

RETHINKING A GLOBAL EUROPE

Ideas to make the EU
a stronger global actor



POLICY BRIEF 5

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ENHANCING THE EU'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

As a foreign policy tool, the EU's strategic partnerships are a legacy of the post-Cold War era. Although they have long underpinned the EU's quest for effective multilateralism, the effectiveness, coherence and sustainability of strategic partnerships in today's fraught global landscape is in question in their current form. What constitutes an EU strategic partnership and, what exactly is 'strategic' about it, has become increasingly unclear. To enhance these partnerships, we suggest that the EU take a series of steps, which we outline below.

1. Rethink the EU's strategic partnerships in a comprehensive manner

Strategic partnerships should help the EU counter the increasingly diverse, complex and fast-changing security threats that it faces, including those originating from its immediate geographic vicinity. This requires a thorough review of the EU's strategic partnerships, which should include streamlining successful partnerships, terminating those that are no longer operational or realistic, and potentially launching new ones. This effort must be led by the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), with other institutions like the European Parliament and the Council also involved.

2. Prioritise strategic partnerships with like-minded states and international institutions, as well as other regional organisations

Strengthening strategic partnerships with democratic states – such as the USA, the UK, Brazil, and India – is the more effective and sustainable way forward, as the EU would thus capitalise on long-term structural synergies and shared interests that survive leadership changes. In a similar vein, it is critical to promote dialogue channels with multilateral institutions that align with the EU's core values, such as the G7 and the OECD. Finally, strategic partnerships based on region-to-region cooperation are compatible with the EU's historical role in promoting regional integration in other parts of the world, and highly desirable from a pragmatic standpoint too.

3. Harmonise the EU's strategic objectives with those of its Member States

The EU's aims do not always match those of its Member States when it comes to relations with strategic partners. To bridge existing and potential gaps, Member States and EU institutions need to devise ways to communicate more fluidly and establish a more constructive and forward-thinking dialogue. Improving policy-related coordination in multilateral settings is of utmost importance for this strategic harmonisation to be achieved.

ENHANCING THE EU'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

The EU's strategic partnerships still merit recognition as a relevant foreign policy tool, although the notion of effective multilateralism, which originally underpinned them, has significantly evolved over time. This policy brief presents recommendations to tailor the EU's strategic partnerships to the emerging global challenges and realities. The EU needs to comprehensively review its strategic partnerships by clearly identifying new security threats, prioritise some types of partners over others, and coordinate its foreign policy objectives with those of its Member States.

Introduction

In the past 15 years, the EU has faced serious external challenges including global events, such as the Great Recession, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as more localised ones, such as migration and the outbreak of wars in the EU's neighbourhood – most notably, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the recent Israel-Hamas conflict. Addressing these challenges requires effective multilateralism, for which strategic partnerships are a key policy tool. However, **the current framework of strategic partnerships is often counterproductive**. Revising this framework would enable the EU to implement a more effective, coherent, and sustainable external action.

