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Anne Schmidt

Strategic Partnerships – a contested policy concept

A review of recent publications

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Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Phone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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Introduction

Already in 2003 the European Security Strategy (ESS) recommended complementing the then relationships with the USA and Russia by developing “strategic partnerships, with Japan, China, Canada and India as well as with all those who share our goals and values, and are prepared to act in their support.” Initially, this simply meant upgrading existing relations with the chosen countries which had previously been based on a form of European Community co-operation agreements. The 2008 ESS implementation report further singled out Brazil, South Africa and the inter-regional relationships between the EU and Latin America, Africa, ASEAN, SAARC and Central Asia. Under van Rompuy’s aegis, the European Council’s September summit aimed to clarify the EU’s relations with these countries and drew up guiding principles for the future of the strategic partnership format. This is deemed necessary due to the rise of other global powers and the changed geopolitical landscape. Analysts perceive a mismatch between the EU’s ambition to be a strategic actor and its actual capabilities and instruments. In the present review of recent publications on the issue, it becomes clear that the partnerships lack a clear sense of strategic purpose. As a result, their makeup has been determined far more by existing relationships and sectoral concerns. Yet, this review also identifies various constructive suggestions by which the bilateral partnership format could be used to achieve the stated goal of effective multilateralism as well as reconciling the EU’s broad normative concerns with its narrower interests. At the heart of these suggestions is the precondition that the EU itself develop into a strategic actor.

The following paper takes a deeper look into the debate on “strategic partnerships” and tries to answer the following questions: What are the goals of this initiative? Are the partnerships a fitting concept with which to pursue them? Have the choice of partners and the substance of the arrangements been conducive to success? And what is the future of the strategic partnerships?

“Strategic partnerships” – a concept searching for a meaning?

Ahead of the summit, the main complaint amongst analysts is unsurprising: The EU itself does not provide a clear definition of what it means by “strategic partnerships”. It states only what it wants to achieve with them. With the strategic partnerships, the EU aims to jointly promote effective multilateralism in pursuit of common challenges. More concretely, it wishes to “actively seek common ground on issues of mutual interest, support each other’s political agendas and take joint political action at regional [...] or global level”.ⁱ What these issues of mutual interest consist of will differ from partnership to partnership. For India they would include the situation in Afghanistan and global stability; energy security, climate change and the protection of the environment in the case of China; crisis management and regional integration with Africa; counter-terrorism with the US; energy and frozen conflicts with Russia as well as the Iran nuclear issue and lasting stability in the EU’s neighbourhood which is mentioned with regard to more than one partner.

A small number of researchers view the lack of conceptual clarity in the partnerships as unproblematic. **Giovanni Grevi** (EU-ISS) argues that it might even be an advantage, since a certain degree of flexibility and constructive ambiguity is indispensable for a concept such as this. In the absence of a uniform conceptual straightjacket, there is room for mutual adjustments, concessions, trade-offs, pragmatism and an incremental approach. For Grevi, the strategic nature of the EU’s partnerships with emerging countries lies in the way they allow the EU to pursue its goals and spread its norms at the international level.

Sven Biscop and **Thomas Renard** (EGMONT), by contrast, speak for the mainstream when they criticise the fact that strategic partnerships have been viewed and interpreted in different ways in the EU and abroad. In the words of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, for example, “cooperation in a strategic partnership should be long-term and stable, transcending both differences and ideology and social systems and the impact of individual events. Furthermore, it should take place on an equal footing and be mutually beneficial”.ⁱⁱ Whereas various actors may agree with Jiabao, the differences occur when it comes to diverging perceptions and conflicts of interest as regards the concrete handling of common challenges. In the view of Renard and Biscop, the lack of substantial clarity risks overstressing the concept and creating confusion within the EU and abroad - not least when it is used in a fashionable and empty way. And this is a very real danger. The name “strategic partnership” is after all flattering for all concerned – who would not want to be considered a strategic and coveted actor?

