



**ENGAGE**

**Working Paper Series**

**No. 31 | January 2024**

**Assessing the European Union's  
External Action Towards Its  
Strategic Partners and Formulating  
Policy Recommendations**

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**ENVISIONING A NEW  
GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE  
FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE**



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 962533.



## Executive Summary

The European Union's foreign policy aimed at building and sustaining effective multilateralism as a key strategic objective, as outlined in its 2003 European Security Strategy and later revised in the 2016 Global Strategy into effective global governance. The European Union's foreign policy encompasses bilateral agreements with global players, identified as strategic partners, both with state actors and international organisations. There are multiple facets of the EU's engagement with global strategic partners, some of which are defined within a legal framework, and some selected on a more ad hoc basis and in an informal manner.

This working paper provides an assessment of the European Union's engagement with its strategic partners, building on the previous research findings of the ENGAGE project. The EU's external environment has altered significantly since the beginning of the project, with the unprecedented global pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the Israeli-Hamas war in October 2023. Whilst the EU's relations with some strategic partners has led to the drafting of new agreements, its relations with certain strategic partners have deteriorated – Russia, which was previously defined as a partner, has become a strategic rival. The dynamic aspect and flexibility of the EU's engagement with strategic partners is critical to enhance the effectiveness, coherence and sustainability of this foreign policy tool.

This working paper aims to unpack the EU's strategic partnerships and to assess whether they are effective, coherent and sustainable tools. The former toolbox for building a multilateral world order – strategic partnerships being one of these instruments – has proven unable to respond to rising power competition, populism and nationalism at the international level. Intensified complexity at the global level brings multilateralism at odds with the recent emphasis on nationalism and national interests. This contestation on the merits of multilateralism is a new complication for the EU's strategic partnerships and their role in building a multilateral, rule-based international order driven by both values and material interests. As a result, strategic partnerships need a major update, with an in-depth review of existing agreements, harmonisation of Member State and EU institution positions, and increasing multilateral management of bilateral agreements.

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# 1 Introduction

The attacks against Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza in October 2023, coming on the heels of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, highlight the turbulent external environment within which the European Union's external action is formulated. The increased militarisation and hot wars in the European periphery both in the East and in the South are unexpected developments presenting new security challenges to the European Union. The EU finds itself facing major security risks at the end of 2023. This is surprising, as when the ENGAGE project was first conceptualised in 2020, the EU's external environment was relatively more tranquil. Three years later, as the project is coming to its close, the EU has experienced the COVID-19 outbreak, the Russian invasion of Ukraine – the first major interstate war on the European continent after World War II,<sup>1</sup> and most recently, the attacks against Israel and the subsequent Israeli-Hamas war. The European Union stands at a major crossroads in 2023, facing multiple challenges ranging from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU and its aftermath in terms of shaping the UK-EU's new relationship, migratory pressures, financial instability, insecurity in terms of climate change and natural resources. The ENGAGE project has revealed that the magnitude of these challenges necessitates collective external action and coordinated foreign policy (Müller et al., 2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 1](#)); 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 7](#)); 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#)); Sus et al., 2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 3](#)); 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#)); Sabatino, 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 19](#)); Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#)); Christou et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 17](#))). In dealing with these external challenges, the EU has developed multiple tools and instruments in recent years.

This deliverable builds on the main findings of [Work Package 7](#)<sup>2</sup> of the ENGAGE project, which aimed to conceptually and empirically analyse the EU's strategic partners and the EU's utilisation of strategic partnership as a foreign policy tool. An EU strategic partner has been 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 (Renard, 2010, p. 4).

An investigation of these strategic partnerships shows that they are valuable under conditions of multipolarity and interolarity. This is critical in line with the main objectives of the project, as the EU still uses strategic partnerships as a foreign policy tool, even though the terminology

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<sup>1</sup> The Bosnian war of 1992–1995 is not indicated as such as it was a civil war erupting from the dissolution of the Republic of Yugoslavia.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis in this paper draws from ENGAGE Working Papers [13](#), [25](#) and [28](#), and the helpful comments of ENGAGE colleagues at the General Assembly in Barcelona on October 19–20, 2023. The authors also thank two ENGAGE peer reviewers for helpful comments on the earlier drafts of the paper.



and the concept are somewhat outdated in certain policymaking circles.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this vague nature of strategic partnerships that has led to the recent attempts to find a more comprehensive approach to this critical tool for European foreign policy (Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#))).

Ever since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the European Union has aimed at finding ways of engaging formally with other global players in the form of strategic partnerships. This is related to the overall objective of building relatively flexible cooperation frameworks addressing complex global issues concerning the Union, including, but not limited to, security, migration, and economic crises. Interestingly, the first strategic partnership frameworks were agreed on with Russia and China, two countries with whom the EU diverges the most over values and principles. The 2003 European Security Strategy clearly identified the potential strategic partners over proposed cooperation areas, as well as a formal institutional framework. As a result, formal partnership agreements were signed with Canada, Brazil, Mexico, and South Korea between 2004 and 2010. Nevertheless, a formal foundation for strategic partnerships as a foreign policy tool did not come along until the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, which put forth the need to develop relations with “third countries, international, regional, and global organisations” that share the Union’s principles of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and international law (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012, Art. 21). Recently, with the 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU has made its vision of external action clearer by broadening both the list of countries and organisations as possible strategic partners as well as cross-cutting issues for these partnerships. As of 2023, the EU officially has ten states and six interregional organisations as formal strategic partners,<sup>4</sup> and another set of informal partners identified as ‘tailored partners’, ‘regional players’, or simply ‘potential partners’ as per strategy documents (Council of the European Union, 2022).

