

The EU Strategic Partnerships Review: Ten Guiding Principles

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»» The European Union (EU) will survive the sovereign debt crisis, despite gloomy predictions to the contrary. But can the EU survive in the post-crisis global order? Can Europe make its voice heard in a multipolar world no longer dominated solely by Western concerns? One factor that will determine the EU's future success is its ability to cooperate with great powers and to put itself at the centre of coalitions to cope with global challenges. The EU has developed the concept of 'strategic partnership' to help it achieve this goal and it has designated ten countries as strategic partners. But the EU's strategic partnerships have been seriously tested recently, and their strategic nature has come into question.

Climate talks in Durban in December last year witnessed a fierce confrontation between European and Indian negotiators. In the Emissions Trading System scheme for foreign airlines operating in the EU, all major partners oppose the EU policy. Earlier this year, Russia and China opposed the EU when they vetoed a UN Security Council resolution aimed at halting mounting violence in Syria and calling for a peaceful political transition. The Russian and Chinese opposition came in spite of regional support from the Arab League; India originally sided with those who were against the measure, but eventually voted in favour of the resolution. In another example of divergence between the EU

HIGHLIGHTS

- Turning strategic partnerships into an effective foreign policy instrument is a priority for the EU.
- Recent summits and international crises suggest that these partnerships do not deliver strategic results yet.
- Ten basic principles should guide the EU's reflection on and implementation of its strategic partnerships.



and its partners, China, India and Russia opposed sanctions against Iran that were proposed by Washington and Brussels to force the Iranian government to make a deal over its nuclear programme.

The bilateral summits held with China and India last February confirmed that dialogue between the EU and its strategic partners is becoming more institutionalised and broad-based. But dialogue still fails to effectively address core interests at the politico-strategic level. In other words, strategic partnerships do not deliver strategic results – so far.

The concept of strategic partnerships remains ill defined. This does not mean, however, that these partnerships should be hastily dismissed. An important process of reflection started at EU level in 2010, with the aim of substantiating existing partnerships and transforming them into an effective instrument of EU foreign policy. As mandated by the European Council in September 2010, High Representative Catherine Ashton has delivered internal reports addressing prospects for relations with six of the EU strategic partners: the US, China, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa. An overall ‘mid-term review’ of the strategic partnerships is scheduled for 2012. It is as yet unclear what this review will entail. Its importance should not be overestimated, but the mid-term review seems a good opportunity for a first evaluation of recent initiatives, as well as offering the chance to make progress towards forging true strategic partnerships. So, it can be expected to focus primarily on the implementation and operationalisation of the ten partnerships, with special attention being paid to lessons learned and best practices.

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR TRUE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

In the run-up to the mid-term review, this brief offers ten basic principles that should guide the EU’s reflection on and implementation of its strategic partnerships. The following list does not aim to be exhaustive, but it covers the key attributes of true strategic partnerships and the sort of choices that they entail.

1. Strategic issues are central to strategic partnerships. A strategic partnership should be comprehensive and cover a wide spectrum of policy areas. But at the moment, trade and economic concerns dominate the EU’s interactions with its strategic partners. This emphasis is not surprising given the EU’s competences and comparative advantage and considering that the EU is the major trade partner for most of these ten countries. So, it is not the emphasis on trade and economic issues that is problematic, but rather, their relative disconnection from political concerns. A strategic partnership can be truly strategic only if it goes beyond the first economic layer of the relationship. It should attempt to address political and security affairs effectively and in a regular and structured way, including shared efforts at confronting geopolitical crises and common transnational threats. The EU holds high-level strategic dialogues with a few partners, including China, and it has established dialogues on defence and security issues only with the US, Canada, China and India. The effectiveness of these dialogues should be assessed and they should be used as models to establish security dialogues in some of the other partnerships.

Strategic partnerships could become an important tool to shape the multilateral order

2. Strategic partnerships grow out of cooperation on concrete issues. There is a natural tendency to take bilateral relationships as the starting point to address issues. But this sequence should be reversed, at least in part. A strategic partnership does not automatically entail cooperation on every single issue. It would be sensible to start from concrete issues and to assess the added value of respective strategic partnerships in each case. The EU should not simply consider what can be done with a given partner, but also with which partner it should work to most effectively deal with issues or regions. The situation in Iran and Syria today requires such kind of approach.

