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The EU and the 'special ten': deepening or widening Strategic Partnerships?

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In the last two decades, the EU has established ten Strategic Partnerships (SPs). The 'special ten' are unequal in size, power, status and resource endowments. They differ in their adherence to European values and relevance to European core interests. No clear criteria for selection of an SP can be identified. Some of the special ten are global or regional powers; others are smaller countries without international leverage. The signing of free trade agreements with the EU is an exception rather than the norm; apparently it is not a pre-condition for a country to be upgraded as a strategic partner. The traditional SPs are with the advanced economies of Canada, Japan and the United States; the seven more recent strategic partners (the so-called BRICSAMS of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Mexico and South Korea) still receive development cooperation.

Yet despite these differences, the EU now applies a common strategy by celebrating bilateral summits, launching common action plans and establishing multi-dimensional cooperation at the bilateral, regional and global levels under each SP. A crucial question is what role SPs will play in future European foreign policy: how far will their reach extend?

It has been widely pointed out that the EU still has no single, concise definition of what a 'strategic' partner is. But this should not matter. SPs may not have great potential in enabling the EU to deepen cooperation on multilateralism with the big rising powers. But they can be useful as bilateral foreign policy tools across a larger number of partner states. They are most likely to offer added value to European foreign policy not in the largest but rather the second order powers. Instead of deepening commitments under a small and select number of SPs, the EU's priority goal should be to widen their geographical coverage.

HIGHLIGHTS

- There are no clear criteria for the selection of strategic partners or for the content of the strategic partnerships.
- Three generations of strategic partnerships coexist and serve different ends.
- Instead of deepening commitments under a small and select number of SPs, the EU's priority goal should be to widen their geographical coverage.

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AD HOC SELECTION

In September 2010, Hermann van Rompuy admitted that 'we have strategic partners, now we need a strategy'. This year, Catherine Ashton will provide further input on the objectives and long-term interests in relations between the EU and the 'special ten'. In the meantime, the first condition for a strategic partnership seems to be a commitment to reciprocity between partners with common interests and duties. As Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao stressed, strategic partnerships are based on 'equal and stable long-term relations, transcending ideologies' and contribute to 'mutual trust and benefits'. They imply a two-way, mutual benefit: the upgrading of third countries within EU foreign policy, and the upgrading of the EU as a strategic partner for those third countries.

Beyond this, there seems to be no common criteria for being chosen a strategic partner or for the content of the strategic partnership itself. The indicators suggested in the debate on SPs are not convincing:

- *The power position of the SP.* The 'special ten' offer a rather diverse picture between new global powers such as China, India and Brazil, declining powers such as Russia and Mexico, and countries like South Africa and South Korea with a strategic weight in their respective neighbourhood. New emerging powers such as Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria and Ukraine are likely to apply for strategic partnerships.

- *A regional power status.* Given that Canada, South Korea and Mexico are strategic partners, being a regional power is not a criteria. Neither does the choice of SPs reflect a coherent regional distribution (see chart 1); instead it exhibits a strong focus on Asia and the Americas (that account for nine of the ten SPs).

- *Natural partners based on values.* The qualification as 'natural' or 'like-minded' partners, based on a normative alliance and shared values, is not a criteria for selection. China and Russia are included in the list and Pakistan might become a strategic partner.

- *Particular member states interests.* No clear conclusions can be drawn on EU member states' national interests in selecting SPs. One of the ostensible rationales for SPs is the need to act collectively and in a more coherent way towards certain partners where EU members have strong national interests and tend to act unilaterally. But although some European countries have played a role in establishing strategic partnerships (Portugal supported Brazil, Spain backed Mexico and the UK pressed for India), other strategic partnerships can be attributed to the size and importance of the country (China, India, Russia, United States) or the passive response to a request by of the partner (Mexico and South Korea).

- *Core interests.* It is also extremely difficult to distinguish the SPs in terms of certain core issues like security, democracy, trade or development. Most SPs have been upgraded from the traditional trade and economic cooperation agenda to all-inclusive partnerships. According to the action plans and summit declarations, strategic partnerships include a very broad range of bilateral, regional and global issues and do not establish a clear hierarchy of priorities.