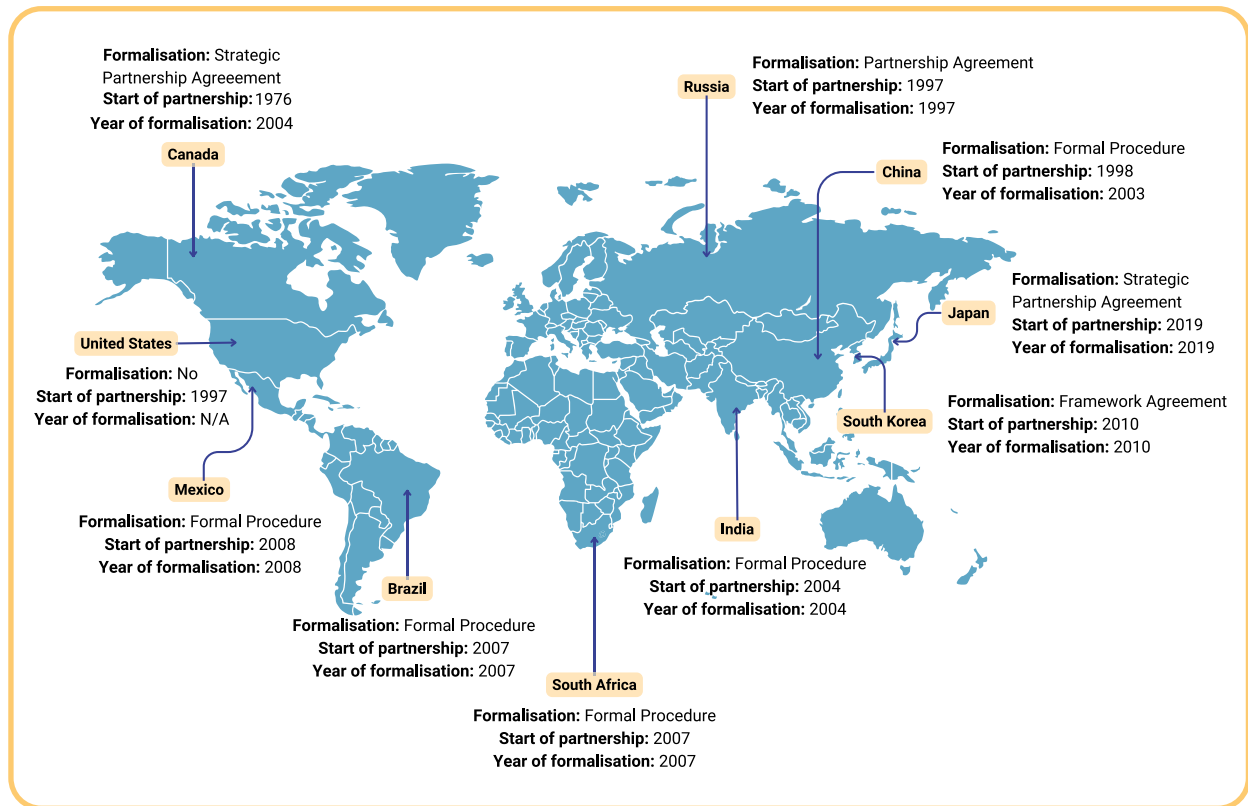
Why does this matter?

The EU's focus on strategic partnerships has evolved, both conceptually and practically. Since the original formulation linking the EU with Russia and China in the late 1990s, the Union has greatly enhanced the scope of these partnerships to cover **ten states and six regional and international organisations**. While effective multilateralism and a commitment to formalising cooperation mechanisms were hallmarks of the 2003 European Security Strategy, the EU has since shifted its focus towards broader global governance schemes based on international law, embracing also the notion of 'strategic autonomy' – as evidenced by the 2016 Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass. Accordingly, **the EU's strategic partnerships have taken up a more variegated form**, even encompassing informal and *ad hoc* arrangements short of the well-established institutionalised articulations.

Table 1: The EU's strategic partner organisations

	African Union	Arab League	ASEAN	CELAC	Gulf Cooperation Council	NATO
Region	Africa	Middle East and North Africa	South East Asia	South America	Gulf	North Atlantic
EU border	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Formalisation	Formal Procedure	Formal Procedure	Formal Procedure	Strategic Partnership Agreement	No	Formal Procedure
Start of strategic partnership	2007	2014	2007	2015	2022	1990s
Year of formalisation	2007	2014	2007	2015	N/A	2002

Figure 1: The EU's strategic partner countries



Considering this evolution and some broader dynamics, we identify three primary challenges for the EU's policy of strategic partnerships:

