

EGMONT PAPER 45

**THE TREACHERY OF STRATEGIES:
A CALL FOR TRUE EU STRATEGIC
PARTNERSHIPS**

THOMAS RENARD



April 2011



ACADEMIA PRESS

The Egmont Papers are published by Academia Press for Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations. Founded in 1947 by eminent Belgian political leaders, Egmont is an independent think-tank based in Brussels. Its interdisciplinary research is conducted in a spirit of total academic freedom. A platform of quality information, a forum for debate and analysis, a melting pot of ideas in the field of international politics, Egmont’s ambition – through its publications, seminars and recommendations – is to make a useful contribution to the decision-making process.

* * *

President: Viscount Etienne DAVIGNON
Director-General: Marc TRENTÉSEAU
Series Editor: Prof. Dr. Sven BISCOP

* * *

Egmont – The Royal Institute for International Relations

Address Naamsestraat / Rue de Namur 69, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
Phone 00-32-(0)2.223.41.14
Fax 00-32-(0)2.223.41.16
E-mail info@egmontinstitute.be
Website: www.egmontinstitute.be

© Academia Press

Eekhout 2
9000 Gent

Tel. 09/233 80 88

Fax 09/233 14 09

Info@academiapress.be

www.academiapress.be

J. Story-Scientia NV Wetenschappelijke Boekhandel

Sint-Kwintensberg 87

B-9000 Gent

Tel. 09/225 57 57

Fax 09/233 14 09

Info@story.be

www.story.be

All authors write in a personal capacity.

Lay-out: proccess.be

ISBN 978 90 382 1744 4

D/2011/4804/96

U 1575

NURI 754

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations started a project on the EU strategic partnerships in February 2009, resulting in various publications, seminars and roundtables. Since the beginning of this project, the topic has (re-)emerged as a top priority on the European agenda, hopefully making this work valuable for the policy-making world. It certainly is extremely fascinating at the personal level. I would like to acknowledge the wisdom and the vision of Rik Coolsaet and Sven Biscop who identified the importance of this topic at an early stage. I particularly want to thank Sven Biscop for his professional guidance, besides being a good friend. I would like to thank Giovanni Grevi and James Rogers for their knowledgeable comments on early drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to Bas Hooijmaaijers for his kind assistance.

This paper is based on a large set of interviews with various officials from the EU and its Member States. I would like to thank all those who took the time to meet with me. Although the list below is not comprehensive and does not necessarily reflect the footnotes in this paper, I would like to thank: Martin Albani, Asad Beg, Oskar Benedikt, Gianfranco Bochicchio, Angel Carro Castrillo, Miguel Ceballos, Daniel Daco, Sem Fabrizi, Bjorn Fagerberg, Raul Fuentes Milani, Valentin Gescher, Matteo Gomirato, Lars Gronbjerg, Roland Johansson, Tim Jones, Emil Kirchner, Lars Bo Larsen, Alexander MacLachlan, Joao Marques de Almeida, Lluís Navarro, Patrick Nijs, Alar Olljum, Francesco Pre-sutti, Jean-Arthur Régibeau, Gianmarco Rizzo, Valérie Rouxel-Laxton, Geoffrey Rudd, Gerhard Sabathil, José Luis Sanchez Alegre, Antoine Sautenet, Bert Schoofs, Xinning Song, Thomas Stevens, Liliana-Silvia Strugariu, Tanguy Struye, Didier Vanderhasselt, Mark Van de Vreken, Petteri Vuorimäki, Philippe Willaert, Torsten Wöllert, Alexandros Yannis.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2010, the European Council discussed for the first time the European Union's (EU) strategic partnerships, a foreign policy concept that was until then unknown to most people – including EU officials. This discussion was certainly needed in these times of geopolitical upheaval. The global shift of power from the Atlantic to the Pacific forces the EU and its Member States to fundamentally rethink their foreign policy with a strong focus on great and emerging powers; otherwise the EU is at risk of falling into global irrelevance. The 2009 Copenhagen climate conference was just a foretaste of what global irrelevance could mean. The recent events in the Arab world have proved again that Europe is not at ease with contemporary challenges, including in its own neighbourhood.

To cope with the coming multipolar world, the EU should invest time and energy in its relationships with great and emerging powers, i.e. in the so-called strategic partnerships, because the more the world becomes globalised and interconnected, the more the EU will be confronted with them – a confrontation that can lead either to cooperation or competition. Given that all international actors need one another if they are to cope with issues as crucial as climate change, nuclear proliferation and sustainable development, cooperation should be privileged over competition. Current events in the Arab world – as important as they are – should not distract the EU from its vital long-term strategic interest: secure a relevant status in the coming multipolar environment dominated by great powers.

On the basis of a review of EU documents, official and informal, as well as a certain amount of interviews with European officials, this paper concludes that the EU has today, in 2011, ten strategic partnerships with third countries: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States. However, it is not entirely clear what is the exact reasoning behind this list. Some countries (e.g. the US) are considered to be natural partners of the EU, whereas others (e.g. China and Russia) are considered simply to be too big to ignore. As for the other countries on the list, the *strategic* rationale is far less evident. Their inclusion sometimes seems to be more the result of political and institutional games than of a true strategic reflection, hence leading to an “accidental” list of strategic partners.

The objectives that the EU is supposed to pursue globally through its strategic partnerships are left entirely undefined. What are the EU's global interests and priorities? How can these interests and priorities be pursued? What is the role of the strategic partners (cooperation or competition) in the pursuit of these

interests and priorities? The 2003 European Security Strategy remains mute on these fundamental questions, as it says more about *how* to do things than about *what* exactly to do. Strategic partnerships thus unfold as instruments empty of meaning and substance, with no clearly defined strategic direction.

Strategic partnerships are only strategic in name, for now. A historical overview of documents and debates shows the total absence of strategic rationale behind the elaboration of strategic partnerships since the very beginning, with no definition of the concept or of its fundamental objectives, and an ad hoc selection of partners. This process of a-strategic thinking led to a repetition of past failures as the EU is now facing similar problems as it was ten years ago with the Common Strategies, from which the partnerships derived, namely the difficulty to turn rhetoric into concrete policies of strategic value vis-à-vis our partners. A set of interviews with EU officials and European diplomats confirmed that strategic partnerships are to this day empty of any substance. This paper demonstrates that strategic partnerships are not so strategic when looked at up-close for a variety of reasons, including that 1) not every partner is equally strategic; 2) the EU is not cooperating with its partners on most truly strategic issues; 3) the strategic partnership has no structural or institutional impact on the relationship; 4) or, finally, the EU itself is simply not considered as a strategic partner in many cases.

This paper concludes that the recent revival of debates on strategic partnerships is a positive step forward and that a strict implementation of the important conclusions of the 2010 September European Council is now awaited. Overall, this paper recommends reflecting on the EU's global interests and priorities in search of the EU's *grand strategy*. *True strategic partnerships*, as this paper brands them, could then be regarded as (sub-)strategies of the EU vis-à-vis great and emerging powers. In addition to this general recommendation, this paper makes several recommendations for the EU and its Member States to turn the existing strategic partnerships into true strategic partnerships:

- Review the EU's institutional set-up, in line with the strategic nature of the partnerships, e.g. by establishing a cell dedicated to the strategic partnerships within the EEAS, or by developing the EU delegations in terms of size and composition to reflect the strategic character of the relationship.
- Review the EU's internal arrangements, notably ensuring a greater coordination between the EU and the Member States vis-à-vis strategic partners.
- Review the bilateral arrangements between the EU and its strategic partners in order to acknowledge the strategic importance of the relationship, e.g. by establishing comprehensive and effective strategic dialogues as well as sectoral dialogues on security and defence, or by developing a culture of cooperation on strategic issues.

- Review the multilateral arrangements, according to the EU's preference for effective multilateralism, e.g. by boosting coordination and conflict mediation mechanisms within multilateral forums between the EU and its strategic partners.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	I
Executive Summary	III
1. Introduction	I
2. A call for true strategic partnerships	3
3. Dust this off: Towards a new use of strategic partnerships	7
Uncommon strategies or the original lack of rationale.	7
The Lisbon Treaty and the rebirth of the strategic partnerships. . . .	I2
The 27 (finally) debate the strategic partnerships.	I4
Progress (reports) in sight for the strategic partnerships.	I7
4. Strategic or not strategic? That is the question.....	2I
Are all strategic partnerships similar?	22
Are all these partnerships truly strategic?	23
Are these partnerships designed strategically?	28
Is the EU a strategic partner?	32
5. “We have strategic partnerships, now we need a strategy”	35
Some recommendations	38

1. INTRODUCTION

“The attempt and not the deed confounds us”
--- William Shakespeare (Macbeth Act 2 Scene 2)

In September 2010, the European Council discussed for the first time the European Union’s (EU) strategic partnerships, a foreign policy concept that was until then unknown to most people – including EU officials. This discussion was certainly needed in these times of geopolitical upheaval. The global shift of power from the Atlantic to the Pacific forces the EU and its Member States to fundamentally rethink their foreign policy with a strong focus on great and emerging powers; otherwise the EU is at risk of falling into global irrelevance. The 2009 Copenhagen climate conference was just a foretaste of what global irrelevance could mean.¹ The recent events in the Arab world have proved again that Europe is not at ease with contemporary challenges, including in its own neighbourhood.

The EU adopted the concept of strategic partnership in the late 1990s-early 2000s. The problem, however, is that strategic partnerships cover two dimensions in which the EU has traditionally been quite ineffective, i.e. a strategic approach to foreign policy and bilateral relations with other powers. Hence, it should be no surprise that recent debates on strategic partnerships have uncovered the fundamental lack of strategy behind the partnerships. Most EU documents bearing the title “strategic partnership” are in fact reminiscent of the painting by René Magritte: “ceci n’est pas un partenariat stratégique” (“this is not a strategic partnership”).²

This paper is built on three sequential assumptions. First, strategic partnerships are a necessary (sub-)strategy for the EU to cope successfully with the changing global order and to avoid global irrelevance. Second, today’s strategic partnerships of the EU cannot reasonably be deemed strategic or even partnerships, for they do not meet all criteria, and therefore they appear to be an unsatisfying tool for the EU and its Member States. Third, the negative assessment of today’s strategic partnerships does not preclude the development of true strategic partnerships tomorrow with established and emerging powers.