Other analysts worry that the name “Strategic Partnerships” creates expectations that are not fulfilled. **Günther Maihold** (SWP) looks at both the meaning of “partnership” and “strategy”. “Partnership” is a cultural ideal for the joint shape of a relationship. Simply by its choice of name, the concept includes assumptions of equal rights and tasks and the possibility of constructively discussing the joint development of the relationship. With partnership, there also comes an expectation of exclusivity. The word “strategy” should not be used lightly either. Like the economic concept of “strategic alliances”, it relies on cooperation between (economic) actors agreeing to produce something jointly in order to realise common goals. Thereby, the existing competition between them will be suspended at least partially. Cooperation then means a common advantage and success. **Annegret Bendiek** and **Heinz Kramer** (SWP) further clarify the background of the concept “strategy”

rooting it in military usage and in domestic politics such as election campaign strategies. This sets the bar high for the EU. In their perspective, strategy can be viewed as “a well-planned pursuit of a clearly-defined long-term goal or as a planned realization of a certain long-term interest” which has precisely defined objectives, timeframes and action plans.

Authors such as **Biscop/Renard** argue that the role of the partnerships in the context of promoting effective multilateralism remains unclear. In their view, the strategic partnerships could only act as instruments for the promotion of effective multilateralism when preceded by an assessment of the EU’s interests in each of the regions followed by an identification of shared interests. This has not occurred. **Alvaro de Vasconcelos et al.** (EU-ISS) draw attention to the inherent tension between this multilateral objective and the bilateral approach of strategic partnerships. Still, with the strategic partnerships’ ambition to go beyond bilateralism by agreeing on how to cope with joint global challenges at different levels, including multilaterally, this format, in their view, can still be seen as conducive to the goal of effective multilateralism. In that sense the EU also aimed at a common understanding of shared global responsibility among the different strategic actors for global peace and security. What however worries them is the fact that some of the EU’s partners had different understandings of multilateralism than the EU. Thus, in China’s, Russia’s and India’s definition, multilateralism meant a way of balancing power rather than of global governance - something which would question the principle of non-interference.

Bendiek/Kramer stress the uncertainties with regard to the relationship between bilateral “strategic partnerships” and the EU’s inter-regional “strategies” (e.g. between EU-Brazil and EU-MERCOSUR or EU-China, EU-India and EU-ASEAN, ASEM etc.) which in the past had already led to rivalries. The authors question whether the EU, which has in the past been a strong supporter of regional integration throughout the world, would not send ambiguous signals to its regional counterparts by agreeing strategic partnerships with selected leading countries.

Partners and policy contents – the cart before the horse?

If the partnerships really were norm-based instruments, implemented in pursuit of effective multilateralism, this would presumably determine the choice of partner. And it is indeed the case that, according to the ESS, the EU will conclude strategic partnerships with “all those who share our goals and values and are prepared to act in their support”. In EU-Mexico relations the EU has “the same commitment to the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and to an effective multilateral system” as Mexico. And with Africa there is a “consensus on values, common interests and common strategic objectives” as well as a commitment to an “equal” partnership.

Yet, the strategic partnerships with other countries illustrate that norms are not definitive when it comes to the choice of partner. For Russia and India the ESS mentions “common interests”. And according to the EU-China strategic partnership document the EU’s relationship with China should be “balanced, reciprocal and mutually beneficial”. Van Rompuy is frank about the significance of mutual interests in the choice of partners. For him, “[the EU’s] strategic partnerships have to be based on a balance of mutual advantages

and commitments”. In his view, the “benefits from the networks of globalisation must be accompanied by a sense of responsible ownership and investment into their functioning”.ⁱⁱⁱ

As **Biscop/Renard** point out, there are few established criteria in the choice of partners beyond the abovementioned principle-sharing (as set out in Art. 22 of the Lisbon Treaty). Partners must, however, have the capacity to exert a significant influence on global issues or a region. They rightly ask if Mexico and South Africa can be put on an identical level with China, Russia and the US? For Biscop/Renard there are two kinds of partners: Russia, India, China and the US for comprehensive co-operation and the others (Brazil, Mexico, South Africa) for limited cooperation.