In short, SP selection criteria have been an ad hoc mix of EU member states' interests (particularly Brazil), size (India, China, Russia, the United States), regional jealousies (Mexico), partner states' interests (South Korea, Mexico), a special role in international politics (South Africa under Mbeki, Canada as a mediating power), shared values and interests (the like-minded SPs) and strong interdependences (the United States, China, Japan and Russia). Strategic partnerships respond to different and overlapping EU global options: band-wagoning (United States and China), balancing US hegemony (with Brazil, India and Russia), agenda-setting (with new partners such as Mexico, South Africa and South Korea), common identity (Canada, Japan, and the United States) and institutional-building (all SPs).

OVERVIEW ON EU'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Bilateral	Core issues	Aid	FTA	Type of SP
Brazil (2007)	Trade (10th partner) environment, energy	Yes	Negotiations Mercosur since 1999	Limited, value and interests based asymmetric SP
Canada (no official SP declaration)	All-inclusive, focus on values, global peace, environment, energy, trade (11th partner) and investment	No	Negotiations since 2009	All-inclusive, like-minded SP
China (2003)	Trade (2nd partner), investment, human rights	Yes	No (PCA)	Limited, interest based asymmetric SP
India (2008)	Trade (8th partner) / investment, security	Yes	Negotiations since 2006	Limited, value and interest based asymmetric SP
Japan (no declaration)	Trade (6th partner), investment, development, peace	No	No (in consideration)	Limited, like-minded SP
Mexico (2009)	Trade (19th trade partner), investment, development, (public security)	Yes	Yes (2000)	Limited, like-minded SP
Russia (2009)	Trade (3rd trade partner), energy	Yes	No (PCA)	Limited, interest based SP
South Africa (2006)	Development, trade (13th trade partner), regional peace	Yes	Yes (2008)	Limited, development focused SP
South Korea (2010)	Trade (9th trade partner), development, democracy	Yes	Yes (2010)	Limited, like-minded SP
United States (1990)	All-inclusive (1st trade partner)	No	No	Like-minded, value and interests based asymmetric SP

Source: EU official documents, own elaboration. PCA: Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

A THREE STEP STRATEGY

In addition to individual countries, the EU has also established regional strategic partnerships with Africa and Latin America. In this sense, SPs with bilateral and regional partners reflect the adjustment of the EU to the changing international environment. Although no conscious decision has been taken, the EU followed a three steps strategy, adapting to the changing international environment:

First, traditional commitments to post-second-world war Western powers (SPs with Canada, Japan, the US).

Second, commitments to regionalism and inter-regionalism (SPs with Africa, Latin America, SAARC, NATO and others).

Third, commitment to individual special partners in a multi-polar, bilateralised world order (SPs with the BRICSAMS).

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The result is three generations of SPs. During the Cold war, the EEC agreed strategic partnerships - although they were not formerly labelled as such - with its traditional Western allies Canada, Japan and the United States. In the 1990s, the EU established inter-regional or collective strategic partnerships, reflecting an apparent rise of regional blocs. Finally, under the conditions of multipolarity, bilateral SPs have now most recently emerged with several new powers, mainly in Asia and the Americas.

The current trend towards bilateralism in EU foreign policy reflects the limits of the inter-regional approach. An additional reason is the diversification of EU foreign policy beyond its traditional key partnerships with the United States, Canada and Japan. In the long run, SPs might weaken the transatlantic alliance with the United States and favour a broader rapprochement towards other partners. This implies a repositioning towards a closer relationship with non-traditional partners.

In the meantime, the three types of SPs coexist and serve different ends. Through the historic partnerships with Canada, Japan and the United States, the EU stresses its membership of the Western club. Through SPs with Africa and Latin America it underlines its inter-regional vocation. SPs with the BRICSAMS attempt to strengthen its new image as a power adapting to multipolarity.

A differentiation can be made between traditional and recent partners. While the historic SPs with Canada, Japan and the United States have been recently up-graded, new SPs with the BRICSAMS are part of an attempted 'one size fits all' strategy. In the latter cases, they respond to the same script: once the decision is taken, the Commission publishes a Communication with the main guidelines for relations, the partners respond with their own priorities, and a summit inaugurates the new class of relations. Third generation SPs can be divided into global powers (Brazil, India, China) and medium-size or smaller powers (Mexico, South Korea, South Africa).