The EU’s engagement with strategic partners is important precisely because it forms an integral part of its external action, with the attempt to find common solutions to global problems. The EU identifies its foreign policy objectives as follows:

In today’s world marked by increasing unilateralism and great-power rivalry, multilateralism remains the most effective means to govern global relations in a way that benefits all. Countries need to continue to work together to settle disputes and to achieve common goals. In the face of mounting challenges, the multilateral system and its structures are under strain. The EU is committed to leading the reform efforts towards a multilateralism fit for the 21st century (EEAS, n.d.).

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<sup>3</sup> This point is emphasised by Benjamin Martill, a contributor to ENGAGE Work Package 7, in ENGAGE Working Papers [13](#) and [25](#).

<sup>4</sup> These strategic partners are Russia, China, US, India, Japan, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, and NATO, United Nations, the African Union, ASEAN, the Arab League and CELAC. There is also a new agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council.



This is precisely why this deliverable aims to assess how and whether strategic partnerships were effective in achieving this foreign policy objective and whether there is any alteration in this objective. The ENGAGE project's focus on understanding the EU's external action and foreign policy depends on a deeper comprehension of multiple instruments, but also unpacks effective multilateralism and assesses its applicability in the EU's external action since its inception in early 2000s (Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#))). First, an in-depth investigation of the EU's extensive network of strategic partnerships shows the need to capture the key differences and how the EU and its Member States engage with strategic partners – both those formally recognised through treaties, and those informally recognised on a policy basis. Second, the analysis on the commonalities between specific case studies reveals the modalities of the EU policymaking as driven by the EU institutions and with Member States acting either as drivers or brakemen in different issue areas such as security, trade, and migration (Müller et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 1](#)); 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#))). Third, the EU's strategic partnerships with international organisations revealed how the EU worked with the UN, NATO, and African Union to deal with specific crises (Sus et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))).

The absence of formal and legal sets of criteria to determine the EU's priorities in choosing its strategic partners is critical in relation to internal divisions among the EU Member States, and the divide between the European institutions and its members (Sus et al., 2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 3](#)); Müller et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 7](#)); 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#))). As a result, there are multiple different possible explanations as to why and how the EU strategic partners were identified, and which issues the EU cooperates on with these partners. The EU's utilisation of strategic partners has led to mixed results in terms of the effectiveness of this policy tool, as the EU's strategic partnerships with Russia and China clearly did not lead to an extensive cooperation. However, there is a degree of coherence and sustainability in the utilisation of the EU's strategic partnerships, as the EU negotiated and finalised all these agreements at the multilateral level. The flexibility of these agreements adds significant value to their usefulness as foreign policy tools, as it enables the EU to adjust its policies in line with global and regional changes. Yet, as individual case study analysis of these partnerships demonstrated, this foreign policy tool was not always effective – the strategic partnership with Russia, which evolved into a strategic rivalry, is a case in point, and an attestation to the fluidity of these arrangements. Similarly, the different cross-cutting issues identified for the strategic partnerships with global players and international organisations reveal a variation and limits to cooperation. These findings provided the main inputs for this deliverable, and for the formulation of policy recommendations for the EU's external action.



## 2 Diagnosis

The European Union still is the main defender of multilateralism, and its attempts to enrich multilateralism hold keys for international cooperation. According to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, “multilateralism is in the EU’s DNA” (European Commission, 2019, p. 17), and this prompts the EU to search for multilateral solutions with other global players and international organisations for global issues. The EU’s role as an international actor is deeply ingrained in its identity, as driven by this commitment to multilateralism, with EU documents and Treaties incorporating multilateralism as a key priority (O’Sullivan, 2021). The European Parliament clearly states this mission:

Multilateralism is the only guarantee for peace, security, and sustainable and inclusive development in a highly polarised international environment [...] is at the heart of the European Union’s approach to its CFSP as enshrined in the TEU [...] and stresses [...] the importance of teaming up with like-minded EU strategic partners, in particular NATO and emerging countries in order to defend the global rule-based order that is founded on international and humanitarian law and multilateral treaties; recalls that the EU’s CFSP is based on partnership and multilateralism (European Parliament, 2020).

The EU institutions, from the Commission and European External Action Service to the European Parliament, repeatedly emphasise the EU’s commitment to multilateralism and building a global order based on rules and international law. To do so, these institutions also stress the critical role of strategic partnerships – both with other states and regional organisations. How to enrich and strengthen multilateralism is the key for international cooperation, and the European Union’s 2016 Global Strategy clearly identified the EU as the “most consistent and best-resourced supporter of a strong multilateral system in the world today” (European Parliament, 2020).

