

The EU and its “strategic partnerships” with the BRICS

Introduction

The “rise of the rest”, the BRICS and the second group of emerging powers including Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria or Turkey, is the main argument for a more integrated Europe¹. According to most future scenarios, in about ten years, even Germany will have lost its position as the fourth world economy, while Brazil, India, Mexico and Turkey, may be part of the first club of nations. Although some analysts deny a constant rise of the BRICS², there is little doubt that in the near future, the EU will not be as strong as it was in the global economy. Demographic trends and the ongoing crisis of the Euro clearly sustain these speculations³.

The future position of the EU in the world highly depends on its capacity to present itself as an integrated space, on the attraction of immigrants and on its ability to create new alliances beyond the traditional Transatlantic Partnership with the United States. Although for historic reasons and economic interdependences, the United States will always have a special place in EU foreign policy, Obama’s Presidency marked a clear shift away from Europe.

For the first time, the EU stands on its own feet in the world and has the historic opportunity to become an independent global actor on its own. The decline of the transatlantic partnership coincides with major progress towards a common EU foreign policy by the appointment of Catherine Ashton as the “EU’s foreign Minister” and the head of the European External Action Service (EEAS). Other examples in the history of European integration sustain the argument that the “technical instrument” of a European diplomatic service - and the implicit need to define common positions towards third countries between the European, Commission, the Council and the member states - will push the EU towards a common external policy. The strategic partnerships with ten countries (seven of them new or emerging powers) are part of this exercise.

An instrument for a global EU? The Strategic Partnerships

The debate on Strategic Partnerships has been an important step forward to a global Europe. It has been an ex post concept created by the EU to up-grade the status of its main Western allies (Canada, Japan and the United States) and to include the “new” powers like

¹ See Ash, 2012

² See Ruchir, 2012.

³ See European Commission, 2011a.

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China and Russia as well as the emerging global players Brazil, India, Mexico, South Korea and South Africa. The EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Catherine Ashton, identified the consolidation of strategic partnerships as a key goal of her mandate.

Even though the Strategic Partnerships are a too heterogeneous concept for defining relations with the EU's special ten⁴, they reflect the political will of the EU to be part of the new global game. Since strategic partnerships with emerging powers (the BRICS, Mexico and South Korea) prevail over historic alliances (Canada, Japan and the United States), the EU is also repositioning itself towards non-traditional partners.

The Strategic partnerships can be divided into three groups: 1) historic partners of the West (Canada, Japan, the United States), like-minded countries (Mexico and South Korea) and potential rivals (the BRICS forum). In terms of power, seize, economic interdependence and political influence, China, Russia and the United States are by far the most important of the EU's special ten.

The EU's individual strategic partnerships with Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are the most complex in terms of common goals, interests and global strategies. Even though in terms of seize, global weight, economic power and values, the BRICS are too different to build a convincing alliance, they constitute the most powerful veto-group in international relations. Its principal goal addresses not so much internal coherence but to exercise external pressure (against the United States and/or its European allies). Thus, the first question to ask is if the BRICS should be addressed only individually or also as a group. The answer to this question depends on its internal performance in the near future.

The BRICS: heterogeneous but powerful

What makes the BRICS group interesting is not just its economic power and seize (43% of the global population and 25% of GDP), but also its political capacity to block decisions taken by the United States and/or the European Union. Since they are not properly represented in the main international organizations like the IMF or the UN Security Council (except from China and Russia), they tend to act from outside as veto-powers against the "unilateralism of the West"⁵.

In this respect, they demonstrate a coherent voting behavior at the UN Security Council where all five countries had been represented in 2011. Except from the 1973 Resolution on Libya (South Africa voted in favor, the others abstained), the BRICS "casted identical votes on 37 of the 38 Resolutions voted upon until 1 September".⁶ This internal convergence can be partly attributed to the decision, taken at the 2010 and 2011 Summits, to coordinate the positions at the UN Security Council.

There are many examples for the BRICS hindering a consensus within climate change negotiations, a common position of the international community on Iran or with regards to a UN-intervention in Syria:

⁴ See Gratius, 2011.

⁵ See European Commission, 2011a, p. 5.

⁶ See European Commission, 2011a, p. 10.