1. RENARD Thomas. 2010. “Le syndrome de Copenhague”. *Revue Défense Nationale*, n°731 (June), pp. 155-161.

2. MAGRITTE René. 1928-29. *The treachery of images (la trahison des images)*. Oil on canvas.

To put these assumptions to the test, this paper starts with an assessment of the international environment, which calls for the establishment of true strategic partnerships between the EU and other major powers. The paper then moves on to determine how the current strategic partnerships came into existence and how they evolved to this day, based on a review of official EU documents as well as on a large set of interviews conducted by this author since February 2009. Finally, it evaluates the weaknesses of the current partnerships and provides some recommendations on how to develop true strategic partnerships.

Let us emphasise here, finally, that this paper will focus exclusively on the EU strategic partnerships with third countries, although we acknowledge the fact that the EU also has regional strategic partnerships – which to a certain extent might be seen as in contradiction or at least in competition with bilateral partnerships.

Thomas RENARD³

3. Thomas Renard is a Research Fellow in the Europe in the World programme at Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

2. A CALL FOR TRUE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

A new global order is emerging from the ashes of the Cold War, in a context of growing complexity and uncertainty.⁴ The world is becoming increasingly multipolar with the emergence of new powers in global affairs. To be sure, the world remains dominated by the United States, but the American superpower is increasingly challenged by emerging powers, not only economically but also financially, militarily, politically and culturally. The emerging global order is probably more fragmented than during the previous bipolar era, in the sense that new strategic opportunities have opened for international actors searching for a new power status. Emerging powers have become sufficiently assertive to confront the West on some issues (sometimes individually, sometimes as a bloc), but remain prudent enough to avoid endangering their rise by investing too much in revisionist postures (e.g. powers in Asia have developed “hedging” strategies via strategic partnerships to better safeguard their interests, but they have not built an anti-Western alliance). This fragmentation makes international cooperation to solve global challenges more difficult. On the other hand, the world is increasingly interdependent and interconnected as largely illustrated by the recent economic crisis. Global interdependence per se is not new, but according to some scholars today’s interdependence is creating favourable conditions for international cooperation, for there is simply no alternative to address some of the most pressing global challenges.⁵ Thus, at the moment, the tension between factors of fragmentation (leading possibly to a fracture?) and cohesion maintains the international system in flux and makes it less predictable.

This new global order is creating a challenging environment for the EU and its Member States, which seem to slowly but reluctantly recognise that Europe’s place on the international chessboard is at risk. Europe’s “global irrelevance” is now commonly being debated in Brussels and in major foreign capitals, in a general climate of apathy or at best irony. Have Europeans already accepted decline as their inevitable fate? They would be correct if they think in national terms – former Belgian Minister Paul-Henri Spaak already warned decades ago that “Europe consists only of small countries, some of which know it and some of which don’t yet” – but the storyline could change if they would start acting European. This paper is built on the assumption that Europe can and should remain a central actor of History, not become its spectator. The EU is the natural director of European action, and the picture can only get better with outstanding national actors.

4. RENARD Thomas. 2009. *A BRIC in the world: Europe, emerging powers and the coming order*. Egmont Paper 31. Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

5. GREVI Giovanni. 2009. *The interpolar world: a new scenario*. Occasional Paper 79. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies.

The EU has a lot of tools at its disposal to adapt successfully to the new global order, building on the new provisions of the Lisbon Treaty. Indeed, the EU is a *potential power*, a power in becoming – although what kind of power is not clear yet. There have been many debates about the power of Europe, leading to many innovative concepts. It is not the explicit objective of this paper to address this question, although we consider the EU capable of developing a new form of global action, mingling traditional and innovative forms of power into something that would build upon the strengths and complexities of the EU.

To cope with this multipolar world, the EU should invest time and energy in its relationships with great and emerging powers, i.e. in the so-called strategic partnerships, because the more the world becomes globalised and interconnected, the more the EU will be confronted with them – a confrontation that can lead either to cooperation or to competition. Given that all international actors need one another if they are to cope with issues as crucial as climate change, nuclear proliferation and sustainable development, cooperation should be privileged over competition.

Recent international events have highlighted the relevance of cooperation even more. At the 2009 climate conference in Copenhagen, for instance, Europeans were marginalised and sidelined by the US and a group of emerging powers, all supposedly strategic partners of the EU. In the spring of 2010, Barack Obama declined the invitation to a EU-US Summit in Madrid, strengthening a feeling of marginalisation in transatlantic relations among Europeans in addition to a sense of sidelining in international affairs. The Chinese bailout of Europe, triggering ambivalent sentiments across the continent, was yet another illustration of the increasingly complex relationship between the EU and its strategic partners.

In the face of these events and of global changes, the EU decided to take action and its Member States started to debate its strategic partnerships in September 2010, following the initial impulse of Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council. This author strongly applauds this initiative and encourages its continuation – *if* debates lead to results and implementation (as opposed to most strategic debates in Europe). The stakes are high and failure to reach results would postpone this debate to a distant future. The world is moving faster than ever, whereas Europe is plagued with national-narcissism and political immobilism. We should simply beware of missing this opportunity.

Recent debates were a good start, but they were precisely just that: a beginning. Now we – as Europeans – need to keep the debate moving and rapidly gather speed. We need to hold two kinds of debates regarding the strategic partner-

ships: 1) discussing among ourselves what are the objectives of a strategic partnership and which are our true strategic partners; and 2) at the bilateral level, discussing our mutual strategic interests with our various partners. This paper focuses mainly on the first level, although it will address the second level when deemed useful or necessary.

The starting hypothesis of this paper is that the existing list of strategic partners was established for various reasons, but not based on an assessment of their strategic value. Indeed, there is to this day no definition of strategic partnerships or of EU strategic interests globally and regionally, hence making the current list of strategic partnerships a rather “accidental” one but certainly not a strategic one. Moreover, a closer look at the substance of these partnerships clearly reveals their lack of strategic character.

This paper argues that a clarification of the concept is in order, as well as an urgent reflection on our strategic interests, in the pursuit of true strategic partnerships. Implementation of these true strategic partnerships is long awaited. In other words, time has come to move from strategic partnerships as a concept to strategic partnerships as a foreign policy instrument. Thus, it is suggested to distinguish the existing strategic partnerships, which are mere rhetorical statements, from the true strategic partnerships, which this paper envisions as (sub-)strategies for the EU to apply its general foreign policy guidelines – its *grand strategy* – to some of its most important partners.

A true strategic partner can be defined as a key global player which has a pivotal role in solving global challenges – in the sense that the EU cannot hope to solve these issues without the positive contribution of that partner – and which is willing to cooperate with the EU to solve these challenges, preferably in a multilateral framework – e.g. by coordinating our position with those strategic partners in multilateral forums. The ultimate objective of these true strategic partnerships is to safeguard the EU’s vital interests, which many times involves the necessary cooperation with its strategic partners. The true strategic partnerships can also be seen as a tool to slow down the global fragmentation of international relations, by active strategic and diplomatic efforts of the EU.

The strategic partnerships in this sense go beyond bilateral relations and focus on the instrumentalisation of this bilateral relationship for broader ends (i.e. regional or, better, global goals). The bilateral relationship per se is not the core finalité of the strategic partnership, although the depth and the quality of the bilateral relationship obviously determine the potential of the strategic partnership, and therefore the former remains crucially important to the latter.

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, a strategic partnership has a strong empathic dimension, which means that both partners share a common understanding of their mutual values and objectives. Fourth, a strategic partnership must be oriented towards the long-term, which is to say that it is not put into question by casual disputes. 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*.

Based on those standards, how strategic are the EU’s “strategic partnerships”? Among the current ten strategic partnerships (with Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States) probably only the US-relationship qualifies as a true strategic partnership. The others are, among other things, not comprehensive (e.g. India and Japan), not oriented towards global issues (e.g. South Africa) or not based on reciprocity and empathy (e.g. Russia and China).

In the new global environment, the EU cannot afford to have only one true strategic partner, even if that is the American superpower. In today’s world, the EU needs to develop true strategic partnerships with tomorrow’s great powers, because it takes time to build sustainable trust among partners in order to collectively address global threats and challenges. At the end of the day, what truly matters is not how much power you have or what kind of power you are, as the US is now experiencing the hard way in Iraq and Afghanistan, but how you make use of that power. Strategic partnerships are precisely a blueprint for a smart use of the EU’s (and therefore Europe’s) power.

3. DUST THIS OFF: TOWARDS A NEW USE OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Due to the paucity of literature on the EU's strategic partnerships, this paper offers a historical overview of debates and documents related to this concept up to this day, in order to better understand where it comes from, what was the original rationale behind it, and how this rationale evolved.

Uncommon strategies or the original lack of rationale

The concept of strategic partnership emerged from the post-Cold War era.⁶ Countries, particularly in Eurasia and in Asia, reacted to the demise of the bipolar order by developing new “hedging” strategies to deal in a flexible manner with the “lonely superpower” and with other regional powers at the same time, without committing to new forms of alliance in troubled and uncertain times. For a former superpower like Russia and for emerging powers like China and India, the international environment was simply too uncertain and evolving too rapidly to opt for a definitive bandwagoning or balancing posture at the global (vis-à-vis the US) and regional (vis-à-vis other regional powers) levels.⁷

Building on this new international concept, the EU used the expression “strategic partnership” for the first time at the highest level in 1998, in the European Council conclusions, which reaffirmed “Russia’s importance as a *strategic partner* to the Union”.⁸ Six months later, the European Council was putting to use the innovations brought by the Amsterdam Treaty in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to adopt a Common Strategy on Russia, which was meant to “strengthen the *strategic partnership* between Russia and the European Union”.⁹ Article 13.2 of the Amsterdam Treaty indeed provided that:

The European Council shall decide on common strategies to be implemented by the Union in areas where the Member States have important interests in common. Common strategies shall set out their objectives, duration and the means to be made available by the Union and the Member States.

6. KAY Sean. 2000. “What is a strategic partnership?”. *Problems of Post-Communism*, n°47, pp. 15-24.

7. NADKARNI Vidya. 2010. *Strategic partnerships in Asia: Balancing without alliances*. Abingdon: Routledge.

8. European Council. 1998. *Presidency conclusions*. Vienna.

9. European Council. 1999. *Presidency conclusions*. Cologne.

The European Council adopted two additional Common Strategies afterwards, on Ukraine and the Mediterranean, while emphasising the “strategic importance” of Latin America and Africa. Hence, originally, it seems that the concept of “strategic partnership” was born out of rhetoric related to the adoption of Common Strategies towards third countries (Russia and Ukraine) and third regions (Mediterranean, Latin America and Africa). Nonetheless, whereas the so-called “Common Strategies” have been lost in EU history, the strategic partnerships have somehow survived to this day despite all uncertainties still surrounding the concept.