However, changes in global power distributions, growing populism and power competition between great powers present new obstacles for the EU’s vision of a multilateral, rules-based global order. Navigating an increasingly complex international environment necessitates new tools in the EU’s external action. This also implies the need to balance and manage internal divisions – both arising from divergent preferences of the EU Member States, and external actors’ unwillingness to deal with the EU, rather than the individual Member States, as an international actor. An underlying problem preventing the EU from moving towards its goalpost of multilateralism is tied to the absence of a uniform, clear European mandate for building a rule-based, multilateral global order. In its absence, the EU’s references to a strong multilateral order remain only as lip service. This is where the EU’s strategic partnerships come into the picture, as tools for developing multilateral cooperation in global governance. This is not an easy feat, as the main global partners with which the EU cooperated for tackling global challenges such as the climate crisis or non-proliferation in the post-Cold War order are increasingly either no longer interested in such cooperation, such as the US, or have transformed into strategic rivals, such as Russia. Another pressing question here is how to engage with great powers such as China. The Chinese visibility in international organisations



and in bilateral engagement with other powers is a critical factor impacting the EU's ability to enrich multilateralism. This remains as a concern for the future of multilateral order for which the EU needs to be prepared in its external action.

It is against this background that investigating the EU's global strategic partnerships through a conceptual definition is a pressing issue. In addition, situating the EU's global partners from a wide net while capturing the variation in strategic partnerships with states and international organisations is a complicated task. The modalities of cooperation patterns, the fit between the EU and Member States in terms of cooperative arrangements, as well as the EU's policies in achieving its key foreign policy objectives, all combine when assessing the effectiveness of the EU's strategic partnerships. These strategic partnerships would serve the EU's foreign policy objectives, which are its recognition as an international actor, strengthening enhanced multilateralism in the post-Cold War era, and the generation of collective solutions to global challenges through multilateralism. This fits into the EU's overall foreign policy objective, which is originally designed to pursue effective multilateralism (Drieskens & van Schaik, 2018). While effective multilateralism was a significant aspect of the 2003 European Security Strategy, a more nuanced approach is now visible following the 2007 Lisbon Treaty and the 2016 EU Global Strategy. The EU's foreign policy and its multiple tools revealed this change from effective multilateralism to a broader global governance and global order based on international law, and even strategic autonomy. Even though strategic partnerships are increasingly referred to as a relic of the Cold War, the EU still relies on this instrument for either expanding its communication channels with other global players or international organisations, as well as legitimatising its own place in global politics. It is the flexibility of strategic partnerships, combined with this communications aspect, that keep it as part and parcel of the EU's foreign policy.

There are multiple factors that shaped the EU's key priority of creating a multilateral order as a framework for international cooperation. The first factor relates to policies where the EU has the competences versus Member States' relative role in guiding the process of international cooperation. The EU has played an important role in bringing forth new initiatives on climate change, global health, development aid and international trade. However, its role in security and defence areas has remained limited and subject to the Member States' presence and initiatives. The Member States contest the EU's increased presence in multilateral fora such as the UN or the global financial institutions, and this contestation is one of the main factors preventing the EU's ability to enrich multilateralism, with the exceptions in trade where the EU institutions have the exclusive competence.

The second factor is the absence of a coherent strategy. The EU's reliance on strategic partners – both state actors and international organisations – was not devised according to a coherent, well-designed plan, but evolved on a more ad hoc basis. This lack of a concerted strategy is a critical concern in reshaping the EU's external action and its foreign policy. This fits into the framework developed in the European legal structures, as the Treaty on the EU clarifies that the EU's actions are only within the limits of the Member States' competences (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012, Art. 5). Consequently, the EU's





role in promoting multilateralism and a rules-based legal order at the global level is limited by the EU's competences apart from its Member States. The strategic partnership as an EU foreign policy tool is directly impacted by this limitation and the formal legal demarcation lines of what the EU could negotiate and implement, and what its Member States find it in their prerogatives to do so. This is the main dynamic shaping the EU's foreign policy as a non-state, regional organisation with state-like competences that builds new cooperative patterns not only with other international organisations such as the United Nations, NATO, the African Union, but also with state actors such as the US, Russia, China, Brazil.

Third, the ongoing crisis of international order, which has been exacerbated by the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the Israeli-Hamas war in the Middle East in 2023, revealed the fault lines in the EU's external action in the overall goal of enhancing multilateralism more clearly. The possible repercussions of this crisis in multilateralism and internationalism are already seen in the changes underway for cooperation schemes on non-proliferation and climate change. While former High Representative for EU Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini repeatedly underlined that multilateralism lies at the core of the EU's identity (Mogherini, 2017), its real-life applications are less visible. This is because the former toolbox of building a multilateral world order – strategic partnerships being one of these instruments – is unable to respond to the rising power competition, growing populism, and nationalism at the international level. The intensified complexity at the global level brings multilateralism at odds with the recent emphasis on nationalism and national interests. This contestation of the merits of multilateralism at the global level is a new complication for the EU's strategic partnerships and their role in building a multilateral, rule-based international order driven by both values and material interests.

## 2.1 Mapping the EU's Strategic Partners

The EU's strategic partnerships can be described as products of history, where developing strategic partnerships in the post-Cold War period in an institutionalised manner is linked to the search for a European foreign policy identity. The principles of democracy, rule of law, international law, and multilateralism, which constituted the formal foundation of the notion of strategic partnerships as per the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, are also extensions of the European foreign policy identity in this respect. Nevertheless, a survey of strategy documents between 2003 and 2022 reveals that the concept is marked by diverging aims across different periods of time. Yet, strategic partnerships and the multiple agreements that the EU signed with other global players are a success for the EU in its foreign policy (Ferreira-Pereira & Smith, 2021).

