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Conceptually Defining "Global Strategic Partner(ship)"

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ENVISIONING A NEW GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE

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Executive Summary

This working paper provides an assessment of the European Union's (EU's) global strategic partners by putting forward a theoretical and conceptual definition of strategic partnership. The paper identifies the EU's global strategic partners both in terms of those which are defined within a legal framework and those that are selected on a more ad-hoc basis. The paper's conceptual examination of the term "strategic partner(ship)" and identification of the EU's global strategic partners aligns with the main objectives of the ENGAGE project: assisting the EU's foreign policy by allowing a more structured engagement with other countries, thereby enhancing the EU's ability to play a more assertive role in effectively and sustainably meeting strategic challenges in global politics. This paper's focus on the differences across multiple strategic partners, both formally identified and informally treated, with respect to their engagement with the EU highlights the challenges the EU faces in its foreign policy and global standing. Those challenges are explored in the paper in terms of the relevant forms of cooperation and conflict between the EU, its Member States and their respective global strategic partners.

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1 Introduction

When former President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy famously declared in 2010 that "we have strategic partnerships, now we need a strategy", he was reflecting on the European Union's (EU's) ability to form special relations with third countries and the key challenges faced in these forms of engagement (Van Rompuy, 2010). Since the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has formally established strategic partnerships with a total of ten countries, but it also has identified other countries as strategic partners, most recently in the 2022 Strategic Compass. While there does not seem to be a formal and legal set of criteria determining the EU's priorities in choosing these strategic partners, there are possible explanations as to why and how the EU identifies possible strategic partners and under what conditions they can form part of an effective, coherent and sustainable foreign policy.

This working paper provides an assessment of the EU's global strategic partners by putting forward a conceptual definition of strategic partnership. It situates the EU's global strategic partnerships, both those defined with a legal framework and the more ad-hoc varieties, within the literature on the broader concept. The paper's conceptual examination of the term 'strategic partner(ship)' and identification of the EU's global strategic partners aligns with the main objectives of the ENGAGE project: assisting the EU's foreign policy by allowing a more structured engagement with other countries to enhance the EU's ability to play a more assertive role in effectively and sustainably meeting strategic challenges in global politics. The EU's official documents surveyed for this working paper demonstrate a clear lack of coherence and consistency in the EU's identification of strategic partners, the institutional set-up of strategic partnerships and the EU's motivations for strategic partnerships across individual partners. This paper's focus on the differences across multiple strategic partners, both formally and informally identified, highlights the challenges the EU faces in its foreign policy and global standing. Those challenges are explored in the paper in terms of the relevant forms of cooperation and conflict between the EU, its Member States and their respective global strategic partners.

The origins of the concept can be traced back initially to efforts by Soviet policymakers to re-think their country's international relationships in the dying days of the regime (Envall & Hall, 2016). For the Soviets, the idea of a strategic partnership was intended as a means of signifying cooperation with the US while at the same time maintaining distinct spheres of influence in Eastern Europe (Kay, 2000). The subsequent agreement between the US and post-Soviet Russia in 1994 – the Moscow Declaration – was one of the first to be explicitly branded a 'strategic partnership', following similarly labelled agreements between the US and Turkey in 1992 and between China and Brazil in 1993 (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019), while the strategic partnership between Russia and China in 2001 represented the first such agreement in Asia, encouraging a practice in the region (Envall & Hall, 2016). However, efforts to locate 'strategic partnership'-zero are not only likely to fail – given the nebulousness of the concept (Blanco, 2016) – but also serve only to highlight the parallel evolution of the concept, with the US, Russia and China each pursuing similar kinds of agreement with partners during the period.

In this sense, strategic partnerships are products of their time, constituting – as Kay (2000, p. 15) has argued – a "new institutional form of post-cold war international relations". It is no coincidence that the novel and relational term of strategic partnerships entered the discourse of international relations in the immediate post-Cold War period (Blanco, 2016; Envall & Hall, 2016). Many of the trends in global politics unleashed by the Cold War's end – including economic globalisation and the rise of non-state security threats – reduced the value of formal international alliances, demanding "more flexible forms of international cooperation" (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 45). Moreover, the general trend towards regionalisation in world politics – and the emergence of powerful regional interlocutors in the form of the BRICs at the same time – offered greater incentives for seeking forms of cooperation *outside* of the traditional, geographically bounded arenas in which political cooperation was often nested (Michalski & Pan, 2017b; Gilson, 2016). Strategic partnerships represented an important tool for states to engage in structured dialogue with potentially disparate partners on a variety of issue-specific challenges (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). In the decades since the end of the Cold War, strategic partnerships have proliferated, leading to a complex web of overlapping relationships which afforded the term. The United States (US) has more than 60 formal strategic partnerships alongside a smaller number of alternative conceptualisations for similar relationships, including that of 'major non-NATO ally', which overlap with some strategic partnerships (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). China has nearly 70 strategic partnerships of various kinds (Envall & Hall, 2016), while India has 20 such agreements and Japan has around ten (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). This web of strategic partnerships includes many examples of relations between major international actors, including Russia and China, the EU and US, India and China, NATO and the EU and the EU and Russia (Wilkins, 2008).

The EU, for its part, identified ten specific strategic partners in 2003, but has additional relationships labelled as strategic with other states, regions and international organisations a (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). The concept of strategic partnership indicates a diversification in the EU's foreign policy and its prioritisation of certain third countries in its bilateral relations, albeit within a multilateral setting. Strategic partnership for the EU is not a 'one size fits all' framework. The EU has the following motivations in its strategic partnerships: the promotion of trade and capital flows between the partners, to find like-minded allies with whom it could promote multilateral solutions to global challenges and expanding burden sharing in global security and dealing with new security risks (Czechowska, 2022; Gilson, 2016; Grevi, 2013).

The relational nature of strategic partnership also implies that the EU itself is a strategic partner, with whom other global players want to engage in comprehensive agreements for their mutual interests. Therefore, an assessment of strategic partnership for the EU rests on this assumption that the EU has become a global power on its own right and is able to conclude strategic partnerships with third countries, distinctly separate from its own Member States. A conceptual analysis of the EU's strategic partners, therefore, needs to tease out the potential conflicts and/or cooperation patterns between the EU as a whole and its Member States- some of whom are global players in their own rights such as France and Germany - and former Member States such as the UK. The EU's strategic partners can be differentiated based on the

instruments of their birth (formal and informal), the scope of bilateral cooperation, the breadth of areas of this cooperation and how the established partnership fits into the EU's overall multilateral vision. At the same time, while the EU has strategic partnerships with states, it also has established partnerships with other intergovernmental organisations. This also fits well with its overall foreign policy objective of gaining recognition as a multilateral, international actor playing an active role in the identification and generation of solutions for global problems and challenges. The paper provides a mapping exercise of the formal basis of the EU's strategic partners, its identification of the main tools and instruments that such partnerships rely upon as well as the evolution of the concept of strategic partnership. It captures how the EU formulates its foreign policy objectives in accordance with its strategic partners, as well as how these partnerships are tools to transform the EU into a global player, a strategic partner in its own right. Finally, this paper also proposes some identified conditions for examining the effectiveness, coherence and sustainability of existing and proposed strategic partnerships to assist in the development of EU foreign policy.

In what follows, we first discuss the conceptualisation of the term 'strategic partnership', through which we identify the rationale and drivers as well as assess the effectiveness of strategic partnerships. We then turn to the empirical sections of the paper, where we chart the evolution of the concept in the EU, drivers and modalities of the EU's strategic partnerships and finally the EU's strategic partnerships in the areas of CFSP and CSDP. We conclude by assessing our main findings and the main lessons drawn in informing subsequent ENGAGE Working Papers.

