#5
January 2010

SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

A Need for Strategy in a Multipolar World: Recommendations to the EU after Lisbon

Thomas Renard & Sven Biscop

The Lisbon Treaty now having entered into force, it is time for the EU to get back to work and more specifically to focus on its foreign policy. In a world that is increasingly complex and multipolar, the EU must act strategically. To avoid becoming an irrelevant international actor, Brussels needs to (1) develop a grand strategy to define the true purpose of its foreign policy; (2) forge solid strategic partnerships with key global players; and (3) contribute to the building of a new effective multilateral system which takes into account the new global structure of power.

Now that Catherine Ashton has been appointed the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and that Herman van Rompuy has become the first permanent President of the European Council, a more fundamental question is: which foreign policy strategy will they actually pursue?

In its 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), the EU has developed a grand strategy, embracing all foreign policy instruments and resources at the disposal of the EU and the Member States, but a partial one. The ESS tells us how to do things – in a preventive, holistic and multilateral way – but it is much vaguer on what to do: what are the foreign policy priorities of the EU?

The recent debate about the ESS, resulting in the 2008 Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy, failed to answer this question. Offering little in terms of recommendations for the future, the Report creates an impression of unfinished business, which the EU can ill afford now that the Treaty of Lisbon has strengthened the institutional set-up, NATO has launched a strategic debate to which an EU contribution is essential, and the EU risks being overshadowed by the much more purposive emerging powers.

A fully-fledged strategic review is in order to complete the ESS. The first rule of strategy-making is to know thyself. Seemingly evident, it is actually not that clear which values and interests the EU seeks to safeguard, and which kind of international actor it wants to be. Therefore, the EU should start its strategic review by looking at itself and try to identify the purpose of its foreign policy. But there are many dangers in looking too much into the mirror, and furthermore the EU cannot pretend to become a strategic actor if it continues to ignore the

other strategic players. This is not about knowing thy enemy (arguably the EU has no direct enemies, although strategic surprises should never be entirely ruled out[1]), but about knowing "the other". Finally, a last principle of strategy-making could be: know thy environment, or to put it in other words, know the rules of the game. If the EU hopes to become a global power, it needs to understand – or better to shape – the rules defining international relations.

A Need for a Grand Strategy

Which values and interests should our grand strategy safeguard? Europe has a very distinctive social model, combining democracy, the market economy and strong government intervention. Preserving and strengthening this internal social contract between the EU and its citizens, guaranteeing them security, economic prosperity, political freedom and social well-being, is the fundamental objective of the EU, both internally and as a global actor. The conditions that have to be fulfilled to allow that constitute our vital interests: defence against any military threat; open lines of communication and trade (in physical as well as in cyber space); a secure supply of energy and other vital natural resources; a sustainable environment; manageable migration flows; the maintenance of international law and universally agreed rights; and autonomy of EU decision-making.

To safeguard these interests, the EU must be a power, i.e. a strategic actor that consciously and purposely defines long-term objectives, actively pursues these, and acquires the necessary means to that end. Which kind of power the EU chooses to be is in part conditioned by the international environment. Marked by interpolarity, defined as "multipolarity in the age of interdependence"[2], that environment is very challenging, but at the same time presents the EU with an opportunity to pursue a distinctive grand strategy. This strategy is distinctive in the sense that the emphasis is on a holistic approach, putting to use the full range of instruments, through partnerships and multilateral institutions, for a permanent policy of prevention and stabilization. Contrary to US grand strategy for instance, the EU favours rule-based multilateralism, not just any form of multilateralism; and it promotes its values globally but does not try to enforce them.

The approach which the EU has pursued so far is in line with this grand strategy, but practice has revealed a number of limitations. Especially vis-à-vis other global actors the classic EU strategy of "positive conditionality", i.e. the offer of benefits in return for security cooperation and economic, social and political reforms, has been rather unsuccessful. Interdependence is too great and the scale of things is too vast for the EU to have any serious leverage. On the contrary, pontificating without acting only serves to undermine EU soft power.

A Need for Truly Strategic Partnerships

In a world that is increasingly multipolar and interdependent – this is to say interpolar – the EU cannot continue to approach emerging global powers without a clear strategy. The EU has therefore created a new instrument to engage with other global actors: strategic partnerships. The actual strategy behind these is far from clear however.

