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THE EU, STRATEGIC DIPLOMACY AND THE BRIC COUNTRIES

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Introduction

One of the key tests facing the emerging diplomatic system of the European Union is that of developing a strategic diplomacy. By this we mean a diplomacy that focuses on the pursuit of a strategic vision for the Union, and that provides principles and guidelines to shape the positioning of the EU both in the global arena more generally and in relation to key strategic partners.

Such a diplomacy is demanding and must by implication be underpinned by a number of key elements: a stable institutional base, a means of extracting and coordinating the relevant resources both at the European level and from the Member States, a unified strategic narrative or vision, the capacity to adapt this narrative in the face of major international trends, and the capacity to both prioritise and target EU actions in a coordinated fashion on key relationships, partners or activities.

The contention of this paper is that the EU has not yet developed such a strategic diplomacy - indeed, that in some ways it may be further from achieving this ambition than it was before the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. It does however possess the tools with which to construct a strategic diplomacy, and we make a number of recommendations about the ways in which those tools might be deployed in the next period.

We proceed by looking first at the challenges facing the development of a strategic diplomacy by the EU, and then by focusing on a key set of targets for such a diplomacy – the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) group. As will be seen later, this group is in itself a moving and sometimes elusive target, indicative of the renewed fluidity of international dealings more generally in the 21st century, and thus it poses a particular test of the EU's capacity to address diplomatic challenges in a strategic manner.

Towards a Strategic Diplomacy for the European Union?

As noted above, there is a set of characteristics or key elements that must be provided in order for a diplomacy to deserve the label 'strategic'. Here, we evaluate the extent to which the EU's emerging system of diplomacy can provide these elements, and the ways in which such a diplomacy might in general be directed.

In the first place, strategic diplomacy requires a stable *institutional base*. The Lisbon Treaty sets out a new framework for EU diplomacy, centred on the interaction of several key institutions or services: the External Action Service (EEAS) led by the High Representative (also a Vice-President of the Commission) (HRVP), the President of the European Council (PEC), the Commission and the European Parliament. This new framework has actually been the source of considerable flux and potential disruption in its first year of existence, since its construction and operationalisation has entailed complex negotiations about financing and conditions

of service, substantial transfers of personnel – especially from the Commission and the Council Secretariat – to the EEAS, the need to recruit significant numbers of diplomats from national services, and the challenge of establishing a new diplomatic culture in conditions where existing cultures and organisations need to be merged or re-engineered.

Not surprisingly, this process has engendered significant uncertainties and often suspicions among those involved. Despite the consistent effort to create new working habits and mechanisms of coordination, there has been a constant threat of fragmentation, and of competition for ‘turf’ among both new and existing institutions. A sustained effort of ‘internal diplomacy’ has been needed to keep the machine moving, and there remain areas of instability within the overall framework. There is the danger or the reality of fragmentation, and this is especially challenging in the face of external turbulence such as that created by the ‘Arab Spring’ and conflicts within the EU’s ‘southern neighbourhood’. The uncertainties have often centred on the EEAS, since on the one hand it has needed to create a ‘space’ for itself in the midst of competition and (sometimes) predation by other agencies and on the other hand it has been seen by them either as ‘DG RELEX continued’ or as an essentially subservient arm of the President of the European Council.

This uncertainty clearly affects the capacity of the EEAS to contribute its full voice to the development of a strategic vision, and it is compounded by issues relating to *the capacity to extract resources* with which to support such a strategic vision. We have already noted the problems of coordination that have become apparent within the first year of the new machine’s operation, and it is clear that these relate in substantial degree to the perceptions that different groups have of the role to be played by the EEAS. Is it the potential leader of an integrated and strategic EU foreign policy, or is it no more and no less than a ‘service’, with the role of supporting other institutions (primarily the Commission and the Council/European Council) through analysis, briefing and the preparation of negotiations?