- The group is reluctant to accept the EU's preference for binding commitments on GHG reductions to further advance climate change negotiations⁷.
- The BRICS seeks to settle the crisis in Syria by "peaceful means" and insists on the need to "respect Syrian independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Delhi Declaration, 26 March 2012).
- With the same argument, particularly Russia and China reject to impose sanctions to certain countries such as Iran or Syria.

The performance of the BRICS group is amazing. Created as an economic label by Goldman and Sachs more than ten years ago, it transformed into a powerful club of nations whose regular summits receive a similar attention than the declining G-8 high-level meetings. Different to the trilateral IBSA forum (India, Brazil, South Africa) focused on enhancing cooperation between the partners, the Declarations of the BRICS summits concentrate on global affairs where they adopt increasingly common positions. Peace, security, development and cooperation are the four priorities of the group.

BRICS Summits (2009-2013)

Event	Date	Location	Focus	Results
1 st summit	16 June 2009	Yekaterinburg	Economic crisis, G-20, reform of the global financial system	Joint statement
2 nd summit	16 April 2010	Brasilia	Reform of the global financial system and the UN, development, climate change	Joint statement
3 rd summit	14 April 2011	Sanya	Broad range of global affairs (from development to the global financial system)	Sanya Declaration, inclusion of South Africa (BRICS)
4 th summit	29 March 2012	New Delhi	Global stability, security and prosperity, Middle East and North Africa, climate change	Delhi Declaration, Action Plan, BRICS Development Bank (planned)
5 th summit	26 March 2013	Durban	Economic cooperation	

Source: own elaboration.

The joint statements of the four summits held by the bloc are clearly focused on the international agenda. They underline the common vision of a multi-polar world, a reform of the global financial architecture (the IMF quota reform) and of the UN-system, the strengthening of the G-20, the accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals or climate change negotiations. The main goal of the group is to enhance "the voice of emerging and developing countries in international affairs" (Sanya Declaration, 14 April 2011).

Beyond the global stage, the BRICS countries share few common interests. In terms of size and power, they include a highly heterogeneous group of countries: the global military powers China and India, a declining but still powerful Russia, the economic powerhouse

⁷ See European Commission, 2011b, p. 1.

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and regional leader Brazil and the much smaller but important continental player South Africa. The range of topics to be addressed by the five is not large.

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Military cooperation and global security issues are important for China, India and Russia, but less relevant for Brazil and South Africa. Development is a common challenge for Brazil, India and South Africa: they share large inequities at the domestic level and are performing as new donors in the framework of the so called south-south cooperation. Since these countries also represent the IBSA group, they have already established a common trust fund for development cooperation projects in third countries. Therefore, they don't need a BRICS development bank, foreseen at the last summit between the five held in 2012 in New Delhi. Climate change is a common challenge for the BASIC group, but not so much for Russia.

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Even on economic issues, there are large interest divergences. While China, India, Brazil and South Africa are fully integrated in the WTO, Russia became a member in 2011 and hasn't been very active on the global trade agenda. A similar conclusion can be drawn for energy. China, India and South Africa highly depend on traditional energy sources and imports, Brazil can cover its own energy demands by recent oil findings and renewable sources and Russia is an important supplier of oil and gas (although with limited reserves). These divergences also determine opposed international interests: Brazil and Russia benefit from high energy prices that punishes India or South Africa.

At that background, the BRICS group has a fragile ground for internal cooperation, a limitation that also conditions its external behavior. The different voting pattern of Brazil, India and South Africa (abstention), China and Russia (against) on the UN human rights situation and sanctions against Iran in 2010 evidenced the difficulty to create a common agenda and act as a bloc. The most likely scenario for the BRICS is its performance as a global veto-player, but not so much as a proactive force in international relations or an internal common interest alliance.

Is the EU a strategic partner for the BRICS?

Neither the EU nor the BRICS have ever suggested a group-to-group dialogue. The fact that relations with the EU has never been an important topic in their final declarations of the group gives an idea on the low level of importance that the BRICS attributes to Europe. The problem is that its power-status is based on the opposition and not on the alliance with the EU and the United States. As an important veto player against the West and its self-proclaimed representation of the developing world, the BRICS as an inter-state forum does not seem to be particularly interested in building a Strategic Partnership with the EU, even though they recognize its key role in the WTO, the IMF or the G-20.