The EU is a proactive actor in identifying its potential strategic partners and initiating a partnership process with them. In terms of the EU's key strength in its external action through the utilisation of strategic partnerships, one could point to a diversification and prioritisation of certain third countries in the EU Member States' bilateral relations, albeit within a multilateral setting (Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#))). The EU, through its strategic partnerships, identifies itself as a strategic partner, with whom other global players want to establish cooperation schemes. Nevertheless, there are several layers of



differences and variation across the EU's strategic partners. One of the layers concerns the identification of 'formal' vs. 'informal' strategic partners. A problem of horizontal incoherence is recognised in this 'formal' vs. 'informal' partner identification, where the EU's various institutions and strategy documents display different visions on potential partners. This is a key challenge in the EU's global standing. A second layer of differentiation refers to the type of actors that the EU formed partnerships with. The first series of partnerships in late 1990s and early 2000s were formed with states, whereas more recently the partnership focus has been shifted to regional and international organisations. This primarily shows the Union's response to external circumstances, which necessitated cooperation with regional blocks rather than individual states for the resolution of complex region-wide challenges such as migration and terrorism. A third layer of differentiation refers to the degree of institutionalisation in the EU's strategic partnerships. Strategic partnership can come in multiple formats, i.e. through joint summit declarations, strategic partnership agreements, more standardised framework agreements, or no formal framework at all. The nature of strategic partnership agreements differs from one period to the other, as well. The first generation of strategic partnership agreements were broader in their scope, whereas the second generation of strategic agreements, such as those with Canada and Japan, are driven by common interests and similar positions on global issues such as trade and climate change.

That said, the first and third levels of variation, i.e. the absence of an overarching legal framework for dealing with strategic partners and the *ad hoc* character of some of the arrangements, signal a weakness for the EU's external action (Sus et al., 2021 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 3](#)); Sus et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))). On the other hand, it gives the EU flexibility in its external action. The EU utilised its intensive institutional and already established ties with its major partners such as the US to build upon strategic partnership arrangements. At the same time, the EU identified other global players such as Japan and Canada, with whom it has extensive trade ties (Christou et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 17](#))), and proceeded to sign agreements with these countries as well. The issue-based network of strategic partnership could be assessed as both a strength for the EU's external action but also a weakness. It is a strength because it enables the establishment of cooperative networks with global players with whom it would build common solutions to collective problems such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, food security. The utilisation of strategic partnerships reflects the need to adopt a more integrative approach in formulating the EU's external relations with third countries, especially those with higher global standings and with whom joint solutions to global challenges could be adopted. This need is a distinctive trait of the global strategic partnerships the EU has built since 1998 (Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#))).

There is also an inherent weakness in building strategic partnerships, as it reflects the EU's inability to formulate a coherent framework for all such partners. There are vast differences and variations in the EU's ability to draft strategic partnership agreements. For example, the most important strategic partnership, with the US, operates on an implicit, tacit understanding of cooperation rather than extensive legal treaties. On the other hand, the signing of multiple agreements with global players such as Canada, Japan and South Korea rests on the EU's



institutions' leadership role and their supranational authority. The EU's foreign policy documents dating back to the 2003 European Security Strategy stress the importance of strategic partners in line with the EU's main foreign policy objectives. However, this emphasis did not translate into the drafting of a main legal framework or a strategic partnership document. The 2016 EU Global Strategy emphasises the need for global governance in the EU's foreign policy. Finally, the 2022 Strategic Compass is the only document that brings a new assessment of the EU's strategic partnerships in the light of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. There is an increased emphasis on security and defence in this document and on the importance of bilateral cooperation in dealing with these global challenges. A move towards a geopolitical EU foreign policy is now more likely. However, a 'geopolitical Commission' might find itself at odds with the Member States.

This brings us into a key challenge in the strategic partnership concept for the EU's foreign policy design: strategic partnerships require differentiated approaches because of the different relationships embodied between these strategic partners as well as balancing Member State preferences. Contestation between the EU institutions and Member States over strategic partners plays a critical role in enhancing the EU's effectiveness in its external action (Müller et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#))).

## 2.2 Conceptualising the EU's Strategic Partnerships Through Specific Case Studies

While seeking to develop a holistic understanding of how different levels of policy competence affect the EU's effectiveness in its relationships with global strategic partners, four cross-cutting issues emerged as the most visible and important. Vertical incoherence, external geopolitical factors, asymmetries between the EU and the strategic partnerships, and the strategic partnerships overlapping with other EU policies. To assess the salience of these cross-cutting issues, five important case studies were identified: the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Turkey, and Brazil, and their strategic partnerships are analysed in depth along different issue areas to distinguish between the Member States' and the EU's external policies towards the identified partners. By examining the current state and historical origins of these strategic partnerships, it is possible to identify different forms that these partnerships can take, as well as the range of objectives and challenges that they seek to address.