2 Conceptualising Strategic Partnerships

Unsurprisingly, given that we are nearing three-decades since the initial articulation of the concept of strategic partnerships – and two-decades since the EU first embraced the term – there has been much written on the concept of strategic partnerships generally (Kay, 2000; Wilkins, 2008) and on the EU's individual relationships with its strategic partners (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2021; Gieg et al., 2021; Holslag, 2011; Michalski & Pan, 2017a; Renard, 2013; Saraiva, 2017; Smith & Xie, 2010; Vahl, 2013). Initial work on strategic partnerships focused principally on the task of describing the phenomenon, with a view to establishing what the concept referred to and how it might be situated in relation to alternative concepts in international politics (Blanco, 2016; Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016; Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). This task was arguably motivated by the diversity of usage of the term strategic partnership and the inability of international actors – including the EU – to proffer clear definitions, but at the same time this diversity made the task of specifying *objectively* what strategic partners were all the more difficult. While much of the work on strategic partnerships has focused on issues of conceptual specification, categorisation and descriptive comparison, early works identified significant divergence in perspectives, including between 'broad' and 'narrow' conceptual lenses (Grevi, 2013, p. 163) and between more or less optimistic accounts of the value of such partnerships (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016). Whilst not explicitly theoretical, such proto-theoretical assessments have done much to highlight how strategic partnerships function in practice.

More recent works have offered perspectives on strategic partnerships which are more explicitly informed by a range of theoretical perspectives (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019, p. 15), although we are a long way off still from the emergence of key debates or dominant theoretical fault lines in this regard. Rather, as successive studies have engaged with strategic partnerships, different theoretical lenses have come to shine new light on the concept and its function. Initial theoretical research drew heavily on organisational and business studies (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019), with Wilkins (2008) in particular drawing on these fields in order to map out the life cycle of strategic partnerships. Evident also in these works – including Wilkins' (2008) account – is a background realism, with much discussion of strategic partnerships as a specific form of balancing (Nadkarni, 2010; Wilkins, 2008). Overlaps with liberalism and institutionalism in IR can also be observed in the scholarship on strategic partnerships, which has focused on the nature and degree of institutionalisation within the concept (relative to alternatives) (Wilkins, 2008) and the path-dependent origins of strategic partnerships, which are often (though not always) rooted in prior examples of cooperation (Gilson, 2016). More theoretically explicit are constructivist accounts of the role and function of strategic partnerships, perhaps unsurprising given their origins in the post-Cold War milieu. Constructivist scholars have focused on the linguistic construction of strategic partnerships (Blanco 2016), on their role in identity formation and change (Song & Hall, 2019), on the role played by underlying value congruence (Michalski & Pan, 2017a) and on their ability to externalise values and socialise external actors (Gilson, 2016). There is even a hint of

Europeanisation scholarship regarding the impact of EU Member State bilateral relations on strategic partnerships and vice versa (Tallis & Šimečka, 2017).

Given the sheer number of disparate agreements that fall under the banner of strategic partnerships, along with the familiar problem that both terms can mean different things to different actors, it has been easier to say what strategic partnerships *are not* than to say with any certainty what they are. In this vein, scholars have sought to differentiate strategic partnerships from formal alliances, with their highly institutionalised basis and focus on specific adversaries, from security communities, with their geographic focus, from alignment, with its underlying requirement of value-convergence and from coalitions, with their broader membership and often time-limited purposes (Wilkins, 2008). Yet, there are a number of identifiable *core attributes* of strategic partnerships. They are *bilateral* arrangements made between two states (or international organisations), even if they are embedded within broader overlapping sets of relations (Grevi, 2013; Renard, 2016a) and may subsequently evolve into more multilateral forms (Wilkins, 2008). They also tend to be *formalised* via specific written agreements (Nadkarni, 2010) even as the degree of institutionalisation often entails low commitments costs, with joint statements and regularised meetings the norm, rather than treaties (Wilkins, 2008). Strategic partnerships are *future-oriented*, with a "long-term orientation of cooperation, including the progressive deepening of the strategic interaction" (Czechowska, 2013, pp. 79–80, as cited in Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019), and are more than one-shot affairs. And they focus on *strategic* goals, broadly conceived, and thus focus on identifiable areas in which mutual gains can be obtained from cooperation on security issues (or non-security issues where the broader aim remains geo-strategic) (Wilkins, 2008).

Beyond this minimalist formulation, there is considerable variation across strategic partnerships, even among those agreed by the same actor (Gilson, 2016; Kay, 2000). While some strategic partnerships aim to intensify and/or augment cooperation between actors already cooperating, others are designed with the explicit aim of initiating cooperation between actors without a history of cooperative relations (Envall & Hall, 2016; Renard, p. 2016a).

A distinction can also be drawn between results- and process-oriented strategic partnerships, with the former aiming at delivering specific outcomes and the latter focused more on institutionalising contacts between the partners and shaping the relationship (Renard, 2016a). Relatedly, but distinct conceptually, strategic partnerships can come about between pairs of friendly actors or between those which are more inclined to view one another as competitors (Kay, 2000). As Tyushka & Czechowska (2019, p. 14) note: "strategic partnerships are neither bound to emerge from friendly relations… nor are they bound to necessarily turn rivalling powers into allies. They provide an incentivised form of engagement and cooperation-while-at-competition". Linked to this point, though again conceptually separate, is the role of values: strategic partnerships "are not always underwritten by shared values in a way typical of more entrenched alignments" (Wilkins, 2008, p. 360) though they may well be stronger when they are (Michalski & Pan, 2017b) and may be designed with an explicit focus on value promotion (Gilson, 2016). They can also vary depending on the level of institutionalisation and

investment, with some dialogues “more or less ambitious and operational” and “more or less flexible”, depending on the intensity and nature of the agreement (Renard, 2016a, p. 27). Such institutional variation, as highlighted above, run the gamut from informal declarations, to structured dialogues, through to full joint bodies which act to regulate and normalise interaction between policymakers (Czechowska, 2022). Finally, agreements can differ in their breadth, with some comprising a number of distinct areas of cooperation, potentially including a wealth of non-security considerations, and others limited to single areas of proposed cooperation (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019).

Why do actors seek to establish strategic partnerships? This is a complex question, given the diversity of agreements and the different rationales behind each (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019), although it is possible at least to indicate the range of motivations for actors. As their name suggests, there are often strategic functions from these agreements since they allow actors to collaborate on areas of security policy in which mutual interests are at stake. Many examples of strategic partnerships focus on managing trust and cooperation in the broader security relationship as well as specific security issues including counterterrorism, organised crime, cyber security, trafficking and nuclear non-proliferation (Gilson, 2016; Renard, 2016a). Non-strategic motivations also feature prominently, with cooperation on economic areas frequently built into such agreements and with major economic and trade partners constituting a significant number of such partnerships (Grevi, 2013). Strategic partnerships can also enable cooperation on other areas, including on environmental policy (Gilson, 2016) and development policy (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019), both of which feature prominently in the EU’s strategic partnerships. As these strategic and non-strategic goals could be obtained through alternative means, it is also instructive to ask why states prefer to engage through strategic partnerships rather than alternative institutional forms. One reason strategic partnerships may be preferred in some cases is that they offer the ability to obtain a relationship which is sufficiently structured and institutionalised to bring about concrete results, but which offers sufficient autonomy and flexibility to avoid ‘entrapment’ (Wilkins, 2008). Strategic partnerships can also be tailored to the relationship in question (unlike multilateral commitments) and can avoid the need to fit partnerships around membership criteria associated with multilateral forums.