Nonetheless, at a bilateral level, all five countries have strong reasons for defining closer relations with the EU. One of the arguments is the level of economic interdependences and/or cooperation. China's export boom and economic growth depends highly on the EU (its main trade partner), while China is the EU's second import and export market. Russian oil and gas exports concentrate on the EU and Moscow is not only Brussels main energy supplier, but also an important political headache, particularly when it comes to solve international conflicts such as the nuclear problem with Iran or the civil war in Syria.

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For Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa, the EU is their main trade partner; and all five countries are among the 15 top trading partner. Moreover, India negotiates a free trade agreement with the EU that South Africa has already signed. Brazil might follow their steps, since the 14 years negotiation process between the EU and Mercosur (integrated by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela) have reached a dead-end. No concrete steps had been taken in EU relations with China and Russia, whereas Brussels and Washington have recently revived the idea to establish a Transatlantic Free Trade Zone, initially developed in 1997.

Strategic Partnerships between the EU and the BRICS countries

Country and SP	Core issues	FTA	Type of SP
Brazil (2007)	Trade (9 th partner), climate change, energy, development	EU-MERCOSUR format since 1999	Value and interest driven
China (2003)	Trade and investment (2 nd partner), climate change, human rights	No, Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)	Interest based, horizontal relations
India (2008)	Trade (8 th partner), investment, security, development	FTA negotiations since 2006	Value and interest driven
Russia (2009)	Trade (3 rd partner), investment, energy, security	No, PCA	Interest based, horizontal relations
South Africa (2006)	Development, Africa, trade (13 th partner), peace	Signed in 2010	Development focused, asymmetric SP

Source: own elaboration, based on S. Gratius, The EU and the "special ten": deepening or widening Strategic Partnerships, FRIDE Policy Brief 76, Madrid 2011.

Another argument for bilateral strategic partnerships is the position of all five countries in their respective region and/or at the global level. If China and Russia are consolidated and strong regional and global players, Brazil is becoming a regional power in South and increasingly in Latin America (Gratius & Saraiva, 2013), India is at the heart of South East Asian regionalization and South Africa is still the economic powerhouse in the continent with a leadership role on regional cooperation, peace and integration. In this sense, the BRICS include five potential regional leaders with large influence in their respective neighborhoods, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Another important topic at the bilateral agenda is security. It is important in relations with Russia as a neighbor and hegemon in Central Asia, with China as the second world military power, India as a nuclear power, Brazil because of the drugs problem, and South Africa due to the fact that has one of the highest crime rates on the continent and is a relevant peace-broker in its neighborhood. Other topics rank high on individual SP agendas: climate change and environment with Brazil, India and China, energy security and neighborhood policy with Russia, and development cooperation with Brazil, India and South Africa.

The dominance of diverging bilateral interests demonstrates the lack of an EU-BRIC agenda. Given the low level of internal coherence of the bloc and its veto-power status at the global level, it makes little or no sense to design an EU policy towards the BRICS, Vice-versa, the BRICS had never thought about adopting a common stance on the EU that, in any case, is not on the radar of the heterogeneous group of countries albeit its high rank on the respective foreign policy agendas of Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa.

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www.kas.de/brasilien/en/**Converging visions by strategic partnerships?**

Since they represent a mutual recognition of their respective power-status, the Strategic Partnerships have been an important instrument for up-grading the role of the EU and the BRICS at the global stage (Grevi, 2010). Even though, the level of convergence between both actors is considerably low and the EU's strategic partnerships with the BRICS did not (yet or never?) fulfill the expectation to promote efficient multilateralism.

If the EU wants to deepen its Strategic Partnerships with these five countries, it should not expect them to follow their multilateral behavior but to adapt to their international agendas or to accept that they are not like-minded partner. Without major concessions on both sides, it will be impossible to create a real strategic partnership that makes a difference in the world. For the EU it will be much easier to rely on traditional alliance on global issues than to move towards the positions of the BRICS countries highly influenced by the traditional interpretation of national sovereignty, Realpolitik and non-interference in domestic affairs.