A first and major problem is the lack of understanding of the concept of strategic partnership. It has never been defined and is consequently seen and interpreted differently by many actors within the EU, without mentioning those outside the EU.

Another major problem relates to the countries that qualify for a strategic partnership. There are few established criteria, except that partnerships can be signed with "third countries, and international, regional or global organisations which share the principles [of democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law]" (Treaty of Lisbon, Article 22) and that "the strategic partner status is specifically intended to derive from the capacity of

[1] Colin S. Gray, "The 21st Century Security Environment and the Future of War". *Parameters*, vol. 38:4 (2008), pp. 14-26.

[2] Giovanni Grevi, *The Interpolar World: A New Scenario*. Occasional Paper 79, Paris: EUISS, 2009, p. 9.

a country to exert a significant influence on global issues".[3] At this point, not counting relations with the US, Canada and NATO, the EU has or is negotiating seven strategic partnerships with other States (Brazil, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and South Africa), and one with an international organization (the African Union). It seems quite obvious that not each of these is equally strategic. Most of these countries undeniably exercise regional leadership or are a significant player for one specific global issue. This makes them strategic as regards one region, or one issue. But is this a sufficient condition to make them a strategic partner? Can Mexico and South Africa really be put on an identical level with China, Russia and the United States?

The danger is to overstretch the concept, leading to an amalgam between important relationships and strategic relationships. Such overstretch creates confusion within the EU, but also in the eyes of its partners and in the way they interpret Europe's ambitions. In a sense we have been very successful at confusing our partners and becoming ever less strategic to them.

So, how can we actually make the EU partnerships strategic? A truly strategic use of the strategic partnerships, i.e. in function of EU foreign policy, must start from a thorough assessment of EU interests in the various regions of the globe and a clearer definition of its objectives towards them. At the same time, a prioritization of actions to be taken to tackle the global challenges, in function of the Union's vital interests, is in order. On many of these issues – climate, migration, energy – the EU already has elaborate policies – these must be integrated into its broader foreign policy framework.

Rather than objectives in their own right, the strategic partnerships are instruments to further "effective multilateralism". The EU could identify shared interests with each of its strategic partners, in order to establish in a number of priority policy areas effective practical cooperation with those strategic partners that share EU interests in that specific domain, with the ultimate aim of institutionalizing those forms of cooperation and linking them up with the permanent multilateral institutions. Such a pragmatic approach of coalition-building and practical cooperation, on very specific issues to start with, can expand into broader areas, including with regard to values. If e.g. it is unlikely that we will see China at the forefront of democracy promotion, it has an economic interest in promoting the rule of law, if only to ensure that the mining concessions it acquires are not simultaneously offered to someone else.

Rather than asking with which State or organization a strategic partnership should be concluded, the EU should look beyond those already in existence and involve actors in constructive cooperation in function of their power in the specific area concerned. In practice, two types of partners may eventually emerge: those with which the EU establishes cooperation in a comprehensive range of areas – probably at least Russia, China and India, if they would be inclined to such cooperation that is, and of course the US; and those with whom cooperation focuses on a more limited range of issues or regions.

For the strategic partnerships to work, the EU must speak with one voice – other global actors are only too adept at playing off one Member State against the other. "Self-divide and be ruled over" is not a strategy bound to serve European interests... At the very least, Member States should subscribe to a rule of transparency and automatically inform the EU, at an early stage, of all important bilateral arrangements with strategic partners, so as to allow for debate in the EU institutions and de-conflicting of potentially competing interests. Ideally, on key issues, strategic partnerships could establish the EU as the unique interlocutor on a series of key issues, hence limiting the margin of manoeuvre of individual Member States.

With the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon, a greater role could be devoted to the EEAS – instead of the Commission generally in charge of strategic partnerships to this day – in centralizing and coordinating the various strategic partnerships, linking them up with a coherent foreign policy.

[3] "Towards an EU-Mexico Strategic Partnership", COM(2008) 447, Brussels, 15 July 2008.

Without strategy, the strategic partnerships will quickly become irrelevant. With a strategy, they can potentially become very effective instruments of a united European foreign policy.