3. Summits are one part of the strategic partnerships process. Summits play an important role in many regards, not least because they create an opportunity for leaders from both sides to develop mutual trust and even personal ties. But summits on their own have little value outside of a structured process. Summits should act as a jolt when discussions are stalling on some issues, and they should help seal negotiations when the time is ripe. Too

often it appears that summits with strategic partners are just finely orchestrated events, requiring a lot of work and coordination on both sides, but delivering few results. Situating summit diplomacy more firmly within the process of strategic partnerships could be helpful. But it would call for more flexibility in the scheduling of summits and,

perhaps, for questioning the practice of annual summitry. Some strategic partners will inevitably see this as debasing the summits, or maybe even as a downgrade of the relationship. So, reshaping the summitry practice will prove difficult. But it is essential that a genuinely 'strategic summitry' is developed, involving a better match between summit diplomacy and the broader strategic partnership construct.

4. Strategic partnerships go beyond bilateral relations. Strategic partnerships have an important bilateral dimension, but their ends are often outside the bilateral framework. The EU has a tendency to approach its partners with a bilateral mindset. It would be more helpful to think in terms of triangulation and variable geometry. Triangulation refers here to cooperation in third regions where the EU and its partners have mutual, if not common, interests. For instance, a position has been recently established within the Asia desk of the EEAS to look at ways to cooperate better with non-Asian strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific region. Central Asia, Africa and maybe the Arctic are other regions where the EU could seek closer cooperation, or could at least consult with its partners on relevant matters. Variable geometry means the shifting partnerships of convenience that exist between the EU and (some of) its partners, depending on the issue at stake. Political coalitions and dynamics vary from one issue to another, as can be seen in voting patterns in the UN system. For example, the EU has quite a high voting cohesion with India and China on conflict resolution issues, but this cohesion is significantly lower when it comes to security issues or development and human rights. The diplomatic challenge



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of the EU is therefore to gather the most efficient coalition of partners to deal with each individual issue, in line with its strategic objectives. At the same time, the EU should maintain constructive dialogue with strategic partners who oppose any specific coalition, since they are likely to be part of future coalitions with the EU. The more coalitions the EU shares with a partner, the more strategic the partnership becomes.

5. Strategic partnerships are compatible with effective multilateralism. The promotion of ‘effective multilateralism’, which means a rule-based international system, is a core objective of the EU’s foreign policy as stated in the 2003 European Security Strategy, and it should remain a major goal. If the new global order develops outside an effective multilateral framework, the EU will have little weight in international negotiations because it has no tradition of playing *realpolitik*. So, the EU must actively shape a multilateral order. Strategic partnerships could become an important tool in this endeavour. At the very least, the EU should rely on the ‘variable geometries’ described above to strike deals at the multilateral level and strengthen the multilateral system. Furthermore, strategic partnerships offer a privileged channel for the EU to promote convergence and lessen divergences with its strategic partners over and within the multilateral system. The various sectoral and political dialogues between the EU and its partners, including people-to-people contacts, can pave the way for new coalitions and agreements. Eventually, the EU could explore deals with its strategic partners over the critical issue of representation in multilateral institutions. Such deals will involve heavy bargaining at the European

level, but will prove an important test of the EU’s ability and willingness to promote an effective multilateral order and consolidate its role within it.

6. Strategic partnerships are at odds with the regional approach. The EU has traditionally supported regional integration throughout the world, which is consistent with its own identity and approach to international relations. But in recent years, strategic partnerships have developed as a substitute for the EU’s traditional promotion of regional integration and inter-regionalism. The shift to the bilateral level of engagement results from the conjunction of emerging multipolarity, the rising role of the EU in international affairs and the inherent limits of regional organisations. Bilateralism has not entirely replaced regionalism. But the two approaches do not mesh well together, at least in the short to medium term. The empowerment of strategic partners *vis-à-vis* other countries will alter regional dynamics, with inevitable consequences for regional integration. Countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa are unlikely, at least for the moment, to dilute their newly acquired global influence within regional forums. The deeper the EU enters into bilateral partnerships, the less effective its regional approach becomes. The EU must thus rethink its regional approach in order to make it compatible with and complementary to the strategic partnership approach.