Bendiek/Kramer highlight the ill-effects of path dependency when it comes to the choice of partner. They find that “it generally holds that the older and more consolidated the cooperative trade and development relations between the EU (and its respective member states) and its partners are, the more difficult it is for the EU-27 to give fundamentally new directions or priorities to these existing relations when they are rhetorically upgraded to the “strategic” level”.

Jörg Husar, Günther Maihold, Stefan Mair and Pia Niedermeier (SWP) worry instead that the decision, de facto, to single out global and regional powers for the partnerships will lead to a circle of potential strategic partners which differ immensely as regards their individual values, risk perceptions, interests, goals and historical experiences. Applying the task of identifying potential partners to the specific German case, they define three criteria: 1) interest convergence; 2) the partners’ capacity to conduct foreign policy; 3) countries where Germany has a comparative locational advantage. The authors, however, stress limitations to these criteria with regard to concluding bilateral partnerships. These include, first, a potential clash with the country’s obligations to NATO, the UN and the OSCE; second, the capacity of the potential partner for a strategic coalition or indeed to perceive itself as a leading power; and third, the costs and benefits of co-operation.

Judged against their own criteria, the analysts doubt whether all the EU’s chosen partners are worthy of the attention. For EU-Canada relations **Anthony Seaboyer** (SWP) concludes that his own criteria (clear and measurable common goals; concrete action plan; high degree of consultation and coordination; strong, joint and strategic action; visible output) are not currently fulfilled since for both sides the “strategic partnership” is not a priority. This does not prevent the concept being used far too often rhetorically. Nor does it diminish the possibility that these relations will one day prove fruitful. He identifies much potential for the partnerships with Canada and Japan since there is huge convergence in interests and values with the EU. **Husar/Maihold/Mair/Niedermeier** have their own ideas. Whereas India is ready for partnership the authors see a sceptical South Africa and domestically uncertain Mexicans and Brazilians.

If the choice of partners sometimes looks distinctly unprincipled, so too does the choice of *thematic areas* covered by the partnerships. The ESS mentions terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime as the main global challenges to deal with. The ESS implementation report adds cyber security, energy security, climate change, the security development nexus, piracy, small arms and light weapons and cluster munitions and landmines. It also stresses the need to complete the Doha round, to reform the multilateral system (UN, IMF, G8 etc.), to further strengthen

the International Criminal Court and human rights, and to meet the Millennium Development Goals. From all the strategic partnership documents it becomes clear that they aim at going beyond the typical trade (and aid) co-operation but also looking for joint global e.g. security, energy and environmental concerns.

According to **Gisela Müller-Brandeck Bocquet** (University of Würzburg) the EU might not have chosen the right policy areas for cooperation with its strategic partners since they were mainly influenced by the successful lobbying of one of the EU member states. In her view, the undeniable added value of cooperation with the EU such as economic advantages and easing access to the common market seemed no longer to suffice. In other potential fields of cooperation, such as conflict prevention and management, the EU's capabilities were too weak, thus the EU cannot provide any security guarantees to its partners like the US can. With regard to good governance and development cooperation the EU was seen as too paternalistic.

Biscop/Renard take up the discussion about the EU's added-value for its strategic partners and say that vis-à-vis global actors, the classic EU strategy of positive conditionality related to promoting its model, i.e. the offer of benefits in return for security co-operation and economic, social and political reforms, has had great limitations. In their view, global powers could only have been convinced of the value of the EU model by shared interests and common challenges rather than the "proverbial carrot". On the other hand, according to **Grevi**, the EU should stick to the conditionalities of the strategic partnerships, otherwise getting a problem of credibility.