A Need for a Reformed Multilateralism

Bilateral strategic partnerships will not be sufficient to shape the future global order, however – the multilateral architecture as such must also be reformed. If the world is surely becoming increasingly multipolar – or even interpolar – it is still unclear whether that multipolarity will lead to more cooperation or competition. History taught us that the emergence of new powers challenging the old order can lead to many different scenarios, depending on the players' ability to adapt to each other and to their environment. We should also take from history that interpolarity is not inherently cooperation-driven, as illustrated by the competition between 19th century great powers in a world that was already multipolar and interdependent (even more interdependent than today, according to several indicators such as trade to GDP or capital flows[4]).

The EU preference for a cooperative form of multipolarity is well-known as it constantly promotes an international order based on systemic and rule-based multilateralism referred to in Brussels jargon as "effective multilateralism". This preference inscribes itself in a long-term strategy for promoting peace and multilateral cooperation, based on a strong historical conviction that multilateralism is the best avenue towards peace.

A global reform of multilateralism is clearly in the interest of the EU which "would have nothing to gain and everything to lose if it operated in a world governed by unstable power games in which it was one among various competing power players"[5]. But a reform of multilateralism would also be in the general interest because we all have everything to lose and nothing to gain from a world governed by unstable power games if it leads to a paralysis in the resolution of key global challenges such as climate change and nuclear proliferation, for the entire system is equally threatened in the end.

As stated in the 2003 ESS: "in a world of global threats, global markets and global media, our security and prosperity increasingly depend on an effective multilateral system." And therefore, "the development of a stronger international society, well functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order is our objective. (…) We want international organisations, regimes and treaties to be effective in confronting threats to international peace and security, and must therefore be ready to act when their rules are broken."[6]

However, despite the fact that the EU arguably favours a multilateral approach to international relations[7], it is important to point out that not all forms of multilateralism are favourable to the EU. For instance, the formation of ad hoc bilateral or multilateral alliances – especially those excluding the EU – could potentially be damaging to Europe; a G-2 between China and America e.g. would slowly but inevitably make the US lean towards Asia, and render Europe increasingly irrelevant.

Moreover, even where the world is cooperative, it is only irregularly so, and in an unstructured manner at that. Our contemporary era could be dubbed the age of multi-multilateralism, defined as the strengthening of an asymmetrical and dynamic cooperation process in which (1) countries are becoming members of a variety of overlapping institutions, creating a new mosaic of multilateral interactions; (2) states meet continuously in multiple forums hence increasing the density of international relations; (3) formal institutions (e.g. the UN) cohabit with informal forums (e.g. the G20) in a

[4] See Richard E. Baldwin, Philippe Martin, *Two Waves of Globalisation: Superficial Similarities, Fundamental Differences*. NBER Working Paper 6904, Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, January 1999.

[5] Alvaro de Vasconcelos, "Multilateralising Multipolarity", in Giovanni Grevi and Alvaro de Vasconcelos (ed.), *Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism: EU Relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia.* Chaillot Paper 109, Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, May 2008, p. 24.

[6] *A Secure Europe in a Better World – European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003, p. 9.

[7] We say "arguably" because EU rhetoric promotes effective multilateralism, but its actions might sometimes be seen by other parties – rightly or wrongly – as not faithful to that principle.

moving and overlapping configuration.[8] Nevertheless, even in the age of multi-multilateralism, cooperation between global actors remains conditional and certainly not automatic.

So, here is the obvious question: how do we get to an effective multilateral order? There is of course no clear-cut answer to that question, but our intuition tells us that we should start with what we already have, with a special attention to the latest developments, including the recent upgrading of the G20 from ministerial to head of state level, largely seen as a positive signal by emerging countries, indicating that they are now considered as key players in dealing with global challenges. This recognition was most welcome in New Delhi, Beijing and Brasilia.

Somehow, the displacement of the G8 by the G20 was also positive for the EU, at least for two reasons. First, Brussels is officially the 20th member of the G20, while it was only the 9th member of the G8. To many, this might only be a symbolic nuance, as in both cases the EU has the same "rights" and "obligations" as the other members minus the right to chair and host summits, hence no capacity to fully shape the agenda. But in international politics, rhetoric and the choice of words are never innocent; hence, in some way, the G20 is arguably a recognition of the "emerging" or "global power" status of the EU in international affairs as much as that of China, India or Brazil.