The Treaty is not much help in deciding this question, since it implies a complex and issue-specific division of labour between the major institutions and agencies. It is clear that the EEAS is the major repository of diplomatic expertise within the system, and thus that it claims the key human resources; but the development of ‘foreign relations’ groups within the Commission, both generally and by specific DGs, and the claim by the PEC to be the key external representative of the EU at the level of heads of State or government, are both important qualifications to this position. So is the brute fact that for many of the EU’s external links, the key policy base is within the Commission, accompanied by much of the relevant expertise and by funding that sometimes dwarfs that available to the EEAS. A particular problem is posed by the persistent if muted contest for control of resources at the level of EU delegations in third countries, where the requirements of policies (for example development) still largely controlled by the Commission are at odds with the needs of effective diplomatic representation in specific areas. If the EEAS is to establish a firm identity as the ‘foreign ministry’ of the EU then the person delegated to be foreign minister (HRVP), in practice if not formally in name, needs to be able to extract the necessary resources. However the capacity to extract resources for the conduct of diplomacy is contested – and that reflects the position just in Brussels, without taking into consideration the diplomatic resources and efforts of EU Member States.

This latter factor is important not only in resource terms but also when it comes to the *development of a strategic narrative or vision* by the EU system. The Treaty seems clear that this is the responsibility of the PEC and the EEAS, directed by the HRVP, working together – the PEC having the responsibility for representation and communication at the highest levels, and the EEAS the task of supporting this and then of implementing the relevant actions. There is an ambiguity here, in that the PEC seems to have the responsibility primarily for representation, whereas three other key facets of any diplomacy – preparatory briefing, communication and negotiation – lie with the EEAS or (on ‘pillar one’ issues) with the Commission.

This uneasy division of labour means that the development of any EU strategic narrative is a complex exercise embodying both competition for ‘voice’ and the coordination of the ‘voices’ that are involved. Such problems are not unique to the EU, of course, but they take a particular form where the diplomatic machine itself is in the process of gestation and where the growth of an agreed division of labour is as much a political as it is an administrative process. There is also a potential for tension in the fact that the new diplomatic system calls for the addition of ‘politics’ to long-standing areas of EU external policy which have proceeded on the basis of technocracy or functional expertise; putting these elements together in a strategic narrative is likely to be costly both in terms of the coordination process and in terms of the resulting adjustment of standard operating procedures in (for example) the Commission.

As a result, and also as a reflection of the demands placed on various participants by the combined impact of the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis, there has been no significant development of an EU strategic narrative during the first year of the system. At some stage, there will have to be an overt debate about this, however. For example, the need to review the European Security Strategy in 2013 is one constraint. But it is also the case that the ESS is no longer – if it ever was – the appropriate basis for development of a comprehensive narrative for the EU’s external relations. So there is a bigger and more challenging task to undertake, and it is close at hand, relating to *adaptation of existing strategies to changing demands*.

This in turn links to issues of resourcing already discussed. The PEC has very limited resources with which to undertake such a review and adaptation, and thus it is likely to call upon the EEAS for major inputs into the discussion. This was the case in September 2010 when the European Council, chaired by the PEC, directed the HRVP and the EEAS to “evaluate the prospects of relations with all strategic partners, setting out in particular EU interests and possible leverage to achieve them”¹. Within the EEAS, the Strategic Planning Office was only fully established in September 2011, and it in turn has strictly limited resources with which to address the issues. Clearly, there is a major need for the kind of creative coordination that will take advantage of expertise in national diplomatic services, in the Commission and elsewhere to build a wide-ranging strategic vision. But this will come up against the plurality of ‘voices’ and the issues of competition already outlined in this paper. Since there is no realistic prospect of greatly increased resourcing for the EEAS in the next two or three years, it is legitimate to wonder how much in the way of strategic thinking will emerge over that period. The initiative to rethink summitry and the EU’s approach to strategic partners and their demands was interrupted by the crisis in the Eurozone but the HRVP’s reports delivered in late 2010 and mid 2011 served

mainly to illustrate the resource problems that she and the EEAS faced in trying to 'think strategically'.

The EU's strategic partners and strategic relationships

If there is not likely to be a revolution in strategic thinking within the EU's system of diplomacy – and there are very good reasons not to expect it, and to be cautious about any attempt to set an EU strategic vision in concrete at this time especially – then this is likely to affect the EU's approach to its key *strategic partners and strategic relationships*. One potential pay-off from an effective strategic diplomacy is in the capacity it creates for management of key partners and relationships within a framework that indicates priorities and preferences.