1. There is a lack of precision in the EU's understanding and implementation of what constitutes a strategic partnership. The lines between formal and informal, as well as between well-established and *ad hoc* formulations, are often blurred. This ambiguity often produces inconsistencies in terms of policy implementation and diplomatic engagement, thus hindering the effectiveness and coherence of this foreign policy tool.
2. Both the EU and its Member States interact with various global partners through multiple diplomatic instruments. Member State contestation of the EU's increasing presence in multilateral fora, especially in the areas of security and defence, undermines the EU's foreign policy objectives. As the global power transition unfolds and new challenges appear, the EU must develop a more unified and sustainable approach to strategic partnerships.
3. Russia stands as a major dilemma for the EU's conception of strategic partnerships. Its status has shifted from 'strategic partner' to 'strategic challenge' due to its policies in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. With the formal procedures for sealing the partnership left unfinished, the future of the EU-Russia relationship is uncertain at best. A complete break with Russia followed its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and a further complication lies in the fact that EU Member States are not fully aligned when it comes to their preferred responses to Russian aggression.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Rethink the EU's strategic partnerships in a comprehensive manner

Given the diverse, complex, and rapidly evolving set of security challenges encircling the EU, a reidentification of the immediate security threats to the Union is necessary for determining the pathways the CFSP and CSDP should take in the future. A conceptual, institutional, and functional review of the EU's strategic partnerships is the next logical step. This would include crafting a well-formulated agenda that delineates the purposes of strategic partnerships within the CFSP and CSDP frameworks and identifying the institutional models to be employed. More specifically, the EU should streamline successful partnerships, such as those with Canada and Japan, terminate those that are no longer operational or realistic, such as the ones with Russia and China, and launch new partnerships that will prove necessary for addressing ever-evolving global challenges. This comprehensive review should complement the efforts to institutionalise the EU's international visibility and presence. The European Commission and the EEAS must lead this initiative, while also involving other institutions such as the European Parliament and the Council.

Prioritise strategic partnership with like-minded states and international institutions, as well as other regional organisations

In streamlining successful partnerships, the EU should prioritise and strengthen its ties with democracies and like-minded states focusing on long-term structural synergies and shared interests. For example, the historical consistency in the EU's relations with the US, the UK, Brazil, and India – despite shifts in their respective political leaderships – underscores the resilience of said partnerships. In this spirit, the EU should:

- **Develop and maintain informal channels of communication**, including second-track diplomacy with civil society. These mechanisms can boost flexibility and ensure continuity, allowing for ongoing collaboration even amidst political changes. Informal channels should be designed to complement the existing formal frameworks of the EU's strategic partnerships.
- **Embrace global governance trends**, by participating in and contributing to international fora and organisations that reflect shared democratic values and objectives, such as the UN and the OECD. Expanding the EU's global reach with tools such as Global Gateway is also a welcome development.
- **Integrate partnerships into multilateral and regional frameworks**, which not only will solidify bilateral relations, but also enhance the EU's role and influence in those larger settings. The EU should focus on region-to-region cooperation schemes with other intergovernmental organisations such as NATO, ASEAN, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the African Union. This is fully compatible with the EU's historical record in promoting regional integration in other parts of the world.

Harmonise the EU's strategic objectives with those of its Member States

The EU's strategic partnerships are used as indicators of its strategic autonomy and global actorness. Nevertheless, this policy can create tensions, as the EU's goals do not always match those of its Member States when it comes to relations with strategic partners and global players. To mitigate those mismatches, it would be helpful for Member States to secure a more fluid interaction with EU bodies through mechanisms that do not entail more formal opportunities to exercise their veto, but instead resemble the informal Gymnich meetings, presided by the rotating Presidency of the Council. The Global Gateway deserves praise in this regard too, as it brings EU institutions and Member States together around common goals. Reinforcing communication channels between the EU and its Member States at the multilateral level is also of chief importance.

This policy brief has been drawn up by Meltem Müftüler-Baç, Ezgi Uzun and Nihat Muğurtay on the basis of research conducted in the ENGAGE project. For a more in-depth look at the research, please visit the ENGAGE website.

Project identity:

The ENGAGE (Envisioning a New Governance Architecture for a Global Europe) project examines how the EU – both the institutions and its Member States – can effectively and sustainably harness all of its tools in joined-up external action alongside the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to meet key strategic challenges and become a stronger global actor.”

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