Brazil emerges as an interesting case, shedding light on the EU's relationship with an emerging country from the Global South, which is characterised by its multi-dimensionality, as there is a wide array of policy areas in which the EU and Brazil cooperate (i.e. science and technology, trade, human rights, political cooperation in multilateral fora), and by its multi-level nature, as it greatly affects EU-Latin America relations. Thus, the question of vertical coherence of the EU-Brazil strategic partnership is key to the EU's approach to regional institutions and regional integration in Latin America and, more specifically, to Mercosur, in case of trade. The state of the EU-Brazil relationship is crucial to the further development of EU-Mercosur relations and the pending association agreement between the two blocs. On the one hand, EU Member States such as Portugal and Spain are keen to move forward with the ratification of the



agreement in efforts to preserve the Union's relationship with the region. On the other hand, Member States such as France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria clash with Brazilian normative views and actions in the fields of human rights, environmental protection, and multilateralism, most notably during the Bolsonaro government (Müller et al., 2023 ([ENGAGE Working Paper 25](#))). The EU's strategic partnership with Brazil demonstrates that a lack of horizontal and vertical coherence, is an obstacle to the establishment of a deeper relationship with a clear impact on the global order.

As for the emerging strategic partnership with the United Kingdom, both in security and defence as well as trade and economic policy, it highlights the strength of the Union's horizontal and vertical coherence following Brexit. The high degree of shared interests in the outcome of Brexit negotiations and the coherence between the Member States was echoed in strong inter-institutional relationships, especially between the European Council, the Commission, and the Parliament. Nevertheless, the analysis of the policy areas demonstrated that the EU's effectiveness was not optimal in all. While the EU was highly effective in successfully protecting the integrity of the Single Market and avoided a hard border in Ireland, in security and defence, the outcome was not as optimal. There are problems and lack of framework for the tasks of coordinating the actions of the UK and the EU, which will only become more relevant in the future because of the increase in external challenges and the growing shared UK-EU interests.

The case of the EU's relations with the United States highlights the complexities embedded in the transatlantic partnership. While the EU and the US are normatively aligned partners when it comes to security and defence, ensuring overall vertical and horizontal coherence can be a challenge. While France seems most eager to resist US dominance concerning trade, defence, and the overall policy towards China, the Central and Eastern European Member States are more pro-US and tend to prioritise NATO for their national security. Conversely, as in the case of Brazil, the EU-US partnership is also heavily impacted by changes in governmental leadership on the American side. Most recently, during the Trump administration, there was a strong shift into less cooperative European stances toward the transatlantic relationship.

The Turkish case presents a strategic relationship with an EU neighbouring country, a candidate and accession country, with dense interdependencies, in a longstanding accession process to join the EU itself, and in which clashes of norms and interests are observed. The Turkish case reveals the ongoing clashes between the EU and Member States regarding the EU's policies towards Turkey as well as horizontal incoherence across EU policies related to modernisation of the customs union, migration, promotion of norms, and unresolved Turkish bilateral disputes with two EU Member States – Cyprus and Greece. These challenges thwart progress a closer partnership, which is further complicated by the long-lasting process of Turkey's accession to the EU and the country's growing geopolitical presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Of these strategic partners, Russia presents the most diverse example: it emerges as a case illustrating the consequences of a neglected and ambiguous partnership. The lack of coherence towards Russia, aligned with permeating ambiguity on the strategic rationale on



the future of the EU-Russia strategic partnership led to its collapse in 2014, and to the current state of Russia as a 'key strategic challenge'. Disunity among EU Member States, together with Russian aggression, led to the deterioration of the EU's relationship with Russia, and internal EU disagreements among Member States explain the lack of a long-term policy for Russia.

Strategic partnerships are not isolated bilateral relationships between the EU and third countries, but each relationship is deeply embedded in larger regional and global contexts. The relationships are also particularly affected by election cycles and changes in government, which can create gaps of interests and norms. Therefore, the main question regarding the EU's strategic partnerships is whether a partnership is adaptable to the current geopolitical and geo-economic changes on the world stage while remaining in line with the objectives of the EU's external action. Such partnerships can create momentum and serve as frameworks for joint action and cooperation and may help to sustain relationships despite challenging endogenous and exogenous crises and challenges.

## 2.3 Strategic Partnerships with International Organisations

Examining how the strategic partnerships between the European Union and three international organisations – the UN, the African Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – performed concerning three crises – the security crisis in Mali, the Russian war in Ukraine, and the climate crisis, respectively – showed variations in the scope and purposes of these inter-organisational partnerships (Sus et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))). The comparison of these case studies leads to three conclusions.

First off, even though all three inter-organisational partnerships are formal and institutionalised, they differ significantly in terms of their cooperation channels and framework. The significance of official avenues of collaboration (Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#))) is demonstrated in the case of the EU-NATO partnership. Due to the low institutionalisation of this partnership before 2016, EU-NATO cooperation has been hampered by, i.a., the ongoing political impasse between Cyprus and Turkey. However, with time, as inter-organisational collaboration has further developed and official channels of cooperation have emerged, the partnership seems to be able to handle Turkey's initial reluctance to, for instance, support Finland or Sweden's inclusion in NATO more pragmatically and effectively. At the same time, the EU-AU cooperation in fighting the climate crisis has shown that formal institutionalisation of the partnership does not ensure balanced cooperation to manage a crisis. Furthermore, even if the inter-organisational relationship is highly institutionalised, it still can fail to assure that a crisis will be given the appropriate attention by both partners. Similarly, the UN-EU case showed that this specific partnership does not make the most of existing channels of formal cooperation to tackle the crisis in Mali. The strategic partnerships of the EU-AU and the EU-UN challenge the commonly held assumption in the literature that more densely institutionalised strategic partnerships are more likely to produce concrete results (Muftuler-Bac et al., 2022 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#)); Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). As these two cases show, institutionalisation is not sufficient



for cooperation to be effective, and indeed, in certain cases, informal rules of cooperation may be more beneficial.

