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EU Relations with "Emerging" Strategic Partners: Brazil, India and South Africa

Natalie M. Hess

In her speech on the BRICS and other emerging powers on 1 February 2012, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Lady Catherine Ashton, stated that the EU needs "to invest in these countries as strategic partners in a very strong and dynamic, bilateral relationship [...] We need to do that because it is in our interest to do it."

Analysis

- The EU's strategic partnerships have been established in an uncoordinated manner; however, this has not been accidental. All of the EU's "emerging" strategic partners carry economic weight, but even more importantly, they have political weight and (potentially) important regional and/or global roles to play.
- Consequently, they are essential partners for shaping a globalized, interdependent and multipolar world confronted with key challenges and with a need for international cooperation and global governance. They are truly "formative powers" in that they have enough influence to shape the present and coming world order. These countries are essential partners for the EU in terms of its goals of building "effective multilateralism" and of raising its own international profile.
- While the EU was initially keen to establish strong links between its bilateral and biregional strategic partnerships, since mid-2010 the official statements have put a stronger focus on working with bilateral partners more independently from biregional relations.
- The "emerging" strategic partners have an interest in being officially "selected" by the EU, a traditional or "established" (extraregional) power. Being recognized and acknowledged as important players in regional as well as global terms serves their international and regional power profile as well as their status within the international hierarchy.
- Strategic partnerships generally are and will be an important foreign policy tool in a multipolar world. They are part of the strategy of cooperating while competing.

Keywords: *EU, strategic partnerships, new powers in shaping globalization ("Gestaltungsmächte"), multipolarity*

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The EU's Relations with "Emerging/Emerged Partners"

The Treaty of Lisbon is supposed to give the EU a stronger, more coherent voice on the world stage and to offer more continuity in EU foreign policy and in the union's relations with partners. It has introduced new posts and working structures, most notably the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Lady Catherine Ashton, has outlined three priorities for her mandate: creating a new foreign policy service, the EEAS; the European neighborhood; and the EU's relations with strategic partners (Ashton 2010). It is clear that the first and third priorities are closely related: in order to deal with strategic partners, the EU needs a properly functioning EEAS. In her February speech, Lady Ashton differentiated between so-called "established partnerships" (with the USA, Russia, Japan and Canada) and relationships with "powers that are emerging or have emerged" (referring to China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia) (Ashton 2012). Generally, this listing is in line with the fact that the EU has ten (bilateral) strategic partners at the moment – namely, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States. The partnerships with so-called "emerging/emerged partners" have all been established since 2003. They are said to be characterized by common interests and shared values. Joint Action Plans outlining the policy areas for common political action have been formulated; corresponding working groups on several issue areas have been established; and (annual) high-level summits have been held. What can be learned from analyzing the EU's strategic partnerships with emerging countries, especially from the Brazilian, Indian and South African cases?

No Unified EU Interest

The strategic partnerships with so-called "emerging/emerged partners" have been established in an uncoordinated manner. No uniform political process led up to the establishment of this format. Thus, these strategic partnerships have been arranged individually – on a case-by-case basis – and mostly autonomously from each other. They have predominantly been introduced because of the (combined) initiatives of the Commission president, the commissioners, and particular units (primarily the unit heads) within the European Commission, as well as individual EU member states (EU-MS). Almost naturally, the nationalities of the persons involved within the EU institutions have played a role in whether relations with a specific country have been intensified or not. Furthermore, the historic and cultural relations of particular EU-MS with the emerging countries have also been a significant factor.

Generally, the strategic partnerships have been an attempt by the EU institutions to raise the EU's profile as an interesting interlocutor in the eyes of these emerging countries. Some Commission representatives have indicated that the establishment of a strategic partnership has also depended on how successfully the European Commission has "sold" the idea to the EU Council or the EU-MS. In any case, some EU-MS already maintained intensified relations with a few of the emerging powers (national strategic partnerships). The question that thus arises is why EU-MS have had an interest in EU strategic partnerships even though there is no *joint* EU foreign and security policy in place. The EU-MS have displayed different reasons for seeking EU strategic partnerships with specific countries. Firstly, there is surely a certain extent of normatively motivated interest in supporting the "Europeanization" of European foreign policy. Secondly, some EU-MS have also sought to give new impetus to their national relations with a particular country by using the EU strategic partnership for national purposes (for example, to bring a fresh dynamic to historical relations). This is the same reason some of the bi-regional partnerships have been introduced. For example, the EU-MS have been interested in ensuring that a particular country or region features high enough on the EU agenda because it represents the main focus of their respective national foreign policies, primarily due to economic interests or historical relations. This has resulted in particular (coalitions of) member states' setting and pushing of the agenda for the establishment of specific strategic partnerships – for instance, Germany, Portugal and Sweden's interest in an EU–Brazil strategic partnership. Thirdly, the EU-MS have also sought to complement their national relations with emerging countries by using the EU as an additional framework for speaking