7. Strategic partnerships are part of a broader strategic framework. The strategic partnership narrative must gradually be integrated into the various other European strategies, geographic and thematic. The EU can no longer afford to have strategies on, for



example, Asia, Central Asia, Africa, energy security or WMD proliferation that do not fully take into account the role played by strategic partners and the ways in which the EU could cooperate with them. Thematic and regional strategies should be solidly anchored to strategic partnerships. The most recent 2010 Internal Security Strategy shows that even in the realm of justice and home affairs, strategic partnerships have a crucial role to play. So, a review of some strategies is needed. The post-Lisbon EU needs clear guidelines for its external action in the emerging multipolar environment. This means that the 2003 European Security Strategy, which is outdated and quite vague in its prescriptions, should be first in line for review. Some European leaders, such as Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski, have openly endorsed such revision. But a mere review of separate strategies will not be sufficient. A deeper examination of strategy should be launched. This should build on existing documents and agreements to align all dimensions of security into a coherent framework, which should take account of the role and potential of strategic partnerships to make them a cornerstone of European strategic thinking.

8. Greater coordination is needed. Effective strategic partnerships call for intensive coordination at two distinct levels. Firstly, the EU must coordinate with its Member States. Europeans must agree on a single, coordinated message on the key issues on the international agenda, particularly in the case of shared competences and, crucially, in the case of EU exclusive competences. Some Member States have developed their own partnerships with EU partners like the US and China. But these bilateral relations

should not compete with or undermine the EU's efforts on strategic issues. Secondly, coordination within and between EU institutions needs to be enhanced. The EEAS should become the locus of coordination of the EU's external action. It should take responsibility for coordinating all EU policies towards strategic partners, including the external dimension of internal policies. And it should act as a relay for information between all EU institutions, such as the European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the EU and EU agencies. This objective is not likely to be achieved in the near future, however, since different services tend to design their own policies towards strategic partners separately. Within the EEAS itself, better coordination is necessary between the geographic and thematic desks, as well as with the EU delegations.

9. The transatlantic partnership is a strategic asset. The US is still the most important of the EU's strategic partners. Although the US is partly shifting its attention away from the Atlantic area towards the Pacific, this does not mean that the transatlantic relationship has lost relevance. It simply means that Europe is perceived to be stable and mature enough to take care of its own interests. It also implies that the US now relies more heavily on the EU, since it expects the EU to assume greater responsibility in stabilising its own neighbourhood. The transatlantic bond is likely to remain as central as ever before, even though the terms of the relationship have changed. The relationship should increasingly turn outward and exploit the full potential of a strategic alliance that can help both the EU and the US pursue mutual interests and promote common values. In the



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Asia-Pacific region, for example, it could be argued that the US and the EU share many common concerns and that their interests are better served by closer cooperation than by mutual neglect. More broadly, in a multipolar world, Europeans and Americans might come to regard their cooperation as a necessary platform for influence and leadership with regard to emerging and emerged powers.

10. The list of strategic partnerships is flexible. The EU is currently trying to deepen and strengthen its existing strategic partnerships, and this effort should be encouraged. But the list itself is not beyond questioning, since the ‘special ten’, as they have been called, were chosen more by accident than by strategic reflection. Among the ten, some partners are more strategic than others, and some countries beyond the ‘special ten’ could also be considered as strategic partners. Turkey is one country that has rising strategic clout, but its status as a possible candidate country could raise problems in choosing it as a strategic partner. Indonesia, Pakistan and Nigeria, along with some countries from the Gulf, are also on the EU’s radar. It would be wise, therefore,

to consider the EU’s strategic partnerships as an informal and flexible category, rather than as a definitive and unchanging list.

CONCLUSION

The concept of strategic partnerships is emerging as a new narrative guiding the EU’s external action. Following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU is institutionally better equipped to ‘punch its weight’ on a global scale. But it is still struggling to influence and shape the course of international relations. Time will be one decisive factor in its effort – Brussels, like Rome, will not be built in one day. But time alone is not enough to ensure the EU will become a relevant global power: the EU needs strategic direction. Forging true strategic partnerships, on the basis of the ten principles outlined in this brief, could constitute a milestone on the path to a more strategically capable Europe.

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