Second, the division of labour among the EU and the international organisations emerges as the central aspect of inter-organisational cooperation. The three case studies offer variation in this regard, ranging from a rather unspecified division of responsibilities such as in the case of EU-NATO, to an informal but established division of labour in mandates between EU and UN regarding tackling the crisis in Mali. In this case, the EU mission was specifically aimed at restoring the military capabilities of the Malian armed forces, while the mandate of the UN operation was broader, and focused on supporting national and international efforts to rebuild the entire Malian security sector. Furthermore, given the significant differences between the two international organisations' mandates in Mali, this case provides an example for complementarity between these two actors, rather than competition. At the same time, it seems that the division of labour between the organisations can be harmed by asymmetries within the partnership. As Bierman (2008, p. 168) argues, drawing on the EU-NATO strategic partnership – in which the EU is fully dependent on the use of NATO military resources, such “dependence and hierarchy” can limit the results of inter-organisational cooperation.

The strategic partnerships between the EU and international organisations are directly influenced by external and geopolitical factors. As these three cases demonstrate, competition between the European Union and other global actors – particularly China, India, and Russia – is having an increasing impact on cooperation between the EU and other international organisations. These emerging powers are becoming more assertively involved in major international conflicts and crises because of their growing geopolitical ambitions. The growing rivalry from their side has multiple implications for the Union and for the EU's ambition to promote multilateralism.

For example, as the case of the EU-AU partnership shows, African countries increasingly have the option of choosing to cooperate with China and India on climate-related issues. In some cases, China and India indeed prove to be the partner of choice, diminishing the role of the EU. Furthermore, the competition between the EU and rising powers can also hinder the ongoing inter-organisational partnerships between the EU and other IOs. As the UN-EU cooperation in Mali demonstrates, the Russian-affiliated military presence led to the dramatic deterioration of the security situation on the ground. As a result, due to the inability to prevent the engagement of EU-trained Malian forces in violent activities (Human Rights Watch, 2022), the EU decided in April 2022 to suspend operational training for the Malian armed forces and the National Guard, thereby freezing the relevant part of both EUTM and EUCAP operations (Sabatino et al., 2023, (ENGAGE [Working Paper 19](#))). In the end, the UN Security Council unanimously decided to end the peacekeeping mission in Mali. This geopolitical rivalry between global powers is also evident regarding the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine. China and India's ambiguous stances, which abstain from outright denouncing Russia as an aggressor, enable other countries to adopt a similarly ambiguous approach and fend off calls from the EU and NATO.



## 2.4 Cross-Cutting Issues

There are cross-cutting issues which emerge from the contestation between the EU institutions and EU Member States, shaping the EU's strategic partnerships and their effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability. These issues are first vertical incoherence, where disagreements among the Member States and the EU institutions lead to ambivalence in the EU's approach to strategic partnerships, hindering progress and long-term vision. Second, external geopolitical factors play an important role. While strategic partnerships can serve as frameworks for joint action, external factors in the geopolitical environment affect their effectiveness and sustainability. Third, there is often an asymmetry between the EU and its strategic partners, which can be perceived as unfair by the partners. Finally, the EU's strategic partnerships frequently overlap with other EU policies towards third countries and regions, and these policies might have different objectives and effects, leading to a less effective partnership. The EU's strategic partnerships endow the EU with a global position and equip it to assert itself more powerfully in international politics, in line with the challenges the EU faces in its other instruments of external action, as demonstrated by almost all research findings of the ENGAGE project. All these issues matter significantly in determining the strategic partnership as a tool for the EU external action. In assessing the salience of these cross-cutting issues, the EU's strategic partnerships with other states and international organisations reveal differences across these issues.

For vertical incoherence, the EU's relations with Russia and Turkey, as well as the EU-NATO cooperation, are cases in point. A major challenge regards the internal divisions within the EU and between the EU Member States and the EU institutions. The material preferences of some EU Member States such as Greece and Cyprus, or Poland and Hungary, influenced the EU's strategic partnership arrangements with global actors and/or international organisations. For example:

Essentially, the EU's lasting lack of a long-term and strategic Russia policy is the produce of internal disagreements and disunity among EU Member States in that "the relationship with Russia has arguably been the most divisive factor in EU external relations policy (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2008, p. 170, as cited in Müller et al., 2023, p. 67 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#))).

This disunity is well-documented in both EU and EU Member States' official discourses and in scholarly analyses. Roughly, we can distinguish between EU Member States that are drivers of the EU's Russia policy (Germany, joined by France), veto players (Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, lately also Czechia and Slovakia as well as Nordic EU Members), and spoilers (Hungary). This is also similar for the Turkish case. For example, Spain, Italy, and Hungary have vested interests in building solid ties and engagement with Turkey, while others are using their EU memberships to settle their own scores with Turkey as veto players, particularly the Republic of Cyprus. In particular, and especially after Brexit, Germany is solidifying its role as a key and leading player in shaping Turkey's relations with the EU in policy areas such as economic integration and migration, while Greece, France and Cyprus are advancing their own



security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean especially with regards to energy and security (Müller et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 13](#))).