The EU has over the past twenty years set a lot of store by the designation of 'strategic partners' and the identification of key requirements for their management. Thus for example there are four designated 'strategic partners' in the Americas alone, among them the most important of all, the USA. But simply to state this indicates one of the problems that has emerged with the concept of 'strategic partnerships': they are not all created equal and they certainly have not converged on a single template or set of essential elements for their construction and maintenanceⁱⁱ. The concept has been stretched, in some cases almost beyond recognition, and this was recognised by the PEC when he organised the special European Council meeting referred to above

One of the more positive results of the strategic partnership review has been – inevitably – a recognition that differentiation, prioritisation and a focus on issues as well as on partners is an appropriate way forward. A baseline definition of 'strategic partners' would be those countries with which regular summits at Head of State/Government level are held, and thus with which the PEC has a continuing relationship. With these countries or groupings, the issue for the EU is that of focusing and prioritising the relations embodied in the summit, and also of maintaining what might be described as the 'infrastructure' of the partnerships. This 'infrastructure' varies substantially in depth and scope between key partners, but it is rightly the preserve either of the EEAS or of the Commission, depending on the nature of the dialogues and negotiations that are taking place at any given point, rather than of the PEC.

If we accept that this is the baseline from which the EU can work on its range of strategic partnerships, and that this is the emerging pattern, then it becomes possible to envisage other elements of what might be seen as a strategic framework for managing relationships or issues. Other key partners are to be dealt with at different levels and often in relation to specific issues where they are particularly engaged or significant; given that we argue below that the BRIC category really has no operational significance then the EU's group of emerging powers could be extended considerably and distinguished from the three 'traditional' or cold war strategic partners (the US, Japan and Canada) whose long established relationships with the EU would also benefit from a strategic reconsideration to take account of changing economic and political circumstances. Specific issues will

thus often entail the construction of appropriate coalitions or networks of partners who can be involved in the defence or the promotion of EU positions (or who might be used as sounding boards on which to test the practicality of EU positions). In this process, it seems inevitable that EU Member States will, also be engaged, given their own existing and often long-standing strategic relationships with a very wide range of partners. Here the role of the EEAS as a 'diplomatic entrepreneur' might be seen as a key part of the development of a diplomatic strategy (as opposed to a more centralised strategic diplomacy)ⁱⁱⁱ.

As already noted, one of the key elements in this rather pragmatic version of strategic diplomacy is the process of summit diplomacy. Summits can be characterised as strategic occasions, since they bring together the key elements of diplomacy – representation, communication and negotiation – in specific combinations and at specific times. They also throw into sharp relief the division of labour entailed in the practice – as opposed to the theory – of strategic diplomacy in the EU context.

The primary representation role in the context of summits lies with the PEC, whose cabinet is also the key focus for the conduct of the summit process. The PEC is also responsible for communication – getting the EU's message across, often in conjunction with the President of the Commission (who inevitably will represent many of the key concrete policy concerns entailed in a given relationship). The EEAS has a major responsibility for the preparation of summits and for the execution of commitments undertaken at the summit, including implementation of agreements and the negotiation of agreements that are set in train at summits, but here they have to share responsibility with the Commission, especially on 'pillar one' issues.

One important possibility that emerges from this discussion of strategic partnerships, strategic relationships and the summit process is that a *de facto* strategic diplomacy is emerging or will emerge from the need to service, to conduct and to follow through on summits. This is rather different from the notion of strategic diplomacy as the setting of an explicit and comprehensive framework which then serves as the point of orientation for all subsequent diplomatic activities. Rather, it goes with the grain of what is already there, and takes the EU's emerging diplomatic system as the means by which the conduct of summits in its broadest sense can be enhanced. The jury is obviously out on the extent to which this version of strategic diplomacy has come into existence, but it provides us with one intriguing way of following the development of the EU's diplomacy more generally, within a framework of understanding about the requirements of strategic diplomacy.

Testing the EU's Strategic Diplomacy: the BRICs (and beyond?)