DEEPENING OR WIDENING?

Absent any clear logic to date, the EU can choose to develop SPs in one of two directions.

Option one would be to focus on a small number of high priority partners for different and sometimes overlapping reasons, whether core interests (Russia, China, USA), principles and values (Canada, Japan), or a state being too big for inter-regional relations (Brazil, India, South Africa, Mexico). The final goal would be to create deeper multilateral alliances between the EU and the special ten. This would mean limiting the SPs to a relatively small group of partners.

Option two would be to use SPs as an incremental foreign policy tool across a far wider range of states. The EU would then effectively abandon the traditional inter-regional doctrine that has not worked out as an efficient and sufficient strategy for strengthening the EU as a global actor.

A strong argument for the first option is the common goal of effective multilateralism, included in all SPs and defined in several official documents as a major goal. Nonetheless, given the highly heterogeneous positions in international bargaining on climate change, global trade or international peace – particularly with the BRICS – there does not seem to be too much ground for common positions on the global stage.

If SPs are to be used primarily as a means to encourage the BRICS to commit to multilateralism, the EU should develop a clear road-map of key sectors and goals. The EU could either define bilateral priorities and goals with each of the partners creating an individual brand or develop a common strategy for all SPs, including the same structures, topics and goals. The latter has not happened yet. Policy-makers themselves admit that so far the EU has not sought to harness SPs in any concrete manner to deepen multilateralism. This option does not seem to be a realistic strategy to help adapt the EU to the changing international scenario.

Under the 'widening' scenario, SPs would be used as a means to strengthen European foreign policy by establishing common policies towards a larger number of third partners. The lack of selection criteria and the heterogeneous group of the special ten rather suggests a bilateral realpolitik through SPs. The incipient widening of SPs would be a strong indicator of this scenario taking root. According to speculation in Brussels and abroad, the EU may continue to select additional strategic partners such as Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ukraine. A further indicator in this direction is the status of SPs management in the European External Action Service: the lack of special treatment for strategic partners and coordination between the different services reflects little ambition to create a highly select category for strategic partners.

The EU should place more emphasis on widening the number of strategic partners

The EU should place more emphasis on widening the number of strategic partners to include a next level of second order rising powers. The SPs are likely to provide more of an incentive to these countries than to the BRICS. The heterogeneous group of states identified by the EU as strategic partners suggests that SPs are rather an instrument to upgrade EU foreign policy by defining bilateral agendas with a broad range of countries than an instrument for dealing with major and emerging powers. This rationale would also explain the lack of clear criteria for selection and of common ground for global action (particularly with China and Russia).

If the EU considers the SPs as an instrument of bilateral relations beyond trade and cooperation, it does not make much sense to apply a 'one size fits all' strategy. In this case, there is an urgent need to adapt the dialogues to the different stages of alignment and to develop differentiated instruments for each of them.

This would mean applying a policy of variable geometry with a broad range of partners. A first step in this direction would be to select SPs across sectors or at least to define clear priorities in terms of content. The EU might discuss global peace with its closest partners, Canada, Japan, South Korea and the United States, development issues with the BRICSAMS, climate change with Brazil and Canada, and trade with the partners that have already signed free trade agreements and with China.

A second possibility would be to define a multilateral 'one size fits all' strategy with a similar design for all SPs. This would mean ignoring the different categories and qualities of partnerships with a highly heterogeneous group of countries by harmonising the contents, priorities and structures of the SPs and defining a clear road-map for targets and results. This will not be an easy task and would be a rather idealistic aspiration, given the highly different conditions and positions of the special ten. The search for standardisation of the SPs might prove a wasteful distraction.

There is an urgent need to establish a clear road-map for dealing with the 'special ten'. The EU has yet to devise an effective approach to SPs. In the meantime, the widening or deepening of SPs will decide if the EU's partners benefit from a special treatment or if they are instrumental in shaping its own collective profile on the global stage beyond its traditional transatlantic alliance and neighbourhood policy.

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