to them. The EU level therefore serves as a means of multiplying influence. Fourthly, due to international power shifts, EU-MS face the mid- to long-term risk that "emerging countries" will lose interest in dealing with them on a bilateral basis. Thus, the EU level is a welcome channel for staying engaged with these new powers in the future. This is mostly the case for "smaller" EU-MS, but it increasingly holds true for the "bigger" EU-MS as well. Sometimes, however, there has been objection by EU-MS to an EU strategic partnership because they have preferred to keep their engagement with "emerging powers" at the national level (opposing Europeanization), have preferred a different bilateral strategic partner in a region, or were concerned about possible negative reactions from other countries in the respective regions (for example, Argentina being jealous of Brazil's strategic partnership with the EU).

No Unified Political Process, but No "Accident" Either

Generally, the EU's strategic partners are essential actors in shaping an interdependent and multipolar world, international regimes and global governance. They are truly "formative powers" in the sense that they have the power and/or influence to shape the present decade, and presumably the coming decades. These countries are crucial "partners" for the EU, with its goal of creating a rule-based international system built on multilateralism and global governance – the "effective multilateralism" narrative, which is also articulated in the European Security Strategy (2003). In addition, the EU as such has an interest in strategic rhetoric, in being recognized and acknowledged as an international actor and partner. In essence, strategic partnerships are political agreements. As an EU official has said, "there is a political spin about them." They should primarily be seen as a declaration of interest in cooperating more closely: the starting point of a process that ideally results in joint political action. There is no automatic convergence of values or interests. Here it makes sense to make use of management literature on strategic partnerships: The respective actors have voluntarily "partnered strategically" in order to adapt to the changing international environment. They remain autonomous actors. When interests overlap, they can form interest coalitions to improve their market position or achieve their interests. Even though they are competitors in various dimensions, such as trade, they see a comparative advantage in teaming up in certain cases. It is a strategy of cooperating while competing.

The various strategic partnerships have come into place quite differently; in some cases the EU has offered this "status," and in others the strategic partner has requested it. Once Brazil became the official bilateral strategic partner in Latin America, Mexico lobbied behind the scenes to obtain the same status. This demonstrates that there is no universal political process for becoming the EU's strategic partner. In some cases there have indeed been parallels between two bilateral strategic partnerships. For example, once India had become the EU's strategic partner in 2004, the idea of using the same tool in the Brazilian case emerged within the former Directorate-General RELEX (in charge of external relations) of the EU Commission. Yet, in 2010 there was still little coordination or exchange between the officials in charge of bilateral strategic partnerships. There appeared to be only limited exchange at the "head of unit" level. Furthermore, even though Lady Ashton was, and is, also the vice president of the European Commission, information exchange between the Commission and Ashton's Cabinet had evolved slowly.

Indeed, as already noted above, the EU's strategic partnerships have been established in an uncoordinated manner. However, they are no "accident," as is sometimes believed (Renard 2012). Rather, the EU has, on a case-by-case basis, recognized that the countries in question have not only economic but also political clout in regional and/or international affairs. All of the EU's strategic partners are either major economic players or display considerably high growth rates and are members of the G20. Consequently, it is no wonder that the EU is working towards free trade agreements in most cases: its strategic partners are important trading partners and offer interesting markets for European goods. Nevertheless, what is more important about the strategic partnerships is the fact that these so-called emerging countries have significant political power and influence as well as (potentially) important regional and/or global roles to play. This is the main common ground of all strategic partnerships. The emerging countries are important partners in bilateral, regional and especially international (global) affairs – whether