Despite nice summit declarations, none of the BRICS share the concept of the EU's "efficient multilateralism" based on global governance by norms and values strongly based on its own experience. It is evident that those norms and values are not shared by China and Russia and increasingly interpreted in different ways by the democratic countries Brazil, India and South Africa. Brazil is the most committed to multilateralism, but when it comes to weight human rights against national sovereignty, in most cases (clear examples are Cuba, Iran or Venezuela), Brasilia prefers the latter. This does not reflect so much different values but the strategy to soft-balancing the United States (and the EU) by the alignment with other BRICS (Gratius, 2011).

In general, Brazil, India, South Africa and even China identify themselves with the global south. Consequently, their understanding of multilateralism has a strong developmental and multi-polar bias. But different to other Latin American countries like Chile, Colombia and Mexico, neither Brazil nor India or South Africa wish to join the traditional club of donors integrated in the OECD-DAC Committee but to promote its own model to promote development in third countries.

Let's take the example of humanitarian interventions under a UN umbrella. Even Brazil, the EU's closest ally within the BRICS in terms of global governance and values, is reluctant to support military interventions and has recently proposed its concept "the responsibility at protecting" as an alternative to the UN's "responsibility to protect". Behind this idea lies Brazil's skepticism towards US led UN interventions with low levels of information and transparency with regards to the final goals and means of military interventions in third countries.

The reform of the IMF quota system is a clear case for different positions between the EU and the BRICS. The European reluctance to give up traditional positions for broadening the power status of emerging countries, despite the crisis and the offer of some BRICS countries to support the EU's rescue packages (partially financed by the IMF) proof how distant both sides are with regards to the reform of the international financial system.

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A similar trend towards diverging or even opposed positions can be identified in many other international issues. While the BASIC countries acted as a group (demanding higher reductions of GHG emissions on behalf of the industrialized countries), Russia has a low profile at the international conferences on climate change and environment protection. Although Brazil and the EU are strong advocates for an international climate change regime, both pursued similar objectives with different means and at the Earth Summit in 2012 in Rio de Janeiro they were not able to join forces for obtaining concrete results at the high level international event (Gonzalez & Gratius, 2012).

Bilateral strategic partners and global rivals

There is little room for an EU “grand strategy” towards the BRICS countries. The five countries are not a coherent group and the BRICS will probably never constitute an alliance with some degree of internal cohesion and institutionalization. Nonetheless, their regular summits prove a power shift to new emerging or already consolidated powers, and the BRICS represent an important pressure group with sufficient influence to hinder an inter-state consensus on many issues of the international agenda.

All five countries are strategic bilateral partners of the EU but rather rivals in global governance. In this sense, they are “part of the strategy of cooperating while competing” (Hess, 2012). Different positions on many issues of the international agenda demonstrate the limits of EU’s multilateralism in a multi-polar world of shifting alliances. Therefore, it makes sense to maintain and extend the bilateral partnerships by including as many issues as possible, but it could be a waste of time to expect the BRICS to follow EU’s positions on international affairs or to share its concept of efficient multilateralism.

Consequently, the EU should accept that the BRICS are not allies but rivals in the struggle for global management and influence. Thus, the EU should concentrate on the bilateral dimension of the strategic partnerships. This means to adapt and vary the contents of cooperation instead of homogenizing the strategic partnerships applying the same instruments for each partner. A “one-fits-it all” strategy does neither reflect the particularities of very different types or relationships nor does it contribute to a clear roadmap. Is it really useful to establish an EU-Brazil dialogue on security affairs, as agreed at the 2013 Summit in Brasilia, given the diverging views and the low priority the issue has in bilateral relations? It could probably make more sense to envisage bilateral progress on trade and investment than to open new dialogues on issues with little prospects for concrete results. Should the EU discuss climate change with Russia if there is little ground for success? Or discuss development with China whose views on south-south cooperation are completely different from those of the EU?

In times of crisis and limited resources, the EU should create a feasible bilateral agenda of cooperation instead of trying to convince reluctant partners to adopt their own positions at the global stage. First of all, strategic partnerships with emerging powers should serve to intensify common interests at the bilateral level. It is highly unlikely that the EU will sharpen its profile as a global actor by searching common ground with the BRICS whose prime interest is not to promote multilateralism but the legitimate goal to broaden the power status of its members.

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