The BRICs (Brazil, Russia, China and India) were first understood as an academic concept^{iv} designed to incorporate for analytical purposes the four so-called rising powers in the contemporary international system. However, despite now self identifying and meeting as a group at annual summits since 2009, the BRICS have not really developed a significant collective identity - nor has the EU been able to develop a coherent strategy towards them^v even though all four have been identified

as strategic partners^{vi}. The EU also has already established strategic partnerships with three of its cold war allies (the US, Japan and Canada) and with three other 'rising powers' (South Korea, Mexico and South Africa). Furthermore the EU has also to consider how best it will relate in future to another group of (lesser?) rising powers which include Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria and Ukraine as well as a number of regional organizations. To complicate matters, South Africa has recently been formally admitted by the BRICs to their grouping but this seems destined to make it less rather than more likely that they will develop a collective coherence that will require the EU's strategic consideration. In fact. In the new BRIC grouping the EU is faced with three genuine rising powers (Brazil, India and South Africa) - but unlike both China and Russia, who share Great Power pretensions that are rising in the case of the former and declining in the case of the latter, these three are perhaps better categorised at present as Regional rather than Great Powers (in the context of the EU's interest in the European security order, Russia might also be categorised as a Regional Power along with Turkey).

If we look at the way that the EU has been able to develop its strategic partnerships with the BRICs it is clear that their major shared characteristics are almost entirely negative. Thus we see a series of summits with lengthy agendas that are often dominated either by short term crises or by inconsequential detail, and a lack of real progress on the ambitious action plans. At the same time, summits are often dominated by the trade issues that are at the heart of relations with India and China (and which are insulated to a degree from the more political agenda), whilst there is a tendency on the part of the major EU member states to pursue bilateral initiatives that undermine EU unity. The BRICs themselves demonstrate a relative lack of interest in anything other than a trade relationship with the EU and an irritation, expressed by them all at one time or another, that the EU is mainly interested in engaging the BRICs in a positive participation in the established frameworks of global governance without at the same time being prepared to consider the reform of those frameworks so that they more effectively embrace the BRIC's interests.

It could be deduced therefore that it would make sense for the EU to focus less on seeking a collective multilateral framework (be it the BRICs or the African Union or Mercosur or the SAARC) in which to advance the cause of global multilateral cooperation (what might be described as a *milieu* goal) and focus instead on the more selfish goals of *self extension* based on its own particular interests^{vii}. If specifically identifying and looking after its own interests rather than trying to create a more perfect world became the focus of EU strategic thinking then it might make sense to extend the list of strategic partners and to seek specific objectives with either individual partners or with groups of partners selected for their ability to contribute on specific EU policy targets. To stick with the current list of ten strategic partners might confirm the BRICs belief that the EU's primary strategic objective is to get them to join an extended version of the old Western club system of multilateral global governance. Not only would this continue to be unattractive to the BRICs but it is not clear that this is the ambition of the EU's more traditional strategic partners such as the United States, Japan and Canada.

Policy Recommendations

- The EU needs to expand its list of strategic partners further to include other emerging or rising powers and also needs to identify and prioritise specific interests that it will seek to pursue with selected strategic partners. The all-encompassing agendas that currently characterize both action plans and summits are a recipe for long term disappointment.
- The EU may wish to reconsider the relationship between its bilateral strategic partnerships and its multilateral strategic partnerships and it may wish to also reconsider its relationship with the three 'traditional' partners (the US, Japan and Canada).
- The essential role of the EEAS in maintaining the infrastructure' of strategic partnerships with the BRICs and others needs to be recognised both by the Commission and by the PEC.
- In this context, so that the PEC can play an even more effective role in the development of the EU's strategic relationships, he/she needs to recognise the essential supportive role that should be played by the EEAS and to encourage the HRVP, ideally assisted by Deputies, to make greater use of the opportunities afforded by her/his role as VP of the European Commission to enhance the more effective coordination of the EU's many external policy positions.
- The PEC should utilise his growing experience of establishing personal relationships with the leaders of the EU's strategic partners to encourage the members of the European Council to work together to pursue the EU's collective external interests rather than risk undermining the EU's ability to exploit strategic partnerships by the pursuit of uncoordinated bilateral initiatives with the EU's strategic partners.
- The special role that both trade and development policy matters play and will continue to play in many of the EU's strategic relationships needs to be recognised, but ways need to be found to ensure that they are better integrated into the EU's overall evaluation of its relations with strategic partners. The negotiating experience of those in the Commission responsible for trade and development in particular needs to be better integrated with the work of the EEAS, and the EEAS needs to play a proactive role in assisting other areas of the European Commission to develop a general awareness of how their policy areas might best be fitted into an overall EU strategy. There is a need for a greater awareness in the Commission of the external impacts of internal EU policies
- The EU should consider building a new approach to strategic diplomacy around the preparations for, the conduct of and follow up on bilateral summits. This would make it possible to focus on specific