they seek a proactive role or not. Sometimes they are particularly important partners because of their influence in certain issue areas and policies, irrespective of whether they are active or passive, and simply because of their economic weight and (even more) their political and international influence. The strategic partners are also viewed as potential bridge-builders and vote-pullers in international fora. The EU's strategic partnership with South Africa, for example, is not primarily about development as is often believed (Gratius 2011). South Africa is one of the major economic powerhouses in (Southern) Africa. It is a major locus for European foreign direct investment; it undertakes considerable technological exchange with the EU; and it has played a significant role in driving regional institution-building – for example, for Africa's security architecture – which makes it an important political partner in the region and internationally. South Africa is often perceived as Africa's representative, something which is also quite a challenge for South Africa as it does not want to be portrayed as a regional hegemon or bully vis-à-vis its African partners (Hess 2010). As a South African official has stressed, "South Africa never claims to speak on behalf of Africa."

The Bilateral–Biregional Link

The EU has traditionally followed a region-to-region approach in its foreign relations. However, in 2003 the EU began to establish strategic partnerships with emerging powers as bilateral partners. At the time, the engines of (bi)regionalism were stuttering. Moreover, it was proving difficult for the EU to interact within biregional frameworks because the biregional partners were generally less "supranationalized" than the EU. Even though the EU has tried to export its own model, which has again lost relevance since the European financial crisis, the parties involved in the regional settings have often had no interest in "supranationalizing" their region. This means that the EU has lacked a direct interlocutor in the form of a corresponding institution and has instead dealt with a group of countries with possibly conflicting interests. Moreover, negotiations on free trade agreements have often stagnated (for example, MERCOSUR in the past). The establishment of bilateral strategic partnerships, for example, with Brazil and South Africa (less so in the Indian case), has also been an attempt to "elect" direct interlocutors and cooperation partners within regional settings in order to overcome the biregional stagnation. The EU has looked for like-minded and presumably powerful countries within a region that are capable of influencing their respective regional neighbors and pushing the regional agenda in a direction favorable for the EU (Hess 2009, 2010). These strategic partnerships with bilateral partners have thus marked a shift in the EU's policy focus. However, this does not mean that the EU has started to neglect its biregional relations. Rather, the EU's bilateral strategic partners have been chosen because they are positioned at the nexus of regional and global politics. Whether the regional or the global level is more important depends on the particular partner and its respective power profile. Regional affairs have surely been more relevant in those cases in which the EU has also been cultivating biregional relations – for example, EU relations with the Latin American and Caribbean states or with the African Union.

While the EU was initially keen to emphasize the link between its biregional and bilateral strategic partnerships, the emphasis in official statements has changed since mid-2010: bilateral and biregional strategic partnerships are still linked, but less so than before. Whereas initially it was believed that adding a bilateral strategic partner to the biregional format would be beneficial to biregional relations (that is, that the "regional power" would drive regional integration or be a role model for the region in terms of democratic institutions), the nexus between bilateral and biregional strategic partnerships has decreased in importance. The importance of cooperation at the global level has increased with respect to the bilateral strategic partnerships. Consequently, the EU's main focus is now on working with bilateral strategic partners more independently from, but not irrespective of, biregional settings. The bilateral partnerships today focus predominantly on bilateral and international issues. Presumably, this shift in EU foreign policy is due to several factors, possibly including a learning process on the part of the EU: Firstly, as stated above, the respective regional organizations are not as institutionalized relative to the EU, and more importantly, the countries in the respective regions are not interested in changing this in the near future. Secondly, over the years the EU has come to recognize that the emerging powers are too "big" and

too important on an international scale to only deal with them within the biregional framework. Thirdly, the regional neighbors do not necessarily "follow" the regional "powerhouses." Consequently, South Africa does not represent Africa; Brazil does not speak for Latin America; and India does not stand for South Asia. Fourthly, the bilateral strategic partners themselves do not necessarily want to be engaged in their respective regions or are very careful not to be seen as regional hegemons. They want to work independently from their regions, "transcending the regional scene" somewhat.