However, while the EU’s strategic partnerships have evolved considerably in the years since 2003, they have also been subject to criticism from scholars for several reasons. For one, the EU has struggled to articulate a clear definition of what is meant by the term ‘strategic partner’, which has made it difficult for audiences (not just scholarly ones) to interpret what the relationship is intended to achieve and how it should be assessed (Blanco, 2016; Renard, 2016a) (This is not a specific problem associated with the EU – the US has also been accused of brandishing the term too widely, to the point of undermining its overall efficacy (Kay, 2000)). Confusion over what the EU’s strategic partnerships are intended to achieve has been compounded by the diversity of relationships covered in the category and by the tendency not only for these relationships to change over time, but also for each partner to interpret them in a different way (Blanco, 2016), although this is not a direct fault of EU policymakers. Still others have criticised the EU’s strategic partnerships for failing to deliver, noting that they tend to have a rather modest policy output and, in many cases, show significant “normative

dissonance" (Grevi, 2013, p. 159), the implication being they seemingly do not achieve either concrete policy outcomes *or* normative suasion. In this vein, it has been argued that the EU's strategic partnerships are "under-delivering in the security area" and that they are perhaps better seen as "mostly rhetorical devices" rather than as tools aimed at delivering specific results (Renard, 2016a, p. 10).

3 Rationales, Partners and Effectiveness

This flexibility, while complicating the search for a central theme or modality, allows strategic partnerships to perform a variety of functions with various partners (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). From a liberal institutionalist perspective, strategic partnerships contribute to the intensification of *multilateral* cooperation by strengthening individual nodes in the global governance regime, establishing overlapping arrangements between key partners and aiding coordination within multilateral forums (Grevi, 2013). They can also bring about path-dependent dynamics in which initial forms of cooperation become more regularised and entrenched over time, leading to a greater degree of institutionalisation further down the line (Gilson, 2016). In line with constructivist assumptions about the nature of the international system, strategic partnerships can be tools of socialisation, allowing actors an opportunity to engage on normative questions with a view to minimising the value differences with major partners (Blanco, 2016). The EU has, for example, seen its strategic partnership with China as an opportunity to socialise with a significant international actor (Michalski & Pan, 2017b) and has used its partnership with Japan to push for normative change, including an end to the death penalty (Gilson, 2016). They can also help to shape the milieu in which states are interacting. Strategic partnerships can, for instance, denote the importance an actor places on its relationship with a given other (Kay, 2000) and signify an upgrade in the political or strategic relationship (Gilson, 2016). They can also act as vehicles of social interaction, establishing multiple sites of ongoing diplomatic engagement between actors which can contribute to an intensification of cooperation, increasing trust and greater capacity building in the bilateral relationship (Michalski & Pan, 2017a).

Strategic partnerships also serve a host of more political functions for individual states. For example, they can signify an increased number of international partners and avoid situations in which states are either “partner-free” (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019, p. 11) or viewed as pariahs in the international community. They can also contribute to enhancing an actor’s international status, affording them opportunities to “assert their international identities and enhance their status and prestige as global actors” (Michalski & Pan, 2017b, p. 612). As well as enhancing status, strategic partnerships can play a constitutive role, identifying an actor’s intention to engage in strategic forms of interaction – especially the case for ostensible civilian actors like the EU – and thereby establishing expectations, putting an actor’s credibility directly on the line (Grevi, 2013). The significant institutional variation observed in existing strategic partnerships would seem to strongly support this, providing a site of regularised elite level interaction and dialogue which may not be available through other existing international fora (Czechowska, 2022).

With which actors are strategic partnerships most likely to be negotiated? Again, the question is difficult, since the pattern of agreements is subject to such variation – yet patterns can be identified. Broadly speaking, four significant factors have been identified that are likely to influence the incidence of strategic partnerships as listed in Table 1 and Table 2. The first is the significance of the actor, either globally or for the state in question. Strategic partnerships are often agreed with actors which have a major strategic and/or economic presence, since

this status not only makes them indispensable partners for solving security problems, but also denotes key relationships which are important to carefully manage (Grevi, 2013). The second is the degree of overlap in preferences. At the very least, actors need to possess shared interests in order for a partnership to be worthwhile (Wilkins, 2008). Moreover, although common values are not a prerequisite for strategic partnerships – different states can view such partnerships in very different ways (Blanco, 2016) – it has also been suggested that the underlying commonality of values can contribute to the willingness of states to seek strategic partnerships (Grevi, 2013). The third consideration is the presence of existing structured relationships with the actor in question and the appropriateness of alternative formats. Because strategic partnerships are more flexible than alliances (Wilkins, 2008), they can potentially apply to a far broader category of relationships, de-linking the creation of agreements from such factors as geography and pre-existing forms of cooperation. Strategic partnerships are thus more likely to emerge in circumstances where existing agreements do not provide for the desired level of collaboration or where geographical location would make alternative forms of agreement inappropriate. The fourth and final determinant is the extent of security interdependence between the states in question and their position in relation to patterns of threats (Wilkins, 2008). For example, actors who are both located within trafficking networks will have not just an interest in collaborating on this issue, but also a greater ability to overcome the actions of traffickers (Renard, 2016a).

What determines whether strategic partnerships are effective? Notwithstanding the difficulty of measuring effectiveness – and distinguishing between such potential measures as longevity, degree of institutionalisation, routinisation, value-congruence, or security interdependence – it is expected that some partnerships are more likely to be effective than others. Often, more effective partnerships are associated with pre-existing factors that make their success more likely. Strategic partnerships are more likely to deliver concrete results when they are more densely institutionalised and when they cover a greater number of issue areas (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). This involves questions both on the reach of the agreement (the number of policy areas included) as well as the depth of the agreement in institutional terms (the degree of codification, the frequency of interaction, the kind of formats envisaged). However, the prevalence of other, adequate forums for interaction on similar issue areas can also act *against* the success of a partnership, by providing alternative avenues for more effective cooperation (Haastrup, 2017; Adelle & Kotsopoulos, 2017). Clear, shared interests, in a realist sense, have been posited as providing one way to cleave through the clutter of these other factors (Landsberg & Hierro, 2017).

Others have argued that the effectiveness of partnerships depends on "the degree of congruence in norms and worldviews between the partners" (Michalski & Pan, 2017b, p. 612), with deeper and more sustained interaction resulting from partnerships where there is greater similarity in values and a less competitive relationship. More subtle forms of convergence – for example, on how states frame security problems and which concerns they prioritise among their shared interests – can also influence the likelihood of agreements proving more or less effective (Renard, 2016a). While there is a good case to be made that the degree of institutionalisation and of values-convergence should influence the effectiveness of strategic

partnerships (Rodt & Okeke, 2013), it is also the case that assessments based on such endogenous concepts as these risk positing preconditions as outcomes instead of identifying causal effects. Ideally, any assessment of effectiveness needs to account for *change* in the relationship over time, whilst simultaneously disaggregating the independent variable from the measure of effectiveness. This does not mean that strategic partnerships lack effectiveness in their entirety, but rather that contextual factors are always going to play an important role in determining how effective partnerships will be, whilst being difficult to disentangle from the effects of the specific strategic partnership.

4 The Formal Basis for the EU's Strategic Partnerships: The Evolution of a Concept

The defining features of a possible strategic partner for the EU vary, including multiple elements such as global power standing, stance on global challenges and a need for cooperation between the EU and the strategic partner for confronting these challenges. There is no official EU document that formally defines the EU's criteria for strategic partnerships. Indeed, the EU lacks a clear and unanimous definition of what a strategic partnership is, what it entails and how it works in theory and in practice at both the legal and political level. Given the ambiguity around this concept, the strategic partnership label is thus used in a variety of ways. There is an overall multidimensionality of the term as its meaning and objectives vary depending on the country and organisation. Thus, attempts at classification demonstrate the diversity of the EU's strategic partners, the various procedures for establishing a strategic partnership and the different degrees of cooperation.

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, 2015, p. 5). One needs to note that the EU's own position as a strategic partner also fits into this definition, both in terms of its multilateralism and its will to cooperate with other external actors. As the largest market in the world and with a significant presence in global challenges such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and security concerns, the EU has transformed into a strategic partner following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty which formed the basis for its common foreign and security policies. The EU's emphasis on multilateral policymaking to deal with common global challenges stands out in comparison to the stance that other global players such as the US, Russia and/or China have in their own policies.

Growing multilateralism and a new understanding of threats in the post-Cold War era (Müller et al., 2021 (ENGAGE Working Paper 1)) have contributed to the EU's own formulations for finding strategic partners. The EU has become "a *potential* power, a power *in becoming* – although what kind of power is not clear yet. […] The EU is developing a new kind of global action by blending traditional and innovative forms of power" (Renard, 2015, p. 4). Accordingly, having developed internal resources through such policy innovations such as the European Monetary Union, the EU has presented itself as "a force for good" in global politics with a self-proclaimed 'European exceptionalism' in approaching global challenges – characterised by multilateralism, adherence to global norms and using non-violent means for the resolution of conflicts (Ferreira-Pereira & Smith, 2021). The EU has sought to be recognised as a unified, credible, responsive and effective union in global affairs especially since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Its emphasis on multilateralism meant that it would need to develop strategic partnerships with other global actors (Grevi & Vasconcelos, 2008). Strategic partnership emerged as a key notion for EU foreign policy and its external relations where both the EU and its Member States' material interests would determine with whom these partnerships are

negotiated, and how EU would gain international visibility and acknowledgement of its global status through these partnerships. According to Smith (2007), strategic partnerships represent one means through which the EU attempts to externalise its values and propagate the ideal of the EU as an assertive, normative power.

Prior to the birth of the concept of strategic partnership, there were already established, institutionalised networks of relations between the EU and third countries. The EU has extensive bilateral relations with the US, dating back to the 1950s when the then European Community opened its first foreign representation in Washington D.C. In the post-World War II period, as traditional partners and allies, it was expected that the EU and the US would act together in global issues such as trade, monetary stability and most importantly security and defence, in particular under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) umbrella. However, while it is natural to identify the US as the EU's most important strategic partner, this has evolved in a more informal manner without a formal document and/or treaty cementing this partnership. The failed negotiations for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Agreement (TTIP), launched in 2013 and halted in 2017, could have resulted in such a formal document. Nonetheless, the EU's extensive trade, political, economic, cultural and security-based cooperation with the US transformed the US into the most important strategic partner for the EU.

The term 'partnership' and 'strategic partnership' interestingly were not originally coined for the US, despite the long standing interwoven, dense network of relations between the EU, the US and the EU Member States. Instead, the EU used 'partnership' in reference to its relations with a third country for China in 1998 and 'strategic partnership' in reference to the evolving cooperation with Russia again in 1998. The EU's Joint Statement of 1998, "Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China" clarified the basis for developing a mutually beneficial comprehensive agreement with China, particularly in economic and trade related matters (Official Journal of the European Union, 1998). The concept of strategic partnership was first referred to in the December 1998 European Council Conclusions with regards to Russia, labelling it a "strategic partner to the Union", which would be extending a supporting hand to deal with the crisis that Russia was facing at the time (Council of the European Union, 1998). The emphasis on Russia as a strategic partner was critical at a time when the EU already had comprehensive relations with its post-World War II security and economic partners, namely the US, Canada and Japan. However, the informal basis of these strategic partnerships indicated a 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 is precisely why, when the EU adopted its 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), the European Council emphasised clearly that it is important for the EU to develop strategic partnerships with key global players- both states and international organisations (Council of the European Union, 2003). The ESS was the first major official document that attempted to clarify this concept by identifying this need in line with the EU's key foreign policy objectives. Accordingly, the ESS laid out the framework as the EU needs to find ways to cooperate with

strategic partners “both through multilateral cooperation in international organisations and through partnerships with key actors” (EEAS, 2003). Interestingly, the EU’s strategic partners at the time were defined in a narrower sense, with the US at the very centre, defined as an “irreplaceable partner”, distinguishing it from other similar players, followed by Russia, Japan, China, Canada and India. While Russia and China were initially identified as potential strategic partners with critical importance for European material interests - both with regards to security and economics, their positions seem to have radically shifted from being strategic partners to strategic rivals. As Table 1 shows below, this document also listed regional groupings in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia as strategic partners, albeit vaguely, as the identification of these regional groupings did not openly correspond to any regional organisation. In addition, the document had a rather optimistic tone concerning the expansion of the EU’s strategic partner repertoire with the inclusion of these potential partners. The document clearly stated that “anyone who shares the EU’s goals and values and are prepared to act in their support” would be welcome as strategic partners to the EU (Council of the European Union, 2003).

As the concept of strategic partnership remained under-defined, the 2007 Lisbon Treaty attempted to put together a formal foundation for identifying strategic partnerships in Articles 21 and 22:

> The Union shall seek to develop relations and build partnerships with third countries, and international, regional or global organisations which share the principles" of "democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law. (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012, Art. 21)

Interestingly, the words strategic partners or strategic partnerships are not used together. While the legal nature of strategic partnerships is not specified in the Treaty, Articles 21 and 22, however, establish a clear link between EU values, norms and principles and third countries, laying what can be labelled as the common foundation to all strategic partnerships (Cirlig, 2012).

As such, the Lisbon Treaty clearly underlines the normative aspects of the EU’s strategic partnerships, where a mutual acceptance of democratic principles, primacy of the rule of law and respect for human rights constitute the main building blocks of the EU’s strategic partnerships. This official emphasis on the normative drivers behind EU strategic partnerships has coincided with the rise of debates on the normative power of the EU through its external action (Manners, 2002). In the post-Cold War context, and particularly with the success of EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, it was increasingly argued that “the EU plays a special role in defining the normal or as a beacon of norms” such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law in international politics (Larsen, 2014, p. 899). However, the idea of strategic partnership is not void of the EU’s own material interests as attested by the setting up of these arrangements with China and Russia in the late 1990s. The Lisbon Treaty’s Article 22 attests

to this as follows: “On the basis of the principles and objectives set out in Article 21, the European Council shall identify the strategic interests and the objectives of the Union” (Cirlig, 2012). Accordingly, the Lisbon Treaty stressed that the European Council defines the EU’s material interests and holds the key for the establishment of strategic partnerships.

Following the Lisbon Treaty, the next major step in the implementation of the concept of strategic partnership came in 2008 with the adoption of the Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy. This report was focused on the overall European objective to implement ‘effective multilateralism’ based on partnerships with actors and international organisations. As Table 1 shows below, the report added countries like Switzerland and Norway with whom progress for a strategic partnership had been achieved, specified certain regional organisations such as the African Union and ASEAN and international organisations such as the UN, WTO, IMF, International Criminal Court and OSCE as strategic partners. The strategic partnership with Russia was identified as a “balancing act” (Council of the European Union, 2008). Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia and neighbours in the east and south, NATO members such as Turkey were mentioned as potential strategic partners, thereby further extending the list of the EU’s existing and potential strategic partners. It needs to be noted that while Turkey remains on paper an official EU candidate, this emphasis on Turkey as a strategic partner illustrates the deadlock in its accession process. The implementation report remains vague in terms of the tools to be used with these strategic partners - state actors and multilateral organisations - which differ based on their levels and respective roles in the international system as identified in Table 1.

Table 1: The Identification of Strategic Partners in the EU’s Strategy Documents

Strategy Document	Identification by the EU	Countries and Regions	Issue Areas for Cooperation/Contestation
2003/ European Security Strategy 2003: A Secure Europe in a Better World	Irreplaceable partner	US	Religious extremism and terrorism, WMD, peace and conflict in the Middle East, state failure, transnational organised crime, terrorism
	Country with whom progress in strategic partnership should be pursued	Russia	
	Regional groupings as potential partners	Neighbours in the Middle East, partners in Africa, Latin America and Asia	
	Countries with whom partnership should be developed	China, India, Japan, Canada	
	Potential partners	Anyone who shares the EU’s goals and values, and are prepared to act in their support	

2008/ Report on the Implementation of the 2003 European Security	Irreplaceable partner Key partner	Transatlantic partnership, US	Counterterrorism, data sharing and protection, Iran, conflict resolution, effective multilateralism
	Transatlantic partner with whom strategic partnership should be deepened	NATO	Crisis management, military capability
	Countries with whom progress has been achieved & Room for further cooperation	China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Norway, Switzerland, Japan	Energy security, transnational organised crime, migration
	Regional organisations	African Union, Central Asia, ASEAN, SAARC, Latin America	Crisis management, security, resolution of political issues, energy, rule of law
	Apex of the international system	UN	Conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations
	Other international organisations	WTO, IMF, International Criminal Court, OSCE	Climate change, security, millennium development goals, effective multilateralism
	Regional players as potential partners	Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Arab League, neighbours in the East and South	Regional conflicts, illegal migration, counterterrorism and organised crime
	Impending threat	Iran	WMDs, nuclear proliferation
2016/ Shared Vision, Common Action, A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for The European Union's Foreign and Security Policy	Core partner	NATO	CSDP, European defence, security, cyber security
	Core partner	US	Cyber security, migration, conflict, climate change cooperation
	Transatlantic partner	Canada	Economic and trade relations, migration, conflict, climate change cooperation

	Key strategic challenge	Russia	Destabilisation of Crimea, Black Sea and Ukraine
	Strategic partner countries	China, Japan, India	intellectual property rights, high-end technology, economic reform, human rights, climate change, prosperity, free trade, security
	Regional groupings Regional players	Arab League and the Quartet, Turkey, Gulf Cooperation Council and Iran, African Union, ECOWAS, G5 Sahel, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, ASEAN, Mercosur, Union for the Mediterranean	Middle East Peace Process, transnational organised crime, migration, terrorism, food and security, energy, climate, Syrian and Libya crises, Iranian nuclear issue, maritime security, transport and energy connectivity, trade, development
2022/ A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence	EU's staunchest and most important partner	US	Disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control, security and defence initiatives, disarmament and non-proliferation, the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies, climate change and defence, cyber defence, military mobility, countering hybrid threats including foreign information manipulation and interference, crisis management and the relationship with strategic competitors
	Like-minded partners	NATO, UN	Hybrid threats, cyber diplomacy, foreign information manipulation and interference, disarmament, non-proliferation, arms control, climate change, disaster management, CSDP

			operations, pandemics, terrorism, organised crime, emerging and disruptive technologies and hybrid threats, gender and peace, security of the Western Balkans
	International organisation	OSCE	Crisis management, conflict prevention, security of the Western Balkans
	Partner with whom dialogue and consultation should be pursued	China	international law of the sea, peaceful settlement of disputes and a rules-based international order and human rights
	Tailored bilateral partnership	Norway, UK	Defence cooperation
	Tailored bilateral partnership	Turkey	Issues of common interest, CSDP
	Tailored bilateral partnership	Eastern partners, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia	Peace and security, hybrid threats, disinformation, cybersecurity, CSDP operations, Russian aggression
	Regional grouping	ASEAN	Violent extremism, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats, cybersecurity, maritime security, transnational crime, humanitarian and disaster relief and crisis management
	Regional grouping	African Union	Security, peace, conflict
	Regional grouping	Southern neighbourhood	Terrorism, violent extremism, radicalisation, cyber and hybrid threats, organised crime, irregular migration, operational

			cooperation in security and defence
	Regional grouping	African partners	Security and defence dialogue against strategic competitors from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, conventional as well as hybrid threats, disinformation and cyberattacks, climate change, terrorism, CSDP missions and operations
	Regional grouping	Latin America	Defence and security
	Regional players	Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Vietnam	Security of the Indo-Pacific
	Central threat to the region	Iran	Militia support, ballistic missiles, JCPOA

Source: own elaboration

In September 2010, the European Council discussed for the first time and at the highest level the modalities of the strategic partnership instrument for European foreign policy. The September European Council Conclusions underlined the importance of strategic partnerships as foreign policy instruments and called for greater reciprocity between actors in order to pursue "European objectives and interests" (Council of the European Union, 2010c). Furthermore, the document added emphasis on "enhancing trade with strategic partnerships" through, for example, free trade agreements (FTAs) (Council of the European Union, 2010c). Thus, the emphasis was put on the shift towards emerging economies and the essence of strategic partnerships was narrowed to economic partnerships. A few months later, the December 2010 Council Conclusions asked for a progress report on strategic partnerships, covering US, China and Russia, a demand that can be interpreted as a sign that all three partnerships are ranked higher in terms of interests.

The Strategic Partners Progress Report for the European Council from December 2010 disclosed that strategic partnerships require differentiated approaches because of the different relationships embodied between partners, highlighting in particular EU-Russia and EU-China strategic partnerships (Council of the European Union, 2010a). The document also discussed the use of strategic partnerships as a tool that enables dialogue and cooperation for the development of 'effective multilateralism', likely to be understood as similar to Renard's definition (2011) as meaning simply "a rule-based international system". The report addressed the distribution of roles between the EU and national levels in strategic partnerships, calling for a strategic 'fit' (i.e. vertical coherence), without defining the nature of the term. Although

these documents assessed strategic partnerships and their role in the EU's external action, they failed to define a solid basis for the implementation of Article 21 and 22 of the TEU.

It is precisely this vague nature of strategic partnership that has led to recent attempts to find a more comprehensive approach to this critical tool for EU foreign policy. In June 2016, the EU published its Global Strategy which set out "the EU's core interests and principles for engaging with the world, explain what the EU stands for and hopes to achieve in the world, and give the Union a collective sense of direction" (EEAS, 2016). It was published in the context of global power shifts and in the aftermath of Brexit, the Eurozone and migration crises. Strategic partnerships were mentioned multiple times in the document, and covering new partnerships as well as new topics, such as maritime multilateralism, climate change, conflict, security and European defence with the US, UN, NATO and other partners. The document also focused on deepening economic diplomacy and implementing new FTAs. Regional groupings were specifically emphasised in the document for various regional and global issues with the Arab League, Turkey, Gulf Cooperation Council and Iran at the core following the destabilisation of the Middle East region within the context of the Arab Spring, civil conflict and extremism. One noteworthy implication relates to the EU's strategic partnership with Russia though, which was identified as a 'key strategic challenge', due to Russia's annexation and destabilisation of Crimea, Ukraine and the wider Black Sea region.

The most recent EU document, the Strategic Compass, was adopted in 2022 in a context of high instability, caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the growing concerns regarding the Southern flank, further compounded by China's rise as a systemic rival. Compared to previous strategy documents, the Strategic Compass is more extensive in terms of the range of strategic partners as well as of the cooperation areas identified. Nevertheless, a holistic approach to security and defence, which includes hybrid threats, cyber diplomacy, extremism, foreign information manipulation, non-proliferation, arms control, CSDP missions and operations, terrorism and conflict prevention, is the central focus of EU's strategic partnerships and the areas of cooperation are specified in line with how the EU expects to cooperate with each partner. As Table 1 above indicates, the document states that the US is the "the EU's staunchest and most important partner", that the EU "will reinforce its strategic partnership with NATO and the UN", and it will develop more tailored bilateral partnerships with like-minded states and strategic partners such as Canada, Norway and Japan (Council of the European Union, 2022a). Partnerships thus remain an essential instrument towards effective multilateralism in the area of security and defence, and to consolidate the EU's position on international fora - a high priority issue in the context of these immediate security challenges. The Strategic Compass considers this premise through the partners pillar; however, the chapter on partnerships "is relatively vague in comparison with those in the Act, Invest and Secure chapters" (Major & Marrone, 2022, p. 6). Despite the broader range of partners and specific cooperation areas identified in the document, the Strategic Compass was expected to also give clear directives regarding the strategy for partnerships, an initiative that still remains elusive at this point.

Despite these official documents and reports, the EU's emphasis on strategic partners and strategic partnerships in its foreign policy remains vague, and not officially and/or formally defined. Nevertheless, the EU's strategy reports between 2003 and 2022 demonstrate that strategic partnerships have come to occupy a greater position in the EU's foreign and defence policy. In 2022, the EU has a greater number of strategic partners and signals a willingness to cooperate with an even greater number of strategic partners on significant political, defence and security issues at the regional and global levels in the years to come, which could suggest a deepening and widening of the EU's strategic partnerships. Moreover, while some core and like-minded countries like the US and Japan are still important, the EU seems to be shifting its emphasis from partner countries to international organisations and regional organisations/groupings in order to address pressing regional and global issues in a cooperative manner. However, whether this signals a path towards a more institutionalised understanding of strategic partnerships on the part of the EU remains to be seen, given the great variety in the drivers and modalities of the EU's strategic partnerships.

5 The EU's Strategic Partnership Agreements: Drivers and Modalities

The EU's official documents surveyed for this working paper demonstrate a clear lack of coherence and consistency in the EU's identification of strategic partners, the institutional set-up of strategic partnerships and the EU's motivations for strategic partnerships across individual partners.[1]

What institutional set-ups are utilised for finalising strategic partnerships? Similar to the identification of strategic partners, the mechanisms for setting up strategic partnerships also exhibit substantial variation. A formal procedure was adopted following the ESS to clarify the main steps to be taken in establishing the EU's strategic partnerships. Accordingly, a strategic partnership is established when the European Commission formally adopts a proposal for the partnership agreement, the Council of the EU adopts the Commission's proposal based on the European Parliament's approval, and a joint declaration by the EU and the Strategic partner is issued. With the operationalisation of the European Security Strategy, the EU negotiated and finalised sets of agreements with Japan, Canada and Russia- who already had been referred to as strategic partners in 1998 and further cemented their position with a Strategic Partnership Agreement. The 2015 Strategic Partnership Agreement between the EU and Canada is a solid example of the real-life application of the EU's formal procedures.

Since the adoption of the ESS in 2003, the EU has identified several states as 'strategic partners' and signed a range of agreements with several others (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2021; Grevi, 2010, 2012; Renard, 2013) with the concept of strategic partnership taking on an increasing importance within EU policymaking circles (Renard, 2016a). The ESS named six strategic partners – Canada, China, India, Japan, Russia and the US – while the 2008 Implementation Report on the ESS added Brazil and South Africa to this list. The same year, the EU signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Mexico and in 2010 identified South Korea as the 10th strategic partner (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016). Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa have signed Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPAs) with the EU, while the language of strategic partner is used in official documents to describe relations with Canada, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the US and the associated summit meetings (Blanco, 2016).[2] The EU also uses the language of strategic partnership to describe its relationship with NATO, CELAC, the African Union and ASEAN (Rein, 2015; Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Tangör, 2021; del Biondo, 2020), with states like Azerbaijan (Nuriyev, 2008) and with the

[1] A total of 50 official EU documents including strategy documents, joint summit declarations, conclusions, and press releases by the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, and the European Commission as well as bilateral agreements have been surveyed for this study.

[2] EU Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPAs) typically stipulate areas of cooperation between the EU and its identified strategic partners in trade and investment; security and defence, human rights, culture and education, and environment/climate change.

continent of Africa more broadly (Blanco, 2016; Mangala, 2013a). The EU's strategic partnerships sit alongside other forms of (complementary) partnership, including Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) and Framework Participation Agreements (FPAs), the latter of which facilitate third country contributions to the CSDP, including from existing strategic partners like the US and Canada (Gilson, 2016).

Concerning the EU's identification of these strategic partners, the EU differentiates between formal and informal strategic partners. As of 2022, the EU has a total of 16 formal/official strategic partners such as the US, NATO, Canada, Japan, ASEAN, the Arab League, etc. as well as several informal/unofficial strategic partners such as Norway, Switzerland, the UK and Turkey which are identified as such in strategy documents. The informal partnerships are so designated either because no common ground has yet been achieved on a potential strategic partnership, or a formal initiative has been taken by both parties but not yet finalised. Official strategic partners come in three basic forms as partner countries, regional organisations and groupings and international organisations. As Table 2 in Appendix 1 demonstrates, ten out of 16 official partnerships are formed with partner countries, whereas the remaining six are regional and international organisations. In addition, these strategic partners vary in terms of their geographic location, market power, military power and size. Partners such as the US, China and Russia are key global actors, whereas Brazil, India and South Africa can be classified as regional powers due to their rising economic strength, greater weight over international politics as BRICS countries and their potential for acting as regional interlocutors for addressing global and regional issues.

In a similar vein, it is possible to see bilateral summits organised between the EU and the strategic partner to officially declare the finalisation of the strategic partnership as was the case with South Korea in 2010. Following the Security Strategy, sets of formal agreements and negotiations laying out the procedures and the modalities of the partnerships were finalised with China (2003), South Africa (2006), Brazil (2007), India (2008), Mexico (2009) and South Korea (2010). Interestingly, with the EU's traditional partners, namely the US, Canada and Japan, there were no formal declarations of strategic partnerships until recently and there is still no formal agreement with the US. The Canadian-EU and the Japanese-EU Strategic Partnership Agreements were signed in 2016 and 2018 respectively (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019). Despite such formalisation efforts, the variation in the EU's formal and informal arrangements with strategic partners is still high. Furthermore, the EU utilises multiple tools for the establishment of strategic partnerships in addition to the one outlined in the ESS. For example, it would adopt policy dialogues, i.e. more informal instruments, partnership and cooperation agreements, i.e. formal instruments and/or with the organisation of bilateral summits and joint international meetings with the partners. Depending on the degree of formality, different formulations of strategic partnerships are possible. Thus, strategic partnerships form one part of the EU's generally bespoke approach to bilateral agreements, creating numerous forms of formalised and informal meetings, sessions and bodies, 'transversal' structures, which are individually variegated but serve a common purpose (Tyushka et al., 2022).

Why does the EU pursue strategic partnerships with a variety of global and regional actors? The EU's identification of strategic partners did not occur in a vacuum. Since the early 2000s, the concept had been diffusing beyond those pockets of the international community – such as Asia – where it had already become well established, contributing to a global 'vogue' for signing strategic partnerships (Envall & Hall, 2016). To some extent, the EU's identification of strategic partners could be said to lie at the confluence of the EU's own ambition to become a security and defence actor and the diminishing utility of formal Cold War-era alliance structures (Grevi, 2013). It also reflected the increasing complexity of world politics in a globalised age, the diversity of new security threats not adequately captured by state-centric frameworks, and challenges which required new (and more flexible) conceptual tools (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016; Renard, 2016a). Yet it was also a reflection of the changing nature of international politics in the early 2000s, as the US grappled with fears of decline (and the backlash against the 2003 Iraq War) and as signs emerged of a more multipolar – or at least 'polycentric' international order, where power was more diffuse and values more contested (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016; Grevi, 2013). Indeed, the ESS was itself motivated partly by the perceived need to re-state the EU's values – and its support for multilateralism – in light of global criticism of the unilateralist American foreign policy agenda during this period. Internally, the EU's desire to position itself as a security and defence actor was also a motivation for the designation of major global players as partners and seeking to initiative collaboration on security matters (Blanco, 2016). Engaging with global players not only reinforces the EU's status as a security actor, but also helps it achieve its external goals, given the ability of such actors to frustrate the EU's interests (Grevi, 2013) as well as their pivotal status in world politics more generally, making them ideal sites for seeking normative change (Blanco, 2016).

Further, it is essential to remember that these partnerships are also buttressed, or sometimes opposed, by partnerships at the Member State level. The EU's agreements overlap with agreements at the Member State level with China, Brazil and India, which also serve principally to complement the EU-level agreements (Renard, 2016a). As with the EU's strategic partnerships, though, these agreements are also conceptually murky involving a mixture of normative and realpolitik. Azerbaijan, for example, has strategic partnerships with eight EU Member States including Czechia, Italy, Romania and Croatia. The latter three have direct stakes in Azerbaijan's energy industry and, thus, represent tools of influence in a key energy and economic partner. Alternatively, the EU has been reluctant to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Azerbaijan due to human rights concerns. Czechia has adopted this general approach by signing a very vague strategic partnership focused on energy and commerce but lacking in any other common purpose or comprehensive goals (Tallis & Šimečka, 2017; van Gils, 2017). Thus, even EU Member States take advantage of the conceptual plurality of the strategic partnership label for the development of their own foreign policy goals, either in line with the EU's objectives or separately, across a variety of policy areas. This is critical in teasing out the policy coherence for European foreign policy in its engagement with strategic partners.

What determines the areas of cooperation and policy coordination with strategic partners? It largely depends first on the type of partner which the EU is engaged with, and second on who

the partner is. As indicated in Table 2 in Appendix 1, the EU places an emphasis on normative foundations while committing to a partnership with core and like-minded partners such as Canada, US and Japan by emphasising democracy, rule of law and human rights as an area of common commitment. The same commitment is also observed in the EU's partnership with Russia and China, who were once strategic partners and are now strategic rivals, while the EU takes the role of a promoter of normative values for both states. The EU's strategic partnerships with Russia and China are driven more by a realpolitik calculation of the status of these partners as global players with a stake in global issues. Partnerships with regional groupings such as the League of Arab Nations and the African Union and those aspirational regional powers such as Brazil and South Africa are based on an all-encompassing idea of security including sustainable development, economic growth and liberalisation, climate and environment, energy security, peace and conflict and political issues specific to each region. On the other hand, in the EU's formal and informal partnerships with international organisations such as NATO, UN and OSCE, who are either formally or informally declared as strategic partners as per strategic documents and bilateral agreements, the area of cooperation is extremely focused and limited. For example, the EU's strategic partnership with NATO largely revolves around the efforts to further institutionalise its defence strategies under the CSDP. Nevertheless, one can speak of a common denominator shaping the areas of cooperation and coordination with all partners, which is triangulation according to Renard (2012). This means that the area and scope of cooperation between the EU and a strategic partner often relates to a third country or region other than the strategic partners and the EU where a significant global issue originates such as the issue of Syrian refugees, Iran's nuclear issue, trans-border crime originating from Central Asia, or Afghanistan.

While each of the partnerships comprises a series of policy dialogues aimed at bringing together officials from both sides to discuss areas of mutual concern (Renard, 2016a), beyond these similarities the EU's relationship with its strategic partners is highly variegated. As stated above, the EU has reached different kinds of agreements with different partners, some of which have signed a formal SPA and some of which have not (Gilson, 2016). Moreover, some of the EU's strategic partners are party to multiple agreements – bilateral and multilateral – with the EU, whereas others are not. There are also clear divisions in status between the initial ten states identified as strategic partners, with several – including China and Russia – identified from the beginning as more competitive relationships, and others – like that with Canada, Japan and the US – representing relationships that featured far lower levels of competition and divergence. This is reflected in the intended purpose of the partnerships, with Russia and China regarded more as interlocutors rather than partners, and less substantive discussion on policy coordination as a result (Renard, 2016a). While other strategic partnerships can be described more as aspirational rather than essential, they arise out of distributions of power rather than more fundamental partnerships (Rivera & Garaschchuk, 2016; Maher, 2016). There are also identifiable differences in priorities, which follow predictable lines. For instance, the EU engages with the US on far more issues – and on a far more frequent basis – than it does with South Korea and Japan (Renard, 2016a). Even though the relationship has historically been more competitive and has become more conflictual since the Russian annexation of Crimea, the EU engaged more with Russia as a strategic partner

than it did with countries like South Korea which – while democratic and more 'Western'-aligned – are geographically more distant (Renard, 2016a). Such is the qualitative variation in the strategic partnerships which indicate a hierarchy in this regard. As a matter of fact, the EU has identified different strategic partners with various labels across official documents including the security strategies. Accordingly, the US is often referred to as an 'essential partner', 'core partner', 'traditional partner' or 'irreplaceable partner', whereas Canada, Japan, India and South Korea are often considered as 'pivotal partners' and 'like-minded partners' and Mexico and South Africa as 'regional partners' (Renard, 2011 cited in Grevi, 2013, p. 160). While such identifications seem to have remained constant for most of the traditional allies, a negative turn in bilateral relations has resulted in a re-identification of some partners. For example, while Russia and China were referred to as 'key global actors' across several documents, they are either labelled as 'systemic rival' or 'strategic challenge' due to several political issues that have constrained bilateral relationships after 2014. This is an important development indicating the fluidity of the concept of strategic partnership and its dynamic nature.

6 Strategic Partners in the EU's CFSP and CSDP

Defining a strategic partner is not an easy task for the EU. It comes with multiple challenges: when the EU aims to develop and finalise strategic partnerships, this is based on the assumption that the EU itself is a strategic partner that other states and international organisations want to develop relations with. The EU emphasised, in the 2003 European Security Strategy, the following objectives for its strategic partners: to build a secure and well governed external environment, contribute to effective multilateralism and deal with security threats. However, the emphasis on these common objectives has not necessarily been shared by all EU Member States (EEAS, 2003). Similarly to the EU's trade and development policies as analysed in ENGAGE Working Paper 6, relations with strategic partners are directly affected by a lack of policy coherence. In particular, there is a lack of coherence among the EU Member States on the identification of the EU's strategic partners, as highlighted above, along with a degree of divergence between the EU's common objectives as laid out by its official documents, and those either prioritised or implemented by Member States. This lack of convergence between the EU and its Member States, together with the lack of a clear definition of who constitutes a strategic partner, further complicate the EU's engagement with other countries and other international institutions. Given these issues with regards to how to define and approach strategic partners globally, the EU's ability to project a unified image for itself as a valuable strategic partner remains problematic. That is related to the diverging perceptions among the EU members states over perceived security risks and threats (Müller et al., 2022 (ENGAGE Working Paper 7)) and also to the main fact that the EU is not a unitary actor. The 16+1 group of Central and Eastern European countries and China, although largely defunct now, highlights this risk of disunity (Stanzel et al., 2016). However, despite these issues, the EU's involvement with global issues such as climate change, development, or non-proliferation makes it a critical interlocutor to build bridges between state actors and find solutions to global problems, at least generating awareness on these problems, from a multilateral perspective.

The EU has often been defined as a *sui generis* organisation, with unique traits of supranational decision-making together with intergovernmental bargains. This unique model of policymaking impacts the EU's ability to formulate coherent policy objectives and actions in every area of foreign policy – including its relations with strategic partners. In addition to issues regarding coherence, the act of defining strategic partners also entails problems relating to consistency and credibility, particularly regarding the EU's normative aspirations as outlined in the Lisbon Treaty. Many of the strategic partnership agreements and summit declarations on individual partnerships begin with a statement of normative commitment by both partners on democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms, rule of law and international law – a testament to the normative character of the agreements – and continue with mutual areas of concern, which are often shaped by realpolitik considerations. However, signing strategic partnership agreements with Russia and China, despite the authoritarian

governance and suppression of fundamental rights in both countries, hampers the EU's claims to normativity and hence its credibility in its external relations. Besides, bilateral partnership agreements demonstrate that the commitment to normativity does not come as a package for each partnership but is tailored according to the partner in question. For example, in contrast to many other strategic partnership agreements, the agreements with the League of Arab Nations placed far less emphasis on democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and when such normative content is implied, it is done so in a much narrower sense. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are mentioned in the context of the Middle Eastern countries' counterterrorism efforts specifically, where a common understanding on striking a balance between counterterrorism measures and respect for fundamental freedoms is emphasised. In a similar vein, women's rights are only mentioned with respect to women's access to education and employment opportunities in these agreements, thereby excluding many other issues of interest.

Strategic partnerships are political acts of signalling one's own intentions in international politics, but they are also tools to acknowledge certain state actors' relative standing in global power balances. When the EU developed its external relations with the ten global players it has deemed as the EU's strategic partners, this move was based on these states' global power status and the possible convergence of their material interests with the EU's. Accordingly, the concept of strategic partnership is not static. The EU's identification of Russia as its strategic partner in 1998 was based on the global conditions at the time, where Russia was also moving towards a European goal post. However, in 2022 - following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that the EU and Russia can no longer be considered as strategic partners. In a similar vein, while early strategy documents read Iran as an 'impending threat', after the JCPOA the EU classifies Iran together with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries as potential contributions to Middle East peace and security in the 2016 Global Strategy. In the 2022 Strategic Compass, however, it reverts to 'central threat to the region' discourse due to Iran's militias and WMD activities in the Middle East. Yet, a formula that allows the EU to acknowledge such changes is not clearly visible. On paper, Russia is still a strategic partner, but in reality, this is no longer the case. What is more, even for a player such as Russia, which has blatantly violated the international principles of use of force, there does not seem to be a consensus among the EU Member States over possible courses of action to be adopted to counter Russian aggression. This brings forth the following question: What are the key dynamics of identifying another global player as a strategic partner for the EU and, once this is done, what are the key conditions under which this strategic partnership endures? While different case studies under other working papers for the ENGAGE project will be dealing with these questions, the conceptual framework identified in this working paper provides the tools with which these empirical analyses would be conducted.

The shift towards strategic partnerships specifically – and more 'eclectic' approaches towards external engagement more generally (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016) – established conceptual tensions with the EU's support for existing multilateral frameworks. The ESS had championed the concepts of 'effective multilateralism' and 'multi-dimensionality' and sought to differentiate the EU position from the then dominant strain of exceptionalist neo-conservatism

in the US. Yet the practice of signing strategic partnerships departed from existing EU multilateralism, given the emphasis on bilateralism, the general absence of conditionality and the lower level of formal institutionalisation (Renard, 2016a, 2016b). Many of the EU's strategic partners either do not share the EU's belief in multilateralism (Grevi, 2013) or regard the partnership as connoting a very different kind of relationship (Blanco, 2016). While conceptual divergence may have arisen, however, the EU's intention was to utilise such partnerships as a means of bolstering multilateralism. Strategic partnerships were seen as a way in which the EU could strengthen key relationships *within* multilateral forums, coordinate more effectively with the most powerful players and contribute to building a denser web of overlapping institutional structures at the global level (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016; Wilkins, 2008). In this way, although strategic partnerships represented a distinct form of doing external relations, they were generally put in service of the EU's existing normative commitment to multilateralism and maintenance of the architecture of the liberal international order, as well as tools to promote the EU's CSDP.

7 Conclusion

The EU's foreign policy is multifaceted, multidimensional and is driven by the interplay of material and ideational factors. The EU's reliance on multiple tools and instruments in its engagement with global players, some of which are identified as strategic partners, contributes to its effectiveness and perceived capabilities at the global level. The concept of strategic partnership is elusive, but also empirically visible in the EU's relations with other players. As discussed in this working paper, the study of the concept bears multiple conceptual and empirical challenges which need to be considered in the further inquiry of strategic partnerships.

The first challenge pertains to the key distinction put forward within the broader literature on strategic partnerships and the friend/enemy distinction in EU's relations with specific partners. Strategic partnerships are commonly forged with both kinds of 'others' and the dynamics associated with each are sufficiently distinct to produce a Janus-faced concept in practice, incorporating more traditional allies under the strategic partner umbrella as well as more aspirational forms of relationships. This is reinforced by the tendency for related distinctions – between values and instrumentality, between instigating or deepening cooperation – to map onto the friend/enemy distinction (although this is not always the case).

Second, efforts to assess the effectiveness of strategic partnerships are beset by a range of endogeneity problems, since almost all the variables identified in the literature as contributing to more effective partnerships are also potential outcomes of these relationships. Careful attention needs to be paid to distinguishing between aspects of partnerships – e.g. longevity, institutionalisation, routinisation, value-congruence, security interdependence, etc. – and to establishing which of these is the intended outcome and which is the factor contributing to relative success.

The third challenge relates to the fact that strategic partnerships represent a distinct form of inter-state relationship, even when we account for the diversity of forms they can take. This is perhaps best appreciated when they are considered alongside alternative forms of arrangements (e.g. alliances, coalitions, etc.). Yet while strategic partnerships may represent a convenient mid-point between ad hoc arrangements and institutionalised commitments, they cannot overcome the broader trade-offs between flexibility and constraint. In other words, there will always be downsides to what can be achieved through such adaptable structures.

Fourth, we need to take seriously the political and discursive effects of labelling relationships *strategic*, especially from the vantage point of the EU, with its unique position as an historically civilian actor actively seeking credibility as a security actor. There are a host of good reasons for the EU to engage with major strategic actors, but also political incentives to play up the EU's strategic role, as well as associated risks to the EU's credibility and the effectiveness of the agreements in question.

Turning to the core foci of the ENGAGE project on effectiveness, coherence and sustainability, there is clear overlap between the conditions derived for effectiveness in section 3 and the

operating definitions of the project (Sus et al., 2021 (ENGAGE Working Paper 3)). Effectiveness, being defined as the ability to influence the world as measured by outputs and outcomes, is clearly dependent upon the level of institutionalisation. If, as stated above, strategic partnerships are more likely to deliver concrete results when densely institutionalised (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019, p. 27), then they are also likely be more effective as per the ENGAGE criteria. This is to be understood as a relative measure given the breadth of the partnerships, with levels of effectiveness being proportional to the issue areas covered by the partnerships, to allow for the broad variance between partnerships.

Coherence, however, takes the opposite position regarding such variance. All