

BULLETIN

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Strategic Partnership as an Instrument of the European Union's Foreign Policy

by Dorota Liszczyk

In the context of the debate on the need to increase coherence, effectiveness and visibility of EU's foreign policy, the problem of the conceptualisation of the European Union's strategic partnership deserves special attention. Decisions taken by the European Council on 16 September are not ground-breaking in this respect and do not clarify the fundamental objections formulated with regard to this instrument. As announced by the President of the European Council, however, the developed guidelines are just the beginning of a process that consistent implementation could produce positive results.

Background. Despite its widespread use and significance, the term Strategic Partnership (SP)—used to describe a specific kind of the EU's relations with its key partners—remains one of the most undefined instruments of the EU's foreign policy. The European Security Strategy (ESS), which reiterates that the implementation of the EU's objectives should be pursued through multilateral cooperation within international organizations and through partnerships with key players, identifies three types of relationships that should be a priority for the Union. Transatlantic relations are defined as irreplaceable for the EU; cooperation with Russia is described as a major factor for European security and prosperity. As for other states that share the EU's goals and values and are ready to act in their support, among which are mentioned Japan, China, Canada and India, the ESS recommends the development of strategic partnerships. This document is, therefore, not only inaccurate in defining the instrument that the EU is to use to build relationships with key partners, but it also lacks a strategic approach to the problem.

An analysis of EU documents indicates that currently the EU has or is seeking to develop ten SPs that differ in form and apply to different partners. Strategic partnerships with the United States, Canada, Russia and Japan are informal in nature and based on political declarations, while those with Brazil, China, India, South Africa, Mexico or South Korea have been sanctioned in relevant documents. SPs embrace a superpower (USA), powers with a key position on the international arena (Russia, China, and to some extent also India and Brazil), non-European countries that share the EU's approach to international affairs (Canada, Japan) and regional partners (Mexico, South Africa, South Korea). Their strategic importance for the EU is clearly diversified.

Absence of a precise definition of the SP, its vague strategic vision as well as the lack of clarity of the EU's interests and objectives toward strategic partners make it difficult to determine what distinguishes the SPs from the EU's relations with its other major partners. It is also unclear what the essence of this instrument is other than regular summit meetings, meetings organised at the ministerial level or meetings of experts.

This situation is additionally complicated by the fact that the Union itself is seen by its strategic partners as an important partner, especially economic, but not necessarily a strategic one. This is mainly due to the EU's incoherent mode of communication with third parties. Discrepancies between the foreign policy priorities of EU members on the one hand and the absence of a political will to curb member states' bilateral relations in favour of multilateral cooperation on the other mean that external partners prefer to pursue bilateral relations with individual members rather than cooperate with the EU as a whole. Moreover, the questionable efficiency of the Common Foreign

and Security Policy, the EU's limited international political significance and the fact that the Union is seen as a soft power rather than military, undermine the EU's status in the eyes of its strategic partners.

Nevertheless, the direct impact of the emerging powers' economic strength on their political influence implies the need for adequate instruments; hence the EU's consistent emphasis on the role of SPs in its external relations. This tendency was evident during a recent visit to China paid by High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, in the message of the President of the European Commission (EC) on the state of the EU and especially in the European Council's debate on 16 September.

European Council Decisions. Although the European Council's guidelines of 16 September are by no means ground-breaking, they provide a response to some structural weaknesses of the EU. The European Council is to prepare a mandate or a clear message to any summit meeting with the EU's strategic partners. Based on medium-term plans including objectives the EU might want to achieve, each summit is to focus on two or three most important issues. The SPs are to be two-way streets based on mutual interests and benefits and on recognition that all actors have rights as well as duties. Consequently, the High Representative in collaboration with the EC and the Foreign Affairs Council is to evaluate the prospects of relations with all strategic partners, to define the EU's interests and possible leverage and to reflect on the frequency, format and output of the summits. The first progress report on this work is to be presented to the European Council in December. The European Council also recommended increasing the synergy between the EU's external relations and bilateral relations of the member states, mainly through a regular exchange of information, consultations and close coordination between all the Union's institutional actors involved in the implementation of foreign policy.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The EU's strategic partnerships creating privileged relations with some external actors have undoubtedly enhanced mutual trust between the parties and have strengthened bilateral cooperation. This instrument, however, cannot be a value in itself. Its significance should stem from substantive content as well as the effects and benefits that it brings. The September meeting of the European Council was a good initiative, especially in the context of the EU's growing marginalisation on the international arena. The external position of the EU is in fact closely related to its ability to pursue effective cooperation with countries of global significance. So conceptualisation of the SP should be a priority, all the more so as SP practice is so vague that it embraces also partners that can hardly be described as strategic for the Union as well as those that share neither the EU's global priorities and objectives nor the multilateral approach to dealing with global challenges.

This process should start from a precise definition of the meaning and objectives of this instrument as well as the impact that it should have on mutual contacts. It should then be continued through identifying EU interests in different parts of the world. The SP ought to apply only to those partners with whom relations can go beyond the bilateral level, thus contributing to solving transnational problems. In this context, the High Representative's announcement to expand the group of strategic partners to include Egypt, Israel, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ukraine, comes as a surprise. With no prior indication of its motives and goals, such a move would make the SP concept even more overstretched, possibly undermining the credibility of the EU as an international strategic partner.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) now being formed should be the unit initiating a debate on the strategic dimension of the EU's external relations. It should work on defining the future of the SP and prepare preliminary documents for discussion at European Council meetings. The EEAS could also develop a system for monitoring the implementation of strategic partnerships and strive for their effective dimension.