The Strategic Partners' Interests

The EU is an interesting partner for the emerging countries for various reasons: It is an important trade player/partner, market and foreign direct investor. Furthermore, it is also an interesting "bilateral" partner – for example, when Brazil seeks cooperation in the fields of education, training and exchange. It is also often a "historical" or "cultural" partner as it includes member states with close historical or cultural ties to the emerging countries (for example, India and Great Britain). The EU is also an important cooperation partner in global fora. More significantly, however, the strategic partners use the rhetoric of cooperation strategically: they have an interest in being officially "selected" by the EU, a "traditional" and "established" extraregional power. Even though the EU is an international actor "sui generis," it represents the "West" and the "North" or, basically, the traditional powers that have long dominated the international system and the international economy – though this has, of course, changed since the international economic and financial crisis with which Europe has been struggling. In order to expand their power, emerging powers use various mechanisms. One of them is the recognition of their regional and international power status by so-called established powers. The EU's acknowledgement is also important because of its position outside of the particular region: emerging powers are interested in being "recognized" by extraregional actors. This act of recognition – becoming the EU's strategic partner – is utilized by the respective countries to increase their international and regional power profile and diversify their foreign relations. It signifies prestige and is one rung on the ladder up the international hierarchy. Even though this new status can create jealousy, especially among regional neighbors, the EU's strategic partners can always point to the fact that in most cases this status was offered to them and that they have not been the official driving force in the process. It is therefore quite convenient for countries to be "chosen" by an external actor.

The Post-Lisbon EU Foreign Policy Machinery

The EU High Representative is supposed to represent the EU in foreign and security policy and to ensure the presentation of a consistent, coherent and continuous external image to the world. The EEAS, the EU's foreign service, is the supporting office. Even though the strategic partnerships with emerging countries are individual processes with potentially different aims, coordination and strategic policy guidance need to be increased in order to make effective use of this tool. First of all, it should be emphasized that establishment of a new foreign service is a time-consuming and long-term task. The working mechanisms are still in their infancy and there is a considerable amount of learning still taking place. Some implications of the Lisbon Treaty are only becoming evident now as the treaty is put into practice. As the EEAS is staffed by officials from the EU-MS, the Council secretariat and the Commission, it involves not only 27 different nationalities but also different bureaucratic cultures. The EEAS's basic structure was set up in 2011, and the organization only started to move into one building in Brussels in 2012. Furthermore, the heads of the approximately 140 EU delegations around the world are only being appointed incrementally. At the same time, the EEAS has been expected to function. Locally, the delegations have often been "headless." They also face capacity constraints in terms of personnel, administration, infrastructure or budget. Furthermore, some of the officials at these delegations are not necessarily trained diplomats. While previous Commission delegations predominantly worked on Commission topics – that is, communitarized policies such as trade or climate – the EEAS now also has to actively deal with other policy areas such as security.

Delegations now chair the local meetings of EU heads of missions and various working groups. In

theory, the EEAS is a service provider to the EU institutions and member states; however, even though the EEAS is supposed to "take over" from the rotating presidency, there are sometimes conflicting interpretations of the scope and quality of this "take-over" between the parties on the ground. The exchange of information is at times limited. The quality of cooperation between the embassies of the EU-MS and the delegations depends on the local actors. Generally, it takes time to turn the previous Commission delegations into EU delegations. Moreover, the latter need "room to maneuver," yet their work needs to evolve in coordination with EU-MS. It is nevertheless important to note that both European actors and the strategic partners value having a local EU delegation.

In the post-Lisbon era the (annual) summit diplomacy, which characterizes the strategic partnerships, has continued. Critics of the summit process rightly argue that summits had already been taking place before strategic partnerships existed and that they are not exclusive to strategic partners. Yet practitioners from both parties underscore the fact that summits are an indispensable part of the partnership process, even though they entail a great deal of preparation and there is sometimes frustration with the results. It is nonetheless essential to systematically prepare and evaluate these summits. Additionally, summit diplomacy needs to be accompanied by regular, reciprocal (high-level) diplomatic visits and working meetings.