Save Russia, no countries were described consistently as strategic partners in the late 1990s. This is not to say, however, that Russia was considered to be the sole or even the main partner of the EU. The US unequivocally remained the principal ally of Europe (notably via NATO), but the “strategic partnership” rhetoric was first developed in the context of the relations with Moscow, probably as a consequence of growing frustrations at the European level due to the lack of effective and visible policies vis-à-vis Russia.¹⁰ Hence, for instance, the transatlantic partnership was depicted as “the leading force for peace and prosperity for ourselves and for the world”¹¹ whereas the relationship with Japan was not yet dubbed strategic either, but already went beyond mere bilateral issues as both parties were “aware of the importance of deepening their dialogue in order to make a joint contribution towards safeguarding peace in the world, setting up a just and stable international order in accordance with the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter and taking up the global challenges that the international community has to face.”¹²

All this seems to confirm that the concept of strategic partnership was linked, in the beginning, to the implementation of Common Strategies and to the particular context of uncertainty in the 1990-2000s due to the emergence of a new world order, the normalisation of relations with the post-Soviet space, and the growing (tentative) assertiveness of the EU on the international stage.

The European Security Strategy (ESS), published in 2003, was the first document to envision the strategic partnerships as a (sort of) foreign policy tool. It is true that this document was more political than strategic, in the context of the Iraq war and of the resulting transatlantic and intra-European dissensions, but it was the first document to formulate objectives in connection with the pursuit

10. HAUKKALA Hiski, 2000. *The making of the European Union's Common Strategy on Russia*. Working Paper 28. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

11. *The New Transatlantic Agenda*. 1995. Madrid: EU-US Summit.

12. *Joint declaration on relations between the European Community and its member states and Japan*. 1991. The Hague.

of strategic partnerships, even if these objectives are abstract in their formulation and limited in their scope:

There are few if any problems we can deal with on our own. The threats described above are common threats, shared with all our closest partners. International cooperation is a necessity. We need to pursue our objectives both through multilateral cooperation in international organisations and through partnerships with key actors.¹³

It is also in the ESS that we discovered for the very first time, in print, a list of the EU's strategic partners. The document mentions six partners: it singles out the US ("the irreplaceable partner") and Russia (with whom we should work "to reinforce progress towards a strategic partnership"), then adding as one group Japan, China, Canada and India (with whom "we should look to develop a strategic partnership"). The formulation of this list indicates that it was an open one, although as noted by some scholars, "the criteria to evaluate who qualifies as a potential partner are left virtually unspecified".¹⁴ The only indication regarding who could become a strategic partner was particularly vague: "all those who share our goals and values, and are prepared to act in their support". Furthermore, the ESS tells us that most strategic partnerships should still be regarded as an objective to pursue rather than a depiction of the reality in 2003.

The objectives that the EU is supposed to pursue, notably through its strategic partnerships, are unfortunately not developed in the ESS. What are these objectives? What are the EU's interests and priorities in the field of foreign policy? The ESS remains mute on these fundamental questions, as it says more *how* to do things rather than *what* exactly to do.¹⁵ Strategic partnerships thus unfold as instruments empty of meaning and substance, with no clearly defined strategic direction.

Despite all these major problems, which remain to a large extent unaddressed to this day, the EU has developed a certain number of strategic partnerships based on the recommendations of the ESS. More precisely, the European Commission followed suit of the European Council (which had initiated the Common Strategies and the ESS) and produced a series of documents intended to feed into the general elaboration of strategic partnerships.

13. Council of the European Union. 2003. *A secure Europe in a better world – European Security Strategy*. Brussels.

14. MENOTTI Roberto, VENCATO Francesca. 2008. "The European Security Strategy and the partners". In BISCOP Sven, ANDERSSON Jan Joel (ed). *The EU and the European Security Strategy*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 115.

15. BISCOP Sven (ed). 2009. *The value of power, the power of values: A call for an EU grand strategy*. Egmont Paper 33. Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

In fact, the first document of this kind was released in September 2003, a few months before the publication of the ESS, hence initiating the first strategic partnership with an emerging power, namely China. This document is entitled “A maturing partnership - shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations”.¹⁶ The Commission released similar documents vis-à-vis India (2004), South Africa (2006), Brazil (2007) and Mexico (2008).¹⁷

These documents do not establish a strategic partnership by themselves, however. On the one hand, these are “Communications from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament”, that is to say internal and unilateral European documents and thus not a partnership. On the other hand, these are documents calling for the EU to *establish* a strategic partnership with each emerging country, which cannot therefore be qualified as strategic partners yet at the time of publication. Moreover, in the case of South Africa, Brazil and Mexico, the document is entitled “*Towards* a strategic partnership” (the key being the word “towards”), hence highlighting that such partnership is an objective, but not yet a reality.

Let us note here that these “Communications from the Commission” seem to have been generally well orchestrated, at the European level as well as bilaterally with the partners, given the short lapse of time separating the publication of the document from its adoption by the European Council (and from a favourable recommendation from the European parliament), on the one side, and subsequently from a “Joint Statement” of both partners during a bilateral Summit announcing the upgrading of the relationship to a strategic partnership, on the other side (China in October 2003, India in September 2005, South Africa in May 2007, Brazil in July 2007, and Mexico in May 2010). This good orchestration, however, does not suffice to make the partnerships strategic.

These “Communications” and “Joint Statements” adopted during bilateral Summits, without forgetting the “Joint Action Plans”, are surely no guarantee of the strategic nature of a partnership. These documents resemble declarations of interest, they are a to-do list or a wish list, but they offer no strategic vision for the bilateral relationship. These “Communications from the Commission”, for instance, analyse systematically a certain amount of thematic issues in which the EU and its partners could deepen their relations. This approach is of a cer-

16. European Commission. 2003. *A maturing partnership: shared interest and challenges in EU-China relations*. (COM 533), Brussels.

17. European Commission. 2004. *An EU-India strategic partnership*. (COM 430), Brussels; European Commission. 2006. *Towards an EU-South Africa strategic partnership*. (COM 347), Brussels; European Commission. 2007. *Towards an EU-Brazil Strategic Partnership*. (COM 281), Brussels; European Commission. 2008. *Towards an EU-Mexico Strategic Partnership*. (COM 447), Brussels.

tain value, but it cannot be deemed *strategic* for it leaves aside the issues of mutual interest and, even more importantly, divergent interests (at the bilateral, regional and global levels), as well as the question of the objectives of the partnership and what the EU is ready to trade off for these objectives. In short, these documents offer only cosmetic changes to the relationship, as the upgrade is more symbolic and rhetorical than a fundamental redesign of these relationships. It is not encouraging to notice that these criticisms are similar to those raised against the Common Strategies, over 10 years ago.¹⁸

The 2008 “Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy” underscores the progress accomplished regarding the strategic partnerships, notably thanks to the efforts of the European Commission and to the adoption of “Joint Action Plans”. When it comes to the objectives of the partnerships however, the report is no more detailed than the 2003 ESS, except that it specifies that one of the fundamental objectives of the partnerships is to promote “effective multilateralism”, Brussels jargon referring to a rule-based multilateral order. As for the list of strategic partners, the report maintains a lot of confusion: in addition to the partners from the 2003 ESS, the report also mentions Switzerland and Norway, for instance, along with a certain amount of international organisations.

It appears therefore that in 2008, ten years after the beginning of discussions on strategic partnerships, the concept was still not defined and that there still was no official list of the EU’s strategic partners. It was still a rhetorical expression, celebrating the growing importance of a bilateral relationship, with no clear global strategic vision. The absence of any public European document on the strategic partnerships, as well as the complete lack of knowledge about this concept and of its implications among the staff tasked with these issues within the European institutions indicate the absence of global strategic vision on the European side.¹⁹ There was indeed one or the other internal note circulated within the Commission, notably ahead of the establishing of a strategic partnership with Brazil and Mexico, but even those documents seemed to be incapable of explaining the meaning and objectives of the strategic partnerships.²⁰

By comparison, some strategic partners of the EU seem to have a much more strategic vision of Europe. China, among others, does not hesitate to play on internal European divisions to obtain what it desires. Other illustration: a European official pointed out during an interview that the absence of European strat-

18. HAUKKALA Hiski. 2000. *op. cit.*

19. Observation based on more than 30 interviews carried in 2010 by this author in Brussels and within EU/European delegations abroad.

20. Interview with a staff member of the European Commission, Brussels, 7 July 2010.

egy is visible notably on the occasion of bilateral summits, in the sense that our partners come systematically better prepared than Europeans, with a clearer idea of what they want and how to get it.²¹ More generally, great powers (particularly the US) and emerging powers systematically pursue a clearly defined *grand strategy*, whereas the EU is still in quest of its own identity. In the words of Brigadier-General (R.) Jo Coelmont: “While the EU is playing ping pong, they are playing chess.”²²

The Lisbon Treaty and the rebirth of the strategic partnerships

The EU’s foreign policy took a new turn with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1st December 2009. Indeed, a certain amount of changes foreseen by the Treaty *should*²³ bring more coherence and continuity into European external action. Among major changes, one can mention the designation of a new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (with extended powers in comparison to her predecessor) or the creation of a new European diplomatic corps (the famous European External Action Service – EEAS).²⁴

These changes permitted to rethink the relationship between the EU and third countries, notably in the framework of strategic partnerships. It is precisely a newly appointed figure, Herman Van Rompuy, first permanent president of the European Council, who (re-)started the debate on the partnerships. In February 2010, on the occasion of his first major foreign policy speech, he mentioned the strategic partnerships as a key priority of the EU in terms of foreign policy:

We need to review and strengthen our relationship with key partners. I am above all thinking about the United States, Canada, Russia, China, Japan, India, Brazil.²⁵

Catherine Ashton, the new High Representative, followed in the steps of Van Rompuy and in July 2010 declared the strategic partnerships to be one of her main priorities for 2010 and beyond:

21. Interview with a staff member of the European Commission, Brussels, 23 June 2010.

22. BISCOF Sven (ed.). 2009. *op. cit.*

23. It is important to emphasise the conditional here, because instruments foreseen by the Treaty will be fully exploited only if there is sufficient political will to do so.

24. CEPS, EGMONT and EPC. 2010. *The Treaty of Lisbon: A second look at the institutional innovations*. Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

25. VAN ROMPUY Herman. 2010. *The challenges for Europe in a changing world*. Speech at the College of Europe, Bruges, 25 February, p.7.

In this world I have described where problems are global, and where power is shifting, we need to invest in partnerships, keeping up the work with our “established partnerships” such as the US, Russia, Japan and Canada, and focussing too on developing our relationships with powers that are emerging or have emerged, China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia.²⁶

After a quick overview of both statements, two elements seem particularly important. On the one hand, the list of partnerships seems to differ between the two top figures of EU foreign policy, seemingly confirming the lack of in-depth background reflection on this issue on the eve of the summer of 2010, as this author has highlighted before.²⁷ On the other hand, whereas Van Rompuy does not seem to differentiate the partnerships, Ashton separates “established” powers from “emerging” powers – an issue that will be looked into more deeply below.

José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission and the third key actor in European foreign policy, did not fail either to mention the strategic partnerships as crucial for the EU to pull its weight on the global stage, on the occasion of his first-ever “State of the Union” speech, on 7 September 2010:

Our partners are watching and are expecting us to engage as Europe, not just as 27 individual countries. If we don’t act together, Europe will not be a force in the world, and [our strategic partners] will move on without us.²⁸

Even leaving aside core issues of international security, Barroso also highlighted the crucial importance of the strategic partnerships domestically, namely for the socio-economic situation in Europe:

In our globalised world, the relationships we build with strategic partners determine our prosperity.²⁹

If strategic partnerships were mentioned among the priorities of these three prominent figures of EU foreign policy from early 2010, the debate on the issue

26. ASHTON Catherine. 2010. *Europe and the world*. Speech at Megaron ‘The Athens Concert Hall’, Athens, 8 July, p. 7.

27. BISCOP Sven, RENARD Thomas. 2009. “EU strategic partnerships lack content”. *EUObserver*, 27 August. Observation confirmed during a roundtable organised by the Egmont Institute, Brussels, 7 July 2010.

28. BARROSO José Manuel. 2010. *State of the Union 2010*. Speech to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 7 September, p.8.

29. Ibid.

remained entirely below the radar screen until the end of summer recess.³⁰ Indeed, when Herman Van Rompuy in June 2010 called for an extraordinary European Council to be held three months later and to be dedicated to the strategic partnerships,³¹ few diplomats seemed to be prepared.³² A loose agenda for the meeting coupled to a very fuzzy topic turned out to be a perfect recipe for chaotic preparation, as some diplomats complained.³³

In order to give more substance to the 16 September European Council, it was decided in July that a Gymnich (the first under the new “Lisbon” format) would precede the European Council on 10-11 September, and that the 27 Ministers of Foreign Affairs would later attend the European Council to ensure continuity in the debates. Unsurprisingly, the level of preparation varied greatly from one Member State to another in function of their interest for the topic. Nonetheless, a certain amount of Member States, including France and Germany, shared several key ideas ahead of the Gymnich via an exchange of letters, in which some of the core elements of the European Council’s conclusions were already drafted.³⁴

The 27 (finally) debate the strategic partnerships

During the Gymnich, the Foreign Ministers focused mainly on China (and to a lesser extent on India) as a “template” to debate strategic partnerships. Moreover, Catherine Ashton, chairing the debates according to the new rules, encouraged her colleagues to envision the partnerships in a comprehensive manner, notably by inviting EU Commissioners for economic and financial issues (Olli Rehn), climate (Connie Hedegaard) and trade (Karel De Gucht) to join the discussions.

What emerged from the discussions was a convergence of views on the fact that Europe is still punching below its weight and that it is only when acting together that the EU can hope to become itself a strategic partner. There seemed to be a convergence of views as well on the necessity to develop a strategic approach towards our partners – of which, as will be shown below, Catherine Ashton took note.³⁵

30. Interview with a staff member of the European Commission, Brussels, 11 June 2010. Interview with a staff member of Herman Van Rompuy’s cabinet, Brussels, 7 July 2010.

31. MAHONY Honor. 2010. “Van Rompuy planning ‘foreign policy’ summit”. *EUObserver*, 11 June.

32. Interview with a staff member of the European Commission, Brussels, 11 June 2010. Observation confirmed during a roundtable organised by the Egmont Institute, Brussels, 7 July 2010.

33. TAYLOR Simon. 2010. “Van Rompuy’s summitry fails to convince”. *EuropeanVoice*, 23 September.

34. Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 27 September 2010.

35. Interview with a European diplomat, Paris, 15 September 2010. Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 27 September 2010.

The 16 September European Council was extraordinary for two reasons. First, it was an ad hoc summit and *de facto* an extraordinary Council. Second, and more importantly, it aimed to discuss for the first time and at the highest level (the Gymnich being considered as a preliminary to the European Council) the instrument called “strategic partnerships”. Unfortunately, the extraordinary dimension of this second point went largely unnoticed in the media and in public opinion – in Europe and worldwide – partly due to the hyped row over the Roma issue, between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and European Commissioner Viviane Reding.³⁶ However, another explanation for this lack of coverage cannot be provided, other than a lack of appetite from traditional media for such broad discussions and a certain *désenchantement* with the CFSP.

The fact is that Europe was (again) showing a divided front at a critical moment. Barely two days after six of the nine EU strategic partners voted against – or abstained from supporting – a UN resolution to upgrade the EU status according to its new competences,³⁷ this internal feud was sending one additional negative signal to our strategic partners, whereas some of them are already overtly questioning the strategic value of the EU.

If the European Council was the stage for some internal quarrels, the question of strategic partnerships was nonetheless addressed, notably on the basis of a PowerPoint presentation by Catherine Ashton establishing a list of nine strategic partners – the first such compilation to the knowledge of this author, confirming the list compiled by this author himself previously³⁸ – and paving the way for additional partnerships in the future, namely South Korea and Indonesia (see *infra*).³⁹ Discussions let appear some disagreements among Member States, mainly regarding the list of truly strategic partners; disagreements seemingly resulting fundamentally from historic and cultural differences among Member States.

The discussions turned out to focus mainly on European coordination mechanisms to become more strategic in our approach to strategic partners, and to pull the EU’s full weight on the international stage. These mechanisms should be regarded as extremely important and are a positive step towards a strategic approach to foreign policy. They aim to increase coordination and coherence

36. RICARD Philippe, VAN RENTERGHEM Marion, LEPARMENTIER Arnaud. 2010. “Déjeuner de fiel à Bruxelles”. *Le Monde*, 21 September.

37. VOGEL Toby. 2010. “UN General Assembly postpones vote on special status for the EU”. *European Voice*, 14 September.

38. BISCOP Sven, RENARD Thomas. 2009. “The EU’s strategic partnerships with the BRIC: Where’s the Strategy?”. *BEPA Monthly Brief*, n°29, pp. 6-8.

39. RETTMAN Andrew. 2010. “Ashton designates six new ‘strategic partners’”. *EUObserver*, 16 September.

between the EU and its Member states, but also between European institutions. These discussions resulted in the adoption of “internal arrangements to improve the European Union’s external policy” as an annex to the Council’s conclusions. This resulted in coordination mechanisms within the EU:

Close and regular coordination between all the different institutional actors involved in the definition and implementation of the European Union’s external relations is necessary to ensure that EU representatives can defend coherent positions on the whole range of the strategic interests and objectives of the Union.⁴⁰

The arrangements also foresee not-less-essential coordination mechanisms between the EU and its Member States:

Synergies need to be developed between the European Union’s external relations and Member States bilateral relations with third countries, so that, where appropriate, what is done at the level of the European Union complements and reinforces what is done at the level of the Member States and vice versa.⁴¹

The conclusions of the September European Council include many interesting observations and crucial recommendations for a strategic approach to the partnerships. It was very significant that the conclusions recognised for the first time that the strategic partnerships are an important instrument of foreign policy: “the European Union’s strategic partnerships with key players in the world provide a useful instrument for pursuing European objectives and interests.”⁴² The European Council also recognised the need for the EU to completely rethink its foreign policy in more strategic terms: “in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty, and in line with the European Security Strategy, the European Union and its Member States will act more strategically so as to bring Europe’s true weight to bear internationally. This requires a clear identification of its strategic interests and objectives at a given moment and focused reflection on the means to pursue them more assertively.”⁴³

Thus, despite the negative atmosphere surrounding the September 2010 European Council, its conclusions are largely interpreted as a step forward in this debate. What Europe needs now is implementation as well as follow-up of these conclusions.

40. European Council. 2010. *European Council conclusions on 16 September 2010*. Brussels, p. 8.

41. Ibid.

42. European Council. 2010. op. cit., p. 2.

43. Ibid.

Progress (reports) in sight for the strategic partnerships

In his personal conclusions to the Summit, Van Rompuy highlighted several key points of the European Council's discussions.⁴⁴ The three following were particularly important:

- This extraordinary European Council was only the beginning of a longer debate on EU foreign policy. Catherine Ashton was tasked “in coordination with the Commission and with the Foreign Affairs Council, to evaluate the prospects of relations with all strategic partners, and set out in particular our interests and possible leverage to achieve them.”⁴⁵ Her first progress reports on the partnerships were awaited for December 2010 (see *infra*).
- Reciprocity is a very important notion in the framework of strategic partnerships.
- It was confirmed that in terms of foreign policy, the mandate would be issued by the European Council, but prepared and implemented by the Foreign Affairs Council, the Commission, and the High Representative. In other words, the idea is that during summits with EU strategic partners the latter feel convinced that EU messages “have a political backing of all EU 27 at the level of Heads of State and Government and are not only a product of the Brussels institutions.”⁴⁶

Concerning the first point (the so-called *progress reports*) it was important that European Heads of State and Government and diplomats admit that this debate over strategic partnerships was just the beginning of a longer process, not its conclusion. An advisor to Ashton actually recognised that this topic was meant to remain permanently or at least for a long time on the agenda of the High Representative.⁴⁷

In December 2010, Catherine Ashton delivered her first intermediate progress reports on the strategic partnerships – covering the USA, China and Russia, suggesting implicitly yet unsurprisingly that these three partnerships rank higher in EU priorities. These first reports wisely identify common elements to all partnerships while taking into account the specific characteristics of each bilateral relationship.⁴⁸ The reports also seem to confirm that one of the fundamental

44. VAN ROMPUY Herman. 2010. *Remarks by Herman Van Rompuy President of the European Council at the press conference following the meeting of Heads of State or Government* (PCE 188/10). Brussels, 16 September.

45. European Council. 2010. *op. cit.*, p. 9.

46. VAN ROMPUY Herman. 2010. *Invitation letter by President Herman Van Rompuy to the European Council* (PCE 187/10). Brussels, 14 September.

47. Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 13 December 2010.

48. This author had suggested precisely that approach in previous research. RENARD Thomas. 2010. *Strategy wanted: The European Union and strategic partnerships*. Security Policy Brief 13. Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

objectives of the partnerships is the pursuit of “effective multilateralism” and the coordination between the EU and its partners within multilateral organisations.⁴⁹ In general, European diplomats positively welcomed the progress reports. Further reports should extend to additional partners in 2011, notably India, Brazil and South Africa.⁵⁰

The first progress reports furthermore suggest to determine a limited amount of clearly identified priorities and objectives for each partnership: What are the EU objectives? What are our partners’ objectives? What are our shared interests? Existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms (“the architecture of the relationship”) should be used to their maximum, the reports further suggest, and linkages and tradeoffs between complex issues pertaining to different sectors established, not hesitating to put again on the table some taboo topics. For instance, Ashton re-ignited the debate on the Chinese arms embargo, in order to obtain more from China on other issues, even if this initiative seems to have received a no-go from several Member States. Regarding the report on Russia, it suggests to move from two summits per year to only one annual summit (like for other strategic partners) for the sake of coherence and efficiency (two central elements in the new rationale behind strategic partnerships) while making sure that this move is not interpreted by Moscow as hostile.⁵¹

Several questions remain open regarding these first progress reports, nonetheless. For instance: what is the exact role of these documents? Is it foreseen to have one single overall document guiding them all, determining one common method and set of objectives? How to implement these documents concretely? Finally, how to integrate these documents (and eventually the overall one) into a global foreign policy strategy, in other words into a *grand strategy*?

Concerning the second point (reciprocity), it is necessary to point out that this notion appears for the first time in the framework of the strategic partnerships – even if limited to the September 2010 European Council conclusions’ preamble – despite the reluctance of some Member States which preferred less constraining notions such as “mutual benefits”.⁵² Reciprocity is a central theme to the strategic partnerships because short of reciprocity there is simply no partnership.

49. Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 23 December 2010.

50. Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 30 December 2010.

51. RETTMAN Andrew. 2010. “Ashton pragmatic on China in EU foreign policy blueprint”, *EUObserver*, 17 December.

52. Interview with a European diplomat, Paris, 15 September 2010.

Regarding the third point (implementation and follow-up), the strategic partnerships remain for the moment a regular item on the Foreign Affairs Council and meetings are organised under the chairmanship of Catherine Ashton with the RELEX Commissioners (trade, Karel De Gucht; enlargement and neighbourhood, Stefan Füle; development, Andris Pielbags) as well as with the Commissioners for climate (Connie Hedegaard) and energy (Günther Oettinger). Several proposals have also been formulated with a view to ensure a better follow-up of these issues at the political level, for instance by organising an annual European summit around the same time of the year.⁵³

To conclude this section, let us mention two more issues. Firstly, in the months following the September European Council, the EU had a series of important meetings with its strategic partners, notably summits with China, India, Russia and the US, without forgetting the Europe-Asia Meeting (ASEM). Most observers rated the outcome of some of these summits poorly. Evidently, it is too soon to assess the new European strategic approach. Hence, 2011 will become the first official test for the strategic partnerships. Secondly, on 6 October 2010, during the EU-South Korea summit, the EU signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with its Asian counterpart, and the two actors decided to jointly upgrade their relationship to the strategic level.⁵⁴ South Korea has consequently become the tenth strategic partner of the EU.

53. Interview with a European diplomat, Brussels, 30 November 2010.

54. European Council. 2010. *EU-Republic of Korea Summit, Joint Press Statement (14547/10)*, Brussels, 6 October.

4. STRATEGIC OR NOT STRATEGIC? THAT IS THE QUESTION...

On the basis of a review of EU documents, official and informal, as well as a certain amount of interviews with European officials, this author concludes that the EU has today, in 2011, ten strategic partnerships with third countries (see Map): Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States.⁵⁵

Map: The European Union and its strategic partners



We have seen in which order and in which manner these partnerships were established. However, it is not entirely clear what is the exact reasoning behind this list. Some countries (e.g. the US) are considered to be natural partners of the EU, whereas others (e.g. China and Russia) are considered simply too big to ignore. As for the other countries on the list, the *strategic* rationale is far less evident. Their inclusion sometimes seems to be more the result of political and institutional games than of a true strategic reflection.

55. The EU also has five strategic partnerships with two regions and three organisations: Latin America and the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and the Middle East (we should note however that the strategic partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, agreed in 2004, is no longer the reference document in our relationship with that region since we now have other arrangements, such as the Union for the Mediterranean), the UN, the African Union, and NATO. However, the objectives of these partnerships seem different from those with third countries and they should therefore be treated separately. In any case, they will not be addressed in this paper.

The 2008 Communication of the Commission “Towards an EU-Mexico Strategic Partnership”⁵⁶ is the only official document to offer any justification whatsoever for the list of strategic partnerships. It says that Mexico should be upgraded to the status of strategic partner of the EU because it is the last member of the G8+5⁵⁷ left out. Nevertheless, this argument is no longer valid since the announcement of a new strategic partnership with South Korea. Today the EU counts ten strategic partners, perhaps *by accident*, raising questions about their true strategic value and, eventually, opening room for debating our true strategic partners.

This section offers reflections on various dimensions of the existing strategic partnerships in order to identify what actually makes them strategic and what prevents them from being considered as such. The objective of this section is to put our fingers on problems and challenges, in order to produce sound recommendations for the making of true strategic partnerships in the next section.

Are all strategic partnerships similar?

In light of the above list, the first argument is that the ten strategic partnerships are neither identical nor equal.

Not all strategic partnerships are identical. Although all these relationships are qualified a strategic partnership in either formal or informal documents, they did not come into existence in the same way, nor are they at the same stage. On the one hand, the relationships with Canada, Russia, the US and Japan – the established powers – are regulated by just a few core documents and a continuous political dialogue. The EU considers these long-standing relationships to be inherently “strategic” for various reasons and their natural evolution did not require over-formalisation. On the other hand, the EU finds it much more complicated to regulate its relations with Brazil, India, China, South Africa, South Korea and Mexico – the emerging powers – because it had to adapt to the rapid emergence of these newcomers on the global stage. As the relationship did not evolve as naturally as with the previous category of countries, and as bilateral agreements with them were blossoming in every direction following their emergence, the EU granted them a new kind of reward to maintain a comprehensive framework for the relationship and ensure their continued commitment.

56. European Commission. 2008. *Towards an EU-Mexico Strategic Partnership*. *op. cit.*

57. The full members of the G8 are: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The G5, former Outreach 5, is composed of Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa.

Not all strategic partnerships are equal. Strategic partners can be categorised as follows. (1) The essential partner: the strategic partnership with the US seems to be above any other partnership as the transatlantic relationship is certainly no less important for Europe in today's uncertain global environment than it was in the past. This partnership is essential because little can be done without the support of the American superpower. (2) The pivotal partners: our strategic partnership with Russia and China, and to a certain extent with Brazil and India, is more complex but almost as important to cope with contemporary global challenges and achieve core EU foreign policy objectives. These partnerships are pivotal because they can tip the international balance to the benefit or to the detriment of the EU depending on how we approach them. (3) The natural allies: the strategic partnerships with Canada, Japan and South Korea appear less strategic than those with the US or the BRIC countries. However, these countries are not negligible as they are like-minded countries with a significant footprint in international affairs (notably through their presence in the G8 and the G20). (4) The regional partners: Mexico and South Africa are two dwarfs among the strategic partners of the EU although they can bring a certain added value at the regional level (probably more obviously in the case of South Africa than that of Mexico).

To a certain extent the many differences among the ten strategic partners are reflected also in the legal status of the relationship. Indeed, strategic partnerships are political statements or eventually can be seen as “soft law” instruments, but they differ from the legal framework for the bilateral relationship.⁵⁸ A quick overview of the legal frameworks established and under negotiation between the EU and its strategic partners shows a large diversity of frameworks and diverging priorities for each partnership. For instance, whereas all energy is currently directed towards a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia and China, efforts are channelled towards a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the case of India.

Are all these partnerships truly strategic?

Following up on the first argument above, particularly on the observation that not every partner is equal and that some might be inherently more strategic than others (e.g. because of their military strength, economic weight, or geostrategic position), a second argument can be developed: the cooperation of the EU with

58. SAUTENET Antoine. 2011. “EU and emerging powers: strategic partnerships”. In RENARD Thomas, BISCOP Sven (eds). *The coming order: the EU and emerging powers in the 21st century*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

its partners on international strategic issues is limited at best. It would be unrealistic to expect the EU to cooperate with all its partners on every single issue, for various reasons, including that most issues are significant only to some partners and not to others. Moreover, at times, the EU and its partners might have diverging interests, making cooperation difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, there are a certain amount of key international strategic issues on which one could reasonably expect the EU and its partners to develop at least a coordinated approach or, better, a cooperative framework. Yet, this does not always seem to be the case.

Three issues illustrate this well. We have selected these issues because they are considered particularly important from a European perspective while recognising that our choice remains somewhat limitative and arbitrary. The three international strategic issues are: the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), conflict management, and climate change.

WMD proliferation. The EU identified the proliferation of WMD as one of its key security challenges, “potentially the greatest threat to [Europe’s] security”.⁵⁹ In principle, the EU shares this priority with all its strategic partners, some of which are strong advocates of a nuclear-free world. This shared concern is often-times recalled in joint statements on the occasion of bilateral summits, and there even exist established dialogues on these issues with several partners. India appears at first sight as the most problematic partner here in the sense that it has refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) yet it is widely perceived as a “natural partner”⁶⁰ of the EU in dealing with new security challenges, including proliferation, which is regularly discussed bilaterally through the security dialogue.

The more we move away from the level of principle to a more concrete level, however, the more we notice a lack of cooperation between the EU and its partners – and even at times some form of clash. In the Iranian case, for instance, the positions of China and Russia are particularly ambiguous and raise significant concerns in Europe. Indeed, both countries seem reluctant to condemn the Iranian nuclear programme, mainly for economic reasons (e.g. investment, arms deals, or natural resources) whereas Europe is painfully yet unsuccessfully attempting to lead the negotiations. The negative impact of their ambiguous positions on their international image (and what it means for their relationship

59. Council of the European Union. 2003. *A secure Europe in a better world – European Security Strategy*. *op. cit.*, p.3

60. WAGNER Christian. 2008. “The EU and India: a deepening partnership”. In GREVI Giovanni, DE VASCONCELOS Alvaro (eds). *Partnerships for effective multilateralism: EU relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia*. Chaillot Paper 109. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, p. 88.

with Europe) or on long term regional stability does not seem to have sufficient influence to make them switch positions, and Western negotiators seem clueless as to how to involve them more. In the North Korean case, the EU's involvement is very limited, which in itself might be seen as a problem given the high stakes for the region and for global security, not mentioning the fact that half of the EU's strategic partners are involved in the six-party talks.⁶¹ In fact, with the exception of Iran, the EU has little or no impact in most key initiatives related to non-proliferation, such as the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the six-party talks or the Indo-US nuclear deal.

Conflict management. There are a lot of conflicts and crises of all kinds around the globe that need to be solved. Therefore, one could envision a lot of potential for cooperation among strategic partners. Yet, in practice, cooperation remains very limited. Each government sees the world from a different angle and partners can cooperate when they share similar interests, but can also undermine each other's efforts or, worse, face each other across the frontline when their interests clash, hence contributing more to the conflict than to its management. In Georgia, for instance, Europeans found themselves in a direct clash with Russia. Such cases are the most challenging to the concept of strategic partnership. In most cases however, the problem is not so much one of diverging interests but rather one of too little cooperation between the EU and its strategic partners. In Afghanistan, for instance, Europeans have been asking for more active support from China, India and Russia, notably in the civilian field of operations, e.g. related to police training or capacity-building. The reasons behind the lack of cooperation can be manifold (including the result of a strategic decision by some partners to engulf the EU and the US in strategic deadlocks while they can themselves focus freely on other strategic interests) but their constant occurrence is surely a sign of the weakness of the strategic partnership. There are finally other cases in which the EU is cooperating successfully – although to a limited degree – with several of its partners. Yet this cooperation might at times hide another problem, which is that such cooperation can possibly trigger concerns among some partners. In the Gulf of Aden, for instance, the EU is cooperating with several partners (including China, India and Japan) in counter-piracy operations, although an indirect consequence of these operations are the rising concerns in Asia (but also among some in Europe and in the US) that China is using these operations to develop its blue-water Navy, hence destabilising the regional (and global) security order.

Another manner to assess how the EU cooperates with its partners in conflict management is to look at UN peacekeeping operations, where they regularly

61. In addition to North Korea, the other parties are: China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the US.

have the possibility to work constructively together in the UN framework (see Table 1). In Lebanon, for instance, Europeans (5050) work alongside Indians (899), South Koreans (369) and Chinese (344) in the UNIFIL mission. Yet the level of involvement with UN peacekeeping operations varies from one partner to another and barely reflects any form of strategic partnership. In terms of staff, for instance, India is the biggest contributor, whereas China and Brazil have significantly increased their contributions in recent years but not yet to similar levels. European Member States contribute a big chunk as well, with over 7000 men and women. On the other hand, countries like Japan, Mexico, Russia or the US contribute little to UN peacekeeping operations staff. In terms of financial contributions to the operations, it is a different story. Europe tops the chart, covering over 40% of the total budget, and the US almost 30%. Japan is another important financial contributor, although its contribution to the total budget in relative terms diminished by over 35% over the last six years. All the other partners are very small contributors, China covering for instance less than 4% of the total budget and India 0.1%. As the EU and all its partners recognise the legitimacy of the UN, one would expect that a true strategic partnership would translate into greater cooperation and involvement in peacekeeping operations yet practice shows otherwise.

Climate change. The EU identified climate change as a global challenge and as a “threat multiplier”.⁶² However, the sense of urgency that is very palpable in Europe is not shared by all our partners. Russia, for instance, does not seem particularly concerned with the consequences of climate change.⁶³ The same could be said about India or China. The Copenhagen conference was a very good illustration of how the EU can be sidelined by its own partners in international negotiations of strategic importance to the EU, as the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) decided to negotiate a separate deal with the US, keeping the Europeans outside the negotiation room. What was maybe the most remarkable in Copenhagen was that the EU seemed unable to reach out to its strategic partners, despite the fact that – for once – the EU was carrying a single message.⁶⁴ This again raises questions regarding the strategic nature of the strategic partnerships.

62. Council of the European Union. 2008. *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy – Providing Security in a Changing World*. Brussels, p. 5.

63. FISCHER Sabine. 2008. “The EU and Russia: a contested partnership”. In GREVI Giovanni, DE VASCONCELOS Alvaro (eds). *op. cit.*, pp. 128-130.

64. RENARD Thomas. 2010. “Le syndrome de Copenhague”. *op. cit.*

Table 1: Contributions of the EU and its strategic partners to UN peacekeeping operations

	Financial contribution to DPKO in percentage of total (2004)	Personnel contribution to DPKO operations (Dec 2004)	Financial contribution to DPKO in percentage of total (2007)	Personnel contribution to DPKO operations (Dec 2007)	Financial contribution to DPKO in percentage of total (2010)	Personnel contribution to DPKO operations (Dec 2010)
EU	38,5525	4.618	40,5723	11.066	40,7172	6.660
Brazil	0,3046	1.367	0,1752	1.278	0,3222	2.267
Canada	2,813	314	2,977	149	3,207	198
China	2,4907	1.036	3,1624	1.824	3,939	2.039
India	0,0842	3.912	0,09	9.357	0,1068	8.691
Japan	19,468	30	16,624	38	12,53	266
Mexico	0,3766	0	0,4514	0	0,4712	0
Russia	1,3345	361	1,4229	293	1,9788	258
South Africa	0,0584	2.331	0,058	1.296	0,077	2.187
South Korea	1,5086	41	1,9557	401	2,26	633
USA	26,6901	429	26,0864	316	27,1743	87

Source: www.un.org



Are these partnerships designed strategically?

A third argument that needs to be developed here is that the strategic partnership status has little impact on the structural arrangements of the relationship and on the EU institutional set-up. In fact, interviews with staff members of the European Commission revealed that people dealing with the strategic partners were sometimes barely aware that “their” country was a strategic partner and in most cases had no clear idea of what a strategic partnership is and what it means concretely. Most interviewees also had difficulties to identify significant differences between dealing with a strategic partner or a non-strategic partner country in their daily routine.⁶⁵ According to one respondent, however, a strategic partnership introduced more dynamism internally (more dialogue among EU institutions) and bilaterally (more intense and diversified exchanges).⁶⁶

Bilateral structural arrangements. It could reasonably be expected that the establishment of a strategic partnership with a third country would have an impact on the scope and the depth of bilateral structural arrangements. Yet, reality proves otherwise. For instance, we have a bilateral summit with all our strategic partners, but this alone does not seem to be a consequence of having a strategic partnership, as the EU had regular summits with South Korea before the relationship was upgraded and as Brussels also has established regular summits with Pakistan and Ukraine which are not (yet) strategic partners. Moreover, whereas the EU holds a summit with each partner, the pace can vary from bianual (Russia) to annual (Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, South Africa, South Korea and the US) to biennial (Mexico).

An overview of the political and sectoral dialogues between the EU and its strategic partners shows the gap that still exists in the diversity and intensity of dialogues from one partner to another (see Table 2). For instance, the EU rightly has more dialogues with the US and China than with other partners, covering a broad spectrum of issues, whereas the underdevelopment of dialogues with other partners (e.g. Russia) seems less comprehensible. Of course, it is not only the amount and the scope of the dialogues that should be assessed but it is also their effectiveness which should guide their future development. However, the under-development of dialogues with some partners raises some questions regarding the strategic nature of the partnership.

65. Interviews with staff members of the European Commission conducted in Brussels between 4 June 2010 and 7 July 2010.

66. Interview with a staff member of the European Commission, Brussels, 24 June 2010.

Furthermore, in a strategic partnership, one would correctly expect that dialogues cover the broad spectrum of bilateral, regional and global issues. However, with various partners, some issues remain entirely unaddressed (at least within the framework of established dialogues) or under-addressed. More importantly, several partnerships have no established political and strategic dialogues, whereas there is no sectoral dialogue covering security and defence with most partners (except for the US, Canada, China, and India). In these conditions, it is difficult to qualify those partnerships as truly strategic.

Institutional set-up. It is striking so far that the strategic partnerships have had no impact on the institutional organisation of the EU, more particularly on the structure and composition of the EEAS. For instance, in the current organisation chart,⁶⁷ there is no person in charge of strategic partnerships (together or separately), although it was whispered that the strategic planning cell could partly address these questions.⁶⁸ One could expect that some counsellors could partly address these questions, but as these counsellors are not clearly established in the hierarchy, their influence will pretty much depend upon their personal aura. The lack of importance and visibility given to the strategic partnerships in the EEAS organigramme is another sign of the lack of concrete follow-up on the establishment of strategic partnerships. The unfortunate result will likely be continuous problems of coordination and cooperation among different services of the EEAS (e.g. in following a coherent strategy with all partners), among different EU institutions (e.g. ensuring a coordinate approach with relevant Commission DGs, such as DG Trade or DG Dev, and other relevant bodies), and between the EU and its Member States (e.g. a link between the EEAS and the national Ministries of Foreign Affairs), not mentioning coordination and cooperation with the partner itself. This absence of coordination mechanisms will only make it harder – if not impossible – to develop a truly strategic approach towards our partners.

An overview of the EU delegations in strategic partner countries confirms the general absence of logical institutional reform following the establishment of a strategic partnership (see Table 3). For instance, all delegations with no exception remain critically understaffed (particularly in comparison to the Member States' local embassies) despite the strategic importance of these countries and the new functions devolved to the delegations following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty (e.g. the role of coordination and information-sharing among the 27 embassies previously done by the rotating presidency), which would nor-

67. Official organization chart as of 23 February 2011, <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/background/docs/eeas_organisation_en.pdf>

68. Interview with a member of the Cabinet of Catherine Ashton, Brussels, 11 February 2011.

Table 2: Overview of the EU Summits, Political & Strategic Dialogues, and Sectoral Dialogues with its strategic partners (March 2011)

	Summit	Political & Strategic dialogues	SD Agriculture & Fisheries	SD Culture, Education & Media	SD Development & Human Rights	SD Environment, Energy & Nuclear Affairs	SD Health, Social Policies & Migration	SD Science, Technology & Space	SD Security & Defence	SD Trade, Economy & Finance	SD Transport & Tourism	Other Sectoral Dialogues	Total Sectoral Dialogues	Total
Brazil	1	1	-	3	2	3	2	2	-	4	2	2	20	22
Canada	1	5	3 (1)	1	1	4 (2)	1	2	15 (1)	4	2	2	35	41
China	1	6	1	3	3 (2)	5	5	3	2 (2)	14	6	7 (1)	49	56
India	1	4	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	11 (1)	-	2	29	34
Japan	1	-	-	1	1	2 (1)	2 (1)	1	-	8 (3)	2	2	19	20
Mexico	0.5 (biennial)	-	-	2	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	5	5.5
Russia	2 (biannual)	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	-	8	1	1	21	26
South Africa	1	-	-	1	2	2	3	3	-	1	1	2	15	16
South Korea	1	-	1	-	-	1	2	3	-	13	-	-	20	21
USA	1	6	2 (1)	2	4 (1)	7 (3)	9 (1)	2	19 (2)	7 (2)	3	1	56	63

(In brackets) the amount of High Level Sectoral Dialogues within the stated number of Dialogues

Source: Figures collected by this author



mally require significantly more human and financial resources, whereas delegations have so far maintained their pre-Lisbon size. Even in the current format, there are incomprehensible discrepancies among the ten delegations as their size varies from less than 20 (South Korea and Canada) to over 100 (Russia and China). Furthermore, being now relabelled “EU delegations” instead of “delegations of the European Commission”, the composition of these delegations could and should have significantly changed, opening more space for diplomatic and security staff (e.g. a military attaché) in line with the new competences and responsibilities of the delegations. One could even argue that some responsibilities of the national embassies could be transferred to the EU delegations in the future, provided it comes with staff and money, hence facilitating budget cuts in most or all Member States’ foreign services (which they will do anyway).⁶⁹

The half-hearted implementation of the Lisbon Treaty so far has led to the daunting task for EU delegations to do more with the same, unsurprisingly resulting in dissatisfaction from most Member States and from many third countries, including some strategic partners. As a result, foreign capitals increasingly turn directly towards the national embassies, mainly from the big Member States, hence sowing the seeds of more fragmentation, contrary to the initial goal of the Treaty.

Table 3: Staffing of EU delegations in strategic partner countries (as of March 2011)

	Brazil	Canada	China	India	Japan	Mexico	Russia	South Africa	South Korea	USA
EU staff	21	5	70	44	15	23	65	25	7	36
Local staff	29	13	40	51	35	15	65	40	10	49
Total staff in EU delegation	50	18	110	95	50	38	130	65	17	85

Source: Figures collected by this author

69. EMERSON Michael, BALFOUR Rosa, CORTHOUT Tim, KACZYNSKI Piotr, RENARD Thomas, WOUTERS Jan. 2011. *Upgrading the EU’s Role as Global Actor: Institutions, Law and the Restructuring of European Diplomacy*. Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies.

Is the EU a strategic partner?

A final argument developed here is that the EU is often perceived as the weak end of the strategic partnerships. Indeed, looking at the world from Washington, Beijing, New Delhi, or Moscow, the strategic value of the EU can be questioned in light of its discrete profile on many issues of prime strategic importance, including for Europe (think for instance about the current popular uprisings in the Arab world). As a matter of fact, several strategic partners have proven better at dividing Europe than at acting strategically alongside Europe to tackle global challenges.⁷⁰ To be frank, Europeans have very often rendered their task easy.

Giovanni Grevi lists some of the reasons to explain why the EU is not seen as a strategic partner: “Strategic partnerships require unity of purpose, focus, sometimes hard bargaining, a flexible negotiating posture and always political authority. It is fair to say that today’s pivotal countries, whether established or rising powers, question whether the EU is endowed with these attributes, except on some trade issues.”⁷¹

Digging further into some of these reasons, we deem the lack of coordination between the EU and its Member States one of the biggest constraints on the EU’s strategic actorness. Member States, particularly big ones, will maintain for a long time some form of national preferences in terms of foreign policy, but hopefully further developments of a truly *common* CFSP will narrow the gaps and tensions between national interests. One of the key objectives of the EU today is to push the CFSP forward by injecting small doses of rationality, good sense and coordination at the core of European foreign policies, in order to make the EU a more credible and perhaps more powerful actor. An EU speaking with one voice is unrealistic in the short to medium term, at least as a generalised practice, but it remains an ideal we must strive for in the long term. An EU bearing a single message, on the other hand, seems more realistic in the short term and is already a general practice in less sensitive issues. Whether this single message is the right one or not is yet another issue.

Another major reason for the EU not to be considered as a strategic partner by its counterparts is that it is an unpredictable actor due to its lack of grand strategy, as was already alluded to above. If the EU is unable to identify its interests

70. See for instance FOX John, GODEMENT François. 2009. *A power audit of EU-China relations*. Policy Report. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.

71. GREVI Giovanni. 2010. *Making EU strategic partnerships effective*. Working Paper 105. Madrid: FRIDE, p. 8.

and its values and articulate them coherently in a strategy, then strategic partnerships are simply meaningless and useless to both parties.

In a broader perspective, the challenge for the EU is to be considered as a strategic partner, a notion with clear *realpolitik* resonance, while promoting a Kantian vision of the world through its so-called normative power.⁷² There is an inherent tension within the EU between modernist and postmodernist visions of the world⁷³ leading to ambiguous rhetoric and hybrid foreign policy, and always resulting in confusion. This tension in itself is not a problem; the source of the problem lies in our fundamental incapacity to channel this tension into a coherent and constructive global vision.

72. LAÏDI Zaki. 2005. *La norme sans la force: L'énigme de la puissance européenne*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.

73. COOPER Robert. 2003. *The breaking of nations: Order and chaos in the twenty-first century*. London: Atlantic Press.

5. “WE HAVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS, NOW WE NEED A STRATEGY”

Strategic partnerships are only strategic in name, for now. A historical overview of documents and debates shows the total absence of strategic rationale behind the elaboration of strategic partnerships since the very beginning, with no definition of the concept or of its fundamental objectives, and an ad hoc selection of partners. This process of a-strategic thinking led to a repetition of past failures as the EU is now facing similar problems as it was ten years ago with the Common Strategies, from which the partnerships derived, namely the difficulty to turn rhetoric into concrete policies of strategic value vis-à-vis our partners. A set of interviews with EU officials and European diplomats confirmed that strategic partnerships are to this day empty of any substance. As the previous section of this paper demonstrated, strategic partnerships are not so strategic when looked at up-close for a variety of reasons, including that 1) not every partner is equally strategic; 2) the EU is not cooperating with its partners on most truly strategic issues; 3) the strategic partnership has no structural or institutional impact on the relationship; 4) or, finally, the EU itself is simply not considered a strategic partner in many cases. As some other authors have observed: “The use of the label ‘strategic partnership’ in fact functions as a rhetorical façade which masks the reality that the EU has failed to transform the relations” with other global powers into strategic partnerships.⁷⁴

This comes as no surprise for regular observers of EU foreign policy, as strategic partnerships simply follow the general pattern of a systematic lack of strategic approach in international affairs, which has been highlighted for many years by various scholars.⁷⁵ More broadly, strategic partnerships enter the long European tradition of ‘strategic hyperbole’ consisting in the adoption of strategies on anything and everything – and thus nothing. There are, for instance, strategies on external security, internal security, terrorism, WMD proliferation, neighbourhood, rare materials, growth, etc. Through the adoption of all these documents, the EU flatters itself with the image of a global power active on every front, but the EU is in fact generally unable to maintain the illusion for long. Worse: through the adoption of these strategies, the EU increases expectations from other global actors, which can thereafter only be disappointed by the lack of European commitment. This risk now seems to materialise: indeed, the fact that

74. KEUKELEIRE Stephan, BRUYNINCKX Hans. 2011. “The European Union, the BRICs, and the emerging new world order”. In HILL Christopher, SMITH Michael. *International Relations and the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 389.

75. BISCOP Sven, ANDERSSON Jan Joel (eds). *op. cit.*; HILL Christopher, SMITH Michael. 2011. *International Relations and the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; TOJE Asle. 2010. *The European Union as a small power: After the post-Cold War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

these strategic openings have been created has now generated expectations on the part of established and emerging powers that may once more find themselves disappointed by the lack of (re-)action on the European side. The consequences of this *désenchantement* could be absolutely dramatic, as Europe's marginalisation in the increasingly multipolar order will only grow.

Although strategic thinking was absent, the reasons to establish strategic partnerships were present and sensible. First, the partnerships started to take shape with the 2003 ESS, that is to say after the invasion of Iraq – a jolt to Europeans who realised that the transatlantic alliance cannot tackle and solve all global challenges, in view of our potential strategic dissensions. In this context, the EU needed to reaffirm the importance of the transatlantic relationship, while opening the possibility of new strategic partnerships with rising powers. Second and related to the first, in the context of rising multipolarity and interdependence, the EU needed to address the emergence of new powers in order to ensure their commitment to solving today's challenges, and to deepen and strengthen our partnership today in order to better address tomorrow's challenges. Third, strategic partnerships were a reaction to the failure of the EU's interregional and multilateral approach of international affairs, as well as to the frustrations arising from the stagnation of bilateral relations with emerging powers. The partnerships then appeared as an alternative to reinvigorate European diplomacy in an international context of return to *realpolitik* in which bilateral approaches seem to dominate international relations, even in multilateral forums. Finally, strategic partnerships constitute an attempt to assert the growing importance of the EU over the national diplomacies of the Member States, not least because according to the Lisbon Treaty, the EU now has the tools and legitimacy to act in the name of Europe vis-à-vis third countries.

These four reasons were certainly compelling enough to launch strategic partnerships, and they remain more relevant than ever. Having this in mind, the demise of the concept is simply neither desirable nor recommendable, although strategic partnerships should certainly be reviewed. Herman Van Rompuy understood this and translated it into a catchy yet right-on quote: "We have strategic partnerships, now we need a strategy."⁷⁶ This author would add: we need a grand strategy for the EU to identify our interests *and* a (sub-)strategy for the strategic partnerships to pursue them strategically.

The concept of strategic partnership re-emerged in Brussels circles under the impulse of Herman Van Rompuy, first in a speech, then calling on the input of

76. VAN ROMPUY Herman. 2010. *We have strategic partnerships, now we need a strategy*. Message video from Herman Van Rompuy, 14 September. <<http://vloghvr.consilium.europa.eu/?p=2377>>

Member States via an extraordinary European Council dedicated to this issue in September 2010, making it one of the top priorities of the EU foreign policy agenda. It should come as no surprise that this debate was revived by an EU figure (moreover, one from a small pro-European Member State), given the reluctance of most Member States (particularly big ones) to significantly empower the EU in matters related to foreign policy, especially when dealing with great powers. In fact, the importance of the Lisbon Treaty to the revival of this debate cannot be underscored sufficiently: 1) the Lisbon Treaty offers a legal framework to the strategic partnerships in its Article 21 (“the Union shall seek to develop relations and build *partnerships with third countries*, and international, regional or global organisations which share the principles referred to in the first subparagraph”) and Article 22 (“on the basis of the principles and objectives set out in Article 21, the European Council shall identify the *strategic interests and objectives of the Union*”); 2) the Lisbon Treaty offered new opportunities to the EU in terms of foreign policy, notably via the creation of the EEAS and via greater interaction among various dimensions of foreign policy (e.g. diplomacy, development, trade, finance, energy or climate change); and 3) the creation and designation of two new positions according to the Lisbon Treaty (President of the European Council and High Representative) who were favourable to a revival of this debate.

The re-emergence of the concept of strategic partnership is positive, and the conclusions of the September 2010 European Council indicate that there is some willingness to put substance into it. Now, EU observers will look at the progress reports coming from Catherine Ashton and at the bilateral summits with the EU’s strategic partners, to assess progress on the strategic partnerships. Events in the Arab world – as important as they are – should not distract the EU from its vital long-term strategic interest: secure a relevant status in the coming multipolar environment dominated by great powers.

This paper welcomes the revival of a debate on strategic partnerships, and it argues that it should be pushed even further. In a world ever less centred on European interests, the EU and its Member States must develop a more innovative and effective diplomacy vis-à-vis established and emerging powers. However, as it was emphasised throughout this paper, the strategic nature of the partnerships and of the EU itself is largely questioned. To come back to the opening quote of this paper, it is “the attempt and not the deed [that] confounds us”. The high rhetoric of the strategic partnerships (the “treachery” as the title of this paper has it) is confounding the EU’s partners and the EU. It is now time to take action for establishing true strategic partnerships and make them work.

Some recommendations

The EU needs to turn (some of) its existing strategic partnerships into true strategic partnerships. To do that, the EU and its Member States need to develop a strategic approach to international relations, and more particularly to their relations with great and emerging powers. Internally, the development of this strategic approach entails the revival of a debate on EU strategic interests, a review of the EU institutional set-up, a restructuring of its diplomacy, and the establishment of coordination mechanisms within the EU and between the EU and its Member States. Bilaterally, a strategic approach would be visible notably through increased dialogue between the EU and its partners – rather than the often observed cross-monologues when both parties speak but do not listen to each other – as well as through increased cooperation on a broad spectrum of issues, including on strategic questions of relevance to both actors as this dimension is still mostly missing to this day. Finally, the EU ought to reconcile its bilateral approach to strategic partnerships with its more traditional multilateral approach to international relations and its fundamental objective – as stated in the 2003 ESS – to promote effective multilateralism globally.

To make the recommendations as clear and readable as possible, they are written down in a table, distinguishing recommendations for the short term (5 years framework) and recommendations for the medium term (10 years framework).

EU Institutional set-up	A- Short term (5 years)	B- Medium term (10 years)
	<p>A1- Identify clearly who will be in charge of the strategic partnerships in the EEAS. One person could be in charge of supervising all strategic partnerships (preferably in the Corporate Board) whereas a dedicated point of contact will be necessary in each bilateral desk. A 'focal' point for each strategic partner should be appointed.^a The role of this 'focal' point should be to ensure connection between the EEAS and the various relevant DGs (e.g. Trade, ECFIN, Climate, Energy, etc), the 27 national governments, and the EU delegation in the third country.</p> <p>A2- Create a cell dedicated to strategic partnerships within the EEAS ensuring coherence of vision and practice among all strategic partnerships. In this dedicated cell featuring high in the hierarchy, the head should provide the High Representative with the broad picture of the evolution of the strategic partnerships, informed by the work of regional officers. The 'focal' points created within each desk could meet regularly within the cell to make coordination as effective as possible.</p> <p>A3- The EU delegations located in strategic partners should be fully developed in terms of size and composition to reflect the strategic character of the relationship. The staff in the political sections should be increased. EU military attachés (from the EUMS) should be designated to establish contacts with our strategic partners and increase the possibility of civil-military cooperation in the framework of CSDP operations. The staff of the delegations should also include a greater amount of specialists of key issues relevant to the bilateral relationship (e.g. energy in the case of Russia) as well as specialists of the local culture and history.</p> <p>A4- Provided it receives the necessary staff and resources, the EU delegations need to rapidly develop their diplomatic weight and ensure the necessary tasks (e.g. information sharing, intelligence gathering) to put the EU delegations at the centre of the relationship with our strategic partners, rather than at its margins.</p>	<p>B1- The EU delegations located in strategic partners should be upgraded in line with their new competences and responsibilities. They should receive more staff, particularly in the political section and in sections of particular relevance to the bilateral relationship (e.g. energy in the case of Russia) which should be related to an increase of resources for the EU delegations, although this increase is likely to remain limited in the short term. Some of these resources could come from the Member States, in the perspective of a broad rationalisation of diplomatic and consular activities due to budget constraints, with a transfer of tasks and resources from the national to the European level, resulting in massive savings for Member States.^b</p> <p>B2- The EU should take all necessary measures to create an EU diplomatic culture more assertive and interest-oriented.</p>

	A- Short term (5 years)	B- Medium term (10 years)
<p>EU internal arrangements</p>	<p>A5- Continue the reflections on strategic partnerships within the EU and in cooperation with the Member States, eventually leading to one global strategy vis-à-vis our strategic partners (i.e. in the form a single document). In the next steps, the reflection will have to narrow and broaden at the same time:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) narrow the key lessons and recommendations to each partnership; 2) broaden the debate to link to discussions on EU strategic interests worldwide, i.e. debates on a new ESS worth the name (a true EU <i>grand strategy</i>). <p>A6- Increase the coordination of policies among Member States vis-à-vis EU strategic partners in order to avoid as much as possible a clashing of national approaches, particularly in key issues to the EU. The role of the 'focal' points (see recommendation A1) should be particularly important in this endeavour, but discussions within other forums should also address this problem (e.g. PSC meetings, Foreign Affairs Council, European Council). The EU and its 27 Member States carrying one single message vis-à-vis our partners should be a daily objective, whereas a negative objective would be to avoid overt clashes on key issues through a better communication of respective positions within the EU and an effective search for compromise.</p> <p>A7- Increase the EU coordination with its strategic partners, notably via an enhanced role for EU delegations (see recommendations A3 & A4), but also via a rethinking of the architecture of each relationship with specific attention to the development of effective as well as comprehensive strategic and sectoral dialogues. Bilateral mechanisms can be created to mediate in case of conflict between the EU and its partners.</p> <p>A8- Beyond coordination and conflict mediation, the EU should be looking for cooperation with its partners on a case-by-case basis in order to create a <i>culture of cooperation</i>. This cooperation can start on benign issues related yet at the margins of strategic interests and therefore create a spill-over dynamic to key strategic issues.</p> <p>A9- We should massively invest in efforts to bring European society closer to the societies of our strategic partners. A truly strategic partnership implies the building of bridges and the tearing down of walls between our communities. What makes a partnership truly strategic is not so much common interests (in this regard, even our partnership with the US is not strategic) but instead mutual understanding and, in time, a common understanding of the world. Bridges can take the form of parliamentary exchanges, civil society dialogues, education exchange programmes or cultural events.</p>	<p>B3- Review the strategic approach to our partnerships on a regular basis, to assess their implementation, notably via follow-up mechanisms. Conduct a thorough review of the strategic partnerships every five years (or at least on a regular basis), in order to ensure that the strategy is up-to-date in a rapidly changing environment.</p> <p>B4- The EU should strive for the practice of a single voice policy, at minimum in issues of exclusive competence to the EU, but slowly extending the practice to the domain of shared competences on key issues where a European consensus has emerged, in order to allow the EU to pull its full diplomatic weight. A single message, however, is likely to remain the most common practice.</p> <p>B5- The EU should strive for cooperation with its partners on core strategic issues, using coordination and conflict mediation mechanisms as a basis yet increasingly moving towards cooperation, when deemed necessary.</p> <p>B6- Cooperation should extend to core strategic issues.</p>
<p>Bilateral arrangements</p>		



	A- Short term (5 years)	B- Medium term (10 years)
<p>Multilateral arrangements</p>	<p>A10- Similarly to recommendation A6, the EU should boost coordination and conflict mediation mechanisms with its strategic partners within multilateral forums, in order to pursue common objectives, or at least to avoid unnecessary public clashes which are detrimental to the global image of the relationship and of multilateralism.</p> <p>A11- The EU should establish a meta-dialogue on multilateralism with its strategic partners in order to compare perceptions of the multilateral architecture with a view on a necessary reform of global governance.</p>	<p>B7- The EU should work towards more cooperation within multilateral frameworks, in order to reconcile the bilateral approach of strategic partnerships with the EU preference for effective multilateralism.</p> <p>B8- A meta-dialogue on multilateralism could lead to a sort of <i>grand bargain</i> between an over-represented Europe and under-represented emerging powers to reform global governance structures. This grand bargain should be compensated on the European side by a rationalisation of the EU representation and status within international organisations and negotiations, in line with its competences.^c</p>

a. Grievy Giovanni. 2010. *op. cit.*

b. Emerson Michael et al. *op. cit.*

c. *Ibid.*