issues with specific partners, but it would represent a clear move away from an approach to strategic diplomacy that essentially assumes that all conceivable issues are always on the agenda for all strategic partnerships.

- If anything is to be learned from the EU's experience of attempting to work with the BRICs, then it is that they all seek fundamental reforms of the current systems of global governance. The EU is not going to be an attractive strategic partner for them either collectively or (as they would probably prefer given that they are as much each other's rivals as they are partners) individually, if it is not prepared to consider seriously issues such as the reform of the UN, the WTO, the IMF and other global institutions. For the EU to respond effectively to these sort of demands requires a degree of internal EU unity that currently seems hard to achieve - another reason for the EU to consider building strategic partnerships around its own material goals rather than its ambitions to engage its strategic partners in the establishment of a new world order.
- The EU should consider developing a set of strategies towards the many rising powers in the contemporary system that recognises the stubborn persistence of 'Westphalian' politics. Whilst the EU may briefly at the turn of this century have aspired to take the lead in establishing 'post-modern' global structures that mirrored its own evolution, the reality now is that those who they need to develop strategic partnerships with remain stubbornly 'modern' and focused on sovereignty and status in a changing world..
- Finally in considering how diplomatic strategies might be devised in the future the EEAS and the Commission in particular needs to give due consideration to the (post Lisbon) changed role of the European Parliament in the framing and execution of EU external relations. The positions taken by the European Parliament can be seen as presenting both threats and opportunities to those who would seek to develop EU external strategies, and to the EU's strategic partners themselves.

Endnotes

ⁱ Annex(1), Presidency Conclusions, European Council, 16 September 2010, EUCO 21/1/10 REV 1, CO EUR 16, CONCL3

ⁱⁱ For a more detailed analysis of the varied selection criteria accounting for the EU's strategic partnerships see Suzann Gratius *The EU and the 'Special Ten': Deepening or widening Strategic Partnerships*, FRIDE Policy Brief No. 76, June 2011, p.2

ⁱⁱⁱ See Staffan Hemra, Richard Whitman and Thomas Raines, *A Diplomatic Entrepreneur: Making the Most of the European External Action Service*. Chatham House Report, London: Chatham House, December 2011.

^{iv} See Jim O'Neill, *Building Better Global Economic Blocs*, Goldman Sachs, Global Economic paper No. 66, 2001

^v See Stephen Keukeleire and Hans Bruyninckx, 'the European Union, the BRICs, and the Emerging New World Order', in Christopher Hill and Michael Smith (eds), *International Relations and the European Union*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2011.

^{vi} On this issue in general, see Stephan Keukeleire and Hans Bruyninckx, 'The European Union and the BRICs' in Christopher Hill and Michael Smith (eds) *International Relations and the European Union* (2nd edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011). See also two of the Policy Papers in this series: Fraser Cameron, *The EU and the BRICs*, DSEU Policy Paper 3, February 2011; Bas Hooijmaaijers, *The BRICs at the UN General Assembly: Implications for EU Diplomacy*, DSEU Policy Paper 6, September 2011.

^{vii} For the concepts of 'milieu goals' and 'goals of self-extension' see Arnold Wolfers 'The Goals of Foreign Policy' in *Discord and Collaboration; Essays in International Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

The Diplomatic System of the EU Network, funded by the European Commission's Jean Monnet Programme, brings together three partner universities with a strong tradition in the study of European integration in its international context. The lead partner is Loughborough University, and specifically its Department of Politics, History and International Relations and Centre for the Study of International Governance. The other partners are Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, from Belgium, and Maastricht University, from the Netherlands. Each partner is responsible for key events and a research strand. In addition selected experts drawn from EU and Member State institutions and from relevant sections of civil society will be invited to participate in selected network activities.

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