Interestingly, this vertical coherence is also visible in the EU-NATO strategic partnership, which depends on the political will of their members to cooperate with each other. The question of how to deepen cooperation with other intergovernmental organisations is a pressing issue for the EU's strategic partnerships, which is directly impacted by Member States' positions. For example,

[T]he undermining of the US commitments to the Alliance during Donald Trump's presidency, President Emmanuel Macron's comments about the brain death of NATO [...] and ongoing intra-EU debate about its strategic autonomy, and the rising but still insufficient defence spending in many of the European NATO members, demonstrate the political limitations to the strategic partnership. (Sus et al., 2023, p. 23 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))).

In terms of the second cross-cutting issue, which is the impact of geopolitical factors in determining the development of EU's strategic partnerships, the EU's relations with Russia, the US, and the UK, and Turkey provide solid examples. Russia's war of aggression, starting with its unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, brought not only immense human suffering and destruction in Ukraine, but also an end to illusions of any return to cooperation anytime soon, which has lately been part of heated intra-EU debates and tensions. As for the informal partnership with the UK, the security and defence relationship can, similarly, persist into the future without a significant security gap, given the background presence of NATO. However, it offers a poor framework when it comes to the task of coordinating the actions of the UK and the EU, which is only going to become more important in the future, given the increase in external challenges and the extent of shared UK-EU interests. The EU's partnerships with international organisations also are impacted by the geopolitical environment, as demonstrated by the EU's relations with the African Union, which are affected by the growing influence of other powers such as India and China in international climate negotiations. In the UN, we see this as well: "the current situation is a sum of multiple external factors" (Sus et al., 2023, p. 15 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))). This is further demonstrated in Mali, where Russian involvement complicated the security situation on the ground as well as the modalities of the EU-UN cooperation. Finally, the EU's partnership with NATO is affected by challenges from China, and India.

The third cross-cutting issue is the asymmetrical relationship between the EU and its strategic partners, which is highly visible in multiple case studies. For example, this is apparent in the EU's promotion of human rights in Brazil (Wouters et al., 2020), which are asymmetrical by design:

The EU-Brazil partnership in the field of human rights is particularly impacted by institutional and legal asymmetries and the distribution of competences on both sides. While the Brazilian government is fully accountable for its domestic legislation and protection of human rights, or lack thereof, the EU has limited legislative and





enforcement competences regarding human rights (Müller et al., 2023, p. 13 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 25](#))).

The EU's strategic partnership with the African Union illustrates the asymmetry in the EU's relations with international organisations. In the eyes of the AU and its Member States, the EU is sometimes seen as exporting development and investment frameworks rather than jointly developing them with its African counterparts (Sus et al., 2023 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))). In this sense, most recently, the AU-EU summit of 2022 was perceived "as a missed opportunity to build on African initiatives and engage with civil society" (CONCORD, 2022, as cited in Sus et al., 2023, p. 31 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))), as the EU's agenda and Team Europe occupied most of centre stage (Bilal, 2022).

Finally, there is an overlap between the EU's strategic partnerships and other policy areas. One example is the accession process with Turkey, which overlaps with the increased reference to Turkey as a key partner, rather than an accession process. These two policies – partnership and accession – have different objectives and procedures. As for the African Union, despite high levels of institutionalisation in the EU-AU strategic partnership, the framework overlaps with other structures, such as development and financial support that is articulated through various structures: "ACP countries, which include most African Sub-Saharan states, receive support through Cotonou and post-Cotonou partnership agreements. North-African countries, in turn, are subsumed under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plans" (Sus et al., 2023, p. 32 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))). The African Union Member States might thus decide to activate the different EU channels, depending on their aims. This, in turn, "can lead to a lack of coordination in climate efforts and competition for the allocation of resources (Lightfoot, 2020, as cited in Sus and et al., 2023, p. 32 (ENGAGE [Working Paper 28](#))).

These cross-cutting issues are important in determining the effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability of the EU's strategic partnerships as a key foreign policy instrument in an increasingly geopolitically competitive international environment characterised by greater uncertainty.



### 3 Recommendations

This deliverable addressed the critical importance of building and sustaining strategic partnerships between the EU and major global players, and the coordination between EU institutions and Member States for multilateral, bilateral, multi-issue-based relations with these strategic partners. This is in line first with the EU's ability to reach its foreign policy objective of promoting effective multilateralism through bilateral relations, and second with the EU's overall aim of enhancing global governance. These policy issues play a central role in shaping the coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability of the EU's external action, especially in terms of its relations with third countries and international organisations. The EU has used the rubric of strategic partnership as a framework for its extensive ties with global players – ten states and six international organisations, formally – in its pursuit of a more visible global role for itself. Strategic partnerships are designed as important tools for the EU's realisation of its foreign policy objectives in terms of increased multilateralism, promotion of collective solutions to global challenges, and a recognition of the EU as an international, global actor. The network of strategic partners reflects the multiplicity of the EU's foreign policy objectives in different issue areas in terms of finding common solutions to global problems and challenges.