The fact that Lady Ashton is often accompanied or "replaced" by Herman van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, and José M. Barroso, the president of the EU Commission, has resulted in the partner countries' perception that there is still no single EU telephone number to call. Even though some strategic partners, for example, India, prefer to work with nation-states instead of the supranational EU, they increasingly regard the EU as a "trend." Third countries do see which policy areas have been communitarized and when it makes sense to talk to EU institutions instead of approaching (a multitude of) individual EU member states. They know how to play off EU members against one another. Yet as Brazilian, South African and Indian officials have said, "the EU is more than just the sum of its parts." They welcome the Treaty of Lisbon and the end of the rotating presidency. The latter change is also in the EU's interest, as there now is the chance of formulating long-term EU interests and not having a biannual change in priorities, interests and contact persons. The strategic partners currently find it challenging to work with the EU in policy areas of shared competence. Some third-country officials say working processes become a game of "feathering one's own nest" among EU institutions and EU-MS, making it difficult for the partners to identify the actors in charge. Thus, third countries would actually encourage the formation of a coherent, unified European voice. In their view only Europe as a whole can be influential in a multipolar world. Still, knowledge about and interest in the EU is generally rather limited in the partner countries. For example, as an Indian official has said, the EU is often regarded as a rather "strange or very complex animal in India." The number of people in the EU's strategic-partner countries dealing with the EU on a professional basis is limited, and the EU therefore has to deal with capacity constraints on the partners' side. Generally, local media attention to Lady Ashton's visits to strategic-partner countries is limited. Thus, the EU's public diplomacy needs to be improved.

The uncoordinated coming-into-place of the strategic partnerships proves that this process has not been guided by an overarching EU-foreign policy "strategy." The European Security Strategy (2003) also remained vague on strategic partnerships. This correlates with the impression gained by the author in Brussels – namely, that there has been hardly any coordination between units or desks. Consequently, knowledge about the EU's strategic partners as a group has been rather scattered for a long time. This needs to be improved with/in the EEAS. More exchange and coordination between the desks and units concerned is particularly important for policy coherence. Furthermore, strategic policy guidance and leadership from the Brussels "center of power" (a sort of policy planning office) is needed. The delegations do not have the capacity to draw parallels to other strategic partners or to draft a long-term plan for dealing with them as a group. Close coordination between the EEAS and EU-MS, particularly with their foreign ministries and embassies, is essential. The fact that the (revision of) strategic partnerships featured on the agenda of the European Council in September 2010 as well as those of the foreign affairs councils and Gym-

nich meetings (informal meetings of EU foreign affairs ministers) in 2010 and 2011 should be welcomed. However, continuous exchange and coordination also has to take place on a working level between the EEAS and the EU-MS' foreign ministries. The EEAS needs to deal with foreign and security policy topics more intensively. The rise of the so-called emerging powers represents not only a major foreign policy challenge in itself, but also a major, if not the biggest, incentive for Europe to work more closely together on a common European foreign policy that increases the EU's political weight and "shaping power."

Strategic Partnerships as a Foreign Policy Tool

The EU's strategic partnerships are more than just rhetoric. It is important to see them in terms of a process and an international business format. The question is whether and how these frameworks will be used, further developed and prioritized by the EU High Representative and the EEAS. Strategic (long-term) policy guidance, preferably formulated by the EU High Representative and a connected Brussels policy planning office, is crucial. Similarly, close exchange between the EU institutions (such as the EEAS and the EU Commission), or rather the relevant policy desks and units, is essential in order to generate policy coherence. Such exchange, policy coherence and strategic policy guidance needs to be developed by Brussels in close cooperation with the EU-MS and delegations. As the strategic partners are quite different, the strategic partnerships' contents, and to some extent the policy processes, will also be different. Yet the EU should ensure that the meetings between the respective parties are held regularly at several (working and high) levels, thereby enabling and supporting coordination and possibly cooperation with strategic partners to jointly address global challenges and international topics.

Additionally, strategic partnerships are not an exclusively European instrument. Many countries maintain a variety of strategic partnerships of their own, establishing new partnerships while nurturing traditional ones. Strategic partnerships are and will be a (future) foreign policy tool of choice and a dominant characteristic in a multipolar world. They provide for flexibility, efficiency and dynamism in (simultaneously) building a network of interest coalitions with several partners depending on the issue/policy areas. In a multipolar and multipower world, strategic partnerships enable the building up of influence, or "shaping power." Thus, building a network of strategic partnerships will be a key strategy on the part of several actors – a strategy of cooperating while competing. This does not mean that the EU should establish strategic partnerships with each and every country in the world. Strategic partnerships need to remain something special and exclusive, limited in number. Inflationary tendencies endanger the very nature and benefit of such a partnership.

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