. If they choose the former option, there is no reason why they cannot pursue a policy that builds up European power and maintains a ready flow of resources for the European economy, while simultaneously creating a European political presence through strategic partnerships, which keeps the general peace within the ‘Grand Area’ – and perhaps even the wider world.

*Thomas Renard is a research fellow at the Egmont Institute in Brussels. James Rogers is co-director of the Group on Grand Strategy.*





# Notes

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Sven Biscop and Luis Simón for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this ‘Strategic Snapshot’.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the changing balance of world power, see: Thomas Renard, ‘A BRIC in the World: Emerging Powers, Europe, and the Coming Order’, *Egmont Paper No. 31*, Brussels: Egmont Institute, October 2009 and James Rogers, ‘From Suez to Shanghai: The European Union and Eurasian maritime security’, *Occasional Paper 77*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, March 2009.

<sup>3</sup> For a good discussion on grand strategy, see: Basil H. Liddel Hart, *Strategy* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1954]), pp. 353-360.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, ‘From Suez to Shanghai: The European Union and Eurasian maritime security’, March 2009.

<sup>5</sup> James Rogers and Luis Simón, ‘Three geographies – and societies: The European Union’s enduring problem’, *Strategic Snapshot No. 2*, Cambridge: Group on Grand Strategy, December 2011.

<sup>6</sup> For more on ‘strategic partnerships’, see: Thomas Renard, ‘The Treachery of Strategies: A Call for True EU Strategic Partnerships’, *Egmont Paper No. 45*, Brussels: Egmont Institute, April 2011. See also: Thomas Renard, ‘EU Strategic Partnerships: Evolution of a Concept, from Amsterdam to Lisbon’, in *EU-China Observer*, No. 5, 2010, pp. 16-22 and Thomas Renard, ‘Strategy Wanted: The European Union and Strategic Partnerships’, *Security Policy Briefing No. 13*, Brussels: Egmont Institute, September 2010.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the ‘Grand Area’, see: Rogers, ‘A new geography of European power?’, *Egmont Paper No. 42*, Brussels: Egmont Institute, January 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the recent forays by Hillary Clinton, the United States foreign secretary, in the Indo-Pacific region show an acceleration in America’s strategic shift. See: Hillary Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, in *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

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<http://www.grandstrategy.eu> | [info@grandstrategy.eu](mailto:info@grandstrategy.eu)

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