There are multiple ways in which the EU could enhance the coherence of its external action with global players. While there is significant flexibility in the EU's institutional tools for its engagement with strategic partners, the EU relies on extensive policy dialogues, international agreements, and summits for its long-term relations with other global players. This deliverable reflected on the conceptualisation of the EU's strategic partners and explored the relevant forms of cooperation and conflict between the EU, its Member States, and their respective global strategic partners. This reflection leads to the following conclusions.

First, there is a need for the EU to conduct a comprehensive review of the strategic partnerships. It is apparent that strategic partners are essential for the EU's self-conception and its institutionalisation of the international visibility and global presence, despite the question marks over at least some of the strategic partnerships. The policy implications for this self-conception are multilevel and multi-issue driven. A comparison of the more successful strategic partnerships, for example with Japan and Canada, with the problematic ones such as Russia, China and India, is essential to identify the elements that make one partnership more successful compared to others. The European External Action Service and the European Commission would be expected to undertake this review with an eye towards streamlining the partnerships, and perhaps consider annulling those that no longer function, such as the strategic partnership with Russia. While the 2022 Strategic Compass seems to be an attempt towards this review, with its formulation of a security strategy to enhance and strengthen the EU's multilateralism, a more thorough assessment of the effectiveness of the EU's strategic partnerships and all existing agreements is needed. An essential component of this review would be to bring the Member States and the EU institutions closer together in their respective positions, which is tied to the second policy recommendation.



Second, the EU's strategic partnerships matter in terms of demarcating the strategic autonomy and capacity of the EU as a global actor – separate and different from its Member States. Its strategic partnership initiative is basically designed to realise its main foreign policy objective 'in pursuit of effective multilateral objective'. The EU's multilateral aims are not always on the same level with the individual Member States, which results in a weakening of effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability. As a result, a key policy recommendation would be related to the coordination of the EU and its Member States in their external relations with strategic partners. This could be done through increased Member State involvement with the EU institutions through new coordination and communications mechanisms. The adoption of Global Gateway could be seen as a step towards this new direction.

Third, the increased security risks, with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine first, and the attacks against Israel in 2023 with the subsequent Israeli-Hamas war second, have highlighted the potential for major wars in the European periphery both in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. The EU's foreign policy needs to prepare for and counterbalance these security risks in its periphery. The new emphasis on a 'geopolitical Commission' might be a step in that regard. A possible move would be to find clearer instruments to enhance security-based cooperation with other players. For example, it is high time to build on the already robust security cooperation between the EU and NATO for out-of-area operations.

Fourth, as strategic partnerships with democracies seem more sustainable, a focus on structural synergies and interest alignment with these players could be targeted, beyond the government of the day. This is seen clearly in the case studies for the EU-US, the EU-UK and EU-Brazil relationships, where a change in governmental leadership creates obstacles; whereas the EU is, maybe surprisingly, more consistent over time. Prioritising strategic partnerships with democracies and like-minded states comes out as a clear policy recommendation. This includes more frequent bilateral and informal dialogue mechanisms with these strategic partners. In other words, the EU could benefit from strengthening bilateral tools, along with enhancing multilateral structures with democracies.

Fifth, as strategic partnerships with regional organisations are traditionally connected to the EU's historical goal of promoting regionalism and regional integration in other regions, a tighter region-to-region relationship is needed. A policy recommendation for strategic partnerships with international organisations is to enhance these relations – especially with international organisations such as NATO, where EU and NATO membership mostly overlap.

Finally, as the EU's strategic partnerships were initially important for enhancing multilateralism with bilateral agreements with other global players, a policy recommendation is related to enhancing the EU's capacities in managing the existing partnerships. While it is not sufficiently clear how the EU would manage the already existing strategic partnerships, an effort is needed for its formulation at the EU level. The expansion of the EU's diplomatic capacity is needed for this improvement and to increase the EU's global visibility. This is related to generating initiatives to build linkages between different issue areas for which the strategic partnerships are established. A closer relationship between trade-related concerns with environmental



issues, or security-driven interests would serve the objective of streamlining the EU's strategic partnerships as an external action tool.

The adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 was a solid step in the revision of the EU's global aspirations in a coherent fashion. The next step in its implementation would need to ensure the EU's ability to project itself as a coherent foreign policy actor, with the capacity to expand its cooperation with other global players into multiple issue areas. This builds on enhanced efforts towards the EU's credibility as a strategic partner itself and contributes to global governance. The international system is now markedly defined by power rivalries between the major powers, who as state actors are dominating the global discourses and policies for international cooperation. Great power competition between the US, China and Russia is becoming marked over their preferred vision for global governance, where the EU's own multilateralism preference is becoming less visible. This is further compounded by internal divisions among EU Member States. This situation points to a clear need for a revision of the EU's strategic partnerships in line with global power competition. A pressing question is whether it is possible to prioritise like-minded states with whom mutually beneficially cooperative policies could be contemplated in this revision. Therefore, rather than throwing out strategic partnerships as an outdated tool of external action, the EU could modernise these agreements by differentiating between partnerships with like-minded states such as Japan, Canada, and others such as China and India. This differentiation could be done on an issue-based framework, with the creation of new tools such as informal, regular dialogues with China and India, and coalitions with like-minded states in bilateral and multilateral settings.



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**This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 962533.**