Second, the EU might show a more united front within the G20 than within the G8 because past experience has shown that pre-summit cooperation and coordination was greater ahead of G20 than G8 summits.[9] Since the level of meetings was upgraded to heads of state and the agenda enlarged, there is even a visible trend towards more internal cooperation, on the basis that a stronger European voice is needed in a forum where Europe represents only one fifth of the participants (as opposed to half in the G8). Indeed, ahead of the Pittsburgh summit, the EU gave a positive sign when releasing a communiqué stating the common "agreed language" for the Summit, which also contained declarations on development, climate change and energy security, i.e. topics mirroring a broader agenda for the G20. A stronger and more united European front will send a positive signal to our strategic partners.

Nonetheless, regarding the role of the EU in the G20, two important questions remain open:

(1) Who will represent the EU at the next G20 Summit in Toronto next June? Indeed, the Treaty of Lisbon is not clear regarding to who will replace the President of the Commission and the rotating Presidency. Whether it is Van Rompuy or Ashton that accompanies José Manuel Barroso to Toronto might send a symbolic signal. But whoever is designated needs to strengthen European coordination within the G20 and to ensure coordination with the EEAS which should receive more authority in terms of foreign policy planning, including regarding global challenges and strategic partnerships.

(2) How do we link the new G20 up with effective multilateralism? Indeed, if the empowerment of the G20 was a good option available to make sure emerging powers feel involved in the resolution of today's global challenges, it can only be a *transitory* phase pending a broader reform of the global multilateral architecture. If we want Russia, China, India or Brazil to abide by the rules of the WTO, the IMF or the UN, we have to strengthen (and eventually reshape) these institutions.

However, such reform will take time and a lot of difficult political decisions. In the meantime, the G20 can be used as a proxy to formal organizations provided it is globally accepted that it is only a temporary fix and that it does not replace but complements the UN Security Council.

The development of the G20 as a temporary proxy for global institutions is a necessary exception to "effective multilateralism" because in today's interpolar world most issues are globally interrelated, hence requiring enhanced cooperation and coordination among countries worldwide. Due

[8] Thomas Renard, *A BRIC in the World: Emerging Powers, Europe, and the Coming Order*. Egmont Paper 31, Brussels: Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations, October 2009, p. 15.

[9] Skander Nasra, Dries Lesage, Jan Orbie, Thijs Van de Graaf, Mattias Vermeiren, *The EU in the G8 System: Assessing EU Member States' Involvement*. EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2009/45, San Domenico: European University Institute, September 2009.

to its composition (all countries of significant importance are represented) the G20 constitutes at this time the best available forum to discuss effectively global challenges and ways to solve them. However, the EU must make sure that the decisions taken during the G20 comply with the international rules and are linked with and implemented through the permanent international organizations, e.g. UN agencies.

Conclusion

"Hell is other people" ("l'enfer c'est les autres") wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, meaning that we define our own identity based on the perceptions and our relationship with other parties. If Sartre were to observe the EU today, becoming less and less relevant in the eyes of its significant others, he could very well come to the conclusion that he has unwittingly described the position of the EU in the international system...

But the future lies in hope, not in despair. In order to find its place in a world characterized by moving asymmetrical multipolarity and multi-multilateralism, the EU must start acting strategically now. Indeed, if the EU really wants to step from being a global actor – defined by global presence – to being a global power – defined by global influence – it needs a global strategy. It needs a grand strategy.

This strategy will inevitably be conditioned by the global environment (interpolarity) but it should not be entirely dependent upon that environment, i.e. our strategy should aim at shaping the global environment as much as it will be shaped by it and avoid the trap of mere reactivity which has defined EU foreign policy so far. In the words of Brigadier-General (Ret.) Jo Coelmont, "while the EU is playing ping pong, the others are playing chess". With Van Rompuy and Ashton, Europe was offered a new King and a new Queen. So let's play chess!

Thomas Renard is Research Fellow and Sven Biscop is Director of the Security & Global Governance Programme at Egmont.

The Security Policy Brief is a publication of Egmont, the Royal Institute for International Relations

EGMONT
Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the authors and are not those of EGMONT, Royal Institute for International Relations