The future of strategic partnerships

The EU itself acknowledges the need to move forward and adapt the strategic partnerships it pursues to a new and dynamically changing context. It has recently conducted reviews and implementation reports for its EU-Russia strategy and EU-Africa strategy whilst adapting its EU-India Joint Action Plan (e.g. by adding new cooperation activities with regard to the promotion of peace and comprehensive security as well as sustainable development). The last evaluation of the EU-China relationship was conducted in 2006. For the more recent partnerships with Brazil and Mexico there has not yet been an evaluation. The EU-Japan Action plan expires in 2011.

What becomes clear from the analysis so far is that, in the absence of any clear conceptual thinking by the EU, strategic partnerships are complex and diverse and that judgments of their success or failure depend in large part upon the eye of the beholder. Thus, as **Vasconcelos et al.** put it "if the goal has been to turn the EU into the hub of an international coalition promoting a multilateral solution to the world's problems [as e.g. in Copenhagen...] then the answer is negative." On the other hand, the strategic partnership with China was useful in successfully negotiating technical and regulatory matters.

Bendiek/Kramer advocate greater differentiation. The EU, they say, should confidently emphasize the dual character of its foreign policy. On the one hand it is normative, shaping global order on the basis of effective multilateralism; on the other hand it pursues own interests. This will avoid misunderstandings with partners. In order to fill the EU's strategic

partnerships with “strategy” for **Biscop/Renard** an assessment of EU interests in the various regions and a clearer definition of its objectives towards partners is the first step. Therefore, the EU should integrate the existing climate, migration, energy policies into the broader foreign policy framework.

For **Grevi** there is a need to revise the existing structures of global governance as well as for flexibility in the formulation and interpretation of the strategic partnerships due to the continuously changing context. He therefore recommends four things: First, to adjust the EU external relations approach to a transparent double-track, thus normative and interest-based approach, second, to take into account the partners’ perceptions which do not consider the EU as a fully fledged international actor but as an attractive partner to co-operate with, third, to better match the EU’s supply with the partners’ demands and expectations restraining partners to follow a double track approach with the EU and its member states, and fourth, to take into account the “US factor” acknowledging that e.g. India feels closer to the US whereas China more attached to EU.

Importantly for Grevi, the EU and its member states must decide together where to invest resources with regard to which networks without undermining the UN. Triangular co-operation e.g. between EU, AU and China or India, respectively should be strengthened to avoid competition between strategic partnerships and interregional relations. One could build on joint training, better share experiences and lessons learnt in crisis management and prevention and consult earlier and more regular at UN Headquarters level; here, other partners are interested in the EU’s experience with policing, institution building and Security Sector Reform. With China and India technology transfer and industrial partnerships are of interest. Another focus should be to achieve internationally recognised standards, e.g. in the context of the International Biofuels Forum.

According to **Müller-Brandeck Bocquet**, the EU should decisively address the construction of an effective multilateralism (including a more equitable representation of powers in international organisations) and engage emerging powers there. **Grevi**, meanwhile, pleads for cooperation in an “interpolar world” marked by a redistribution of global power and interdependence. According to him, the transatlantic relationship will remain the most important partnership for the foreseeable future but indicators on the development of the so-called BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) showed the increased relevance of the EU’s strategic partnerships with them as a precondition for global governance of common challenges. The policy priorities would depend on the time horizon and will change. In Grevi’s view the main clusters for co-operation will be global and regional governance, non-proliferation, crisis management, Africa’s stability and development as well as energy and climate change.

Biscop/Renard believe that the EU should adapt the multilateral architecture and ask itself 1) if it actually, while being overrepresented, can contribute to reforms while speaking more and more with one voice in an EU seat, 2) which the preferred multilateral fora are, for which issues, and 3) what the role of other formats such as G20 are, especially vis-à-vis the UN. In their perspective, strategic partnerships are most effective if seen as instruments to further effective multilateralism. More concretely, the EU should look for practical cooperation and coalition building in specific policy areas where there are shared interests,

then institutionalise them and link them to cooperation in multilateral fora. At a later stage this can expand into broader areas of cooperation including with regard to values.

Maihold criticises the lack of policy-centred approaches, co-leadership coalitions and regional specificity. Here, the local EU delegations, coordinated by the EEAS, could help in drafting and negotiating partner-specific co-operation tools. In the different global governance fora (issue-driven such as G20+ and Cairns Group; distribution oriented such as G77 and the non-aligned movement; south-south such as IBSA; north-south such as G20 Finance) the EU needs to be proactive and invest in technical capabilities to create global rules and the ability to contribute to their implementation by forming co-leadership or leadership coalitions. For Maihold, to offer convincing and sufficiently interesting agendas (more than trade and aid) to its partners which are at the same time courted by other competitors the EU should relate to certain policy areas and region specific issues and take into account the expectations of the counterparts and the EU's actual capacity. A unique offer of the EU in this regard could include e.g. increased levels of development co-operation in order to create synergies by developing common projects in science and technology transfer based on public private partnerships or the triangulation of development co-operation.

Is the EU itself a strategic actor?

Many analysts, however, identify a significant pre-condition for the further development of strategic partnerships – and that is, that the EU itself develop into a strategic partner. The ESS highlights that the EU has to become more capable and better co-ordinate its different instruments. The implementation report acknowledges the efforts done in this regard and also stresses the Lisbon Treaty as a framework to further achieve this. The different strategic partnership documents merely mention the different areas of co-operation going beyond trade and aid but do not recall on the development and possible shortcomings of the EU's own instruments.

Still, the analysts see that as a major deficit of the EU in its relations with the strategic partners. Thus, **Grevi** critically asks if the EU was actually ready (thus, willing and able) to be a strategic partner itself? More concretely, he asks if the Union had: the commitment to set principles; the ability to define priorities; sufficient policy tools; the capacity to negotiate; let alone the recognition from others? The answer which his colleagues and he give in **Vasconcelos et al.** is rather negative. While acknowledging that the EU succeeded in speaking with one voice in trade and economic negotiations the “strategic partnerships” are as other foreign policy tools often highly disputed between member states (e.g. the EU does not find a common approach towards Russia). Furthermore, the big member states still followed their own foreign policy agenda and directly interact with the respective strategic partners. Due to this and since other powers are competing with the EU, for **Biscop/Renard** the crucial point must be to speak with one voice by at least more and more sharing information between the member states and the EU in order to reduce the conflict potential around potential competing interests. **Bendiek/Kramer** also highlight the partnerships inherit inefficiency caused by the EU's institutional complexity in the form of conflicts of interest, conflicts of influence and interinstitutional tensions - not helped by continuous

adjustments necessary due to changing policy constellations between the EU and its strategic partners.

According to **Maihold**, the attractiveness of the EU to external partners has diminished considerably due to this mismatch between the EU's normative power expectations and internal capabilities but also due to diminished role expectations abroad, with regard to the fact that the region-to-region dialogue is not working when other regions are not as heavily integrated and institutionalised as the EU, the challenges to maintain the conditionality principle in development aid in view of other donors etc. The competition between emerging powers and the EU may also be due to the lack of formats and limited options the EU can offer in terms of co-leadership. According to Maihold, the EU has lacked instruments to come to terms with the differentiated profiles and new roles of actors in international politics (e.g. Mercosur, SAARC and SADC having expertise in shaping initiatives; Brazil, India and Japan coordinating communities of responsibility with regard to UN Security Council reform; the IBSA-Dialogue Forum mobilising allies for joint initiatives; G20 attracting or enforcing interregional acceptance and support by state and non-state actors etc.).

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³ Remarks by Herman van Rompuy, President of the European Council, at the press conference before the G8 meeting, Toronto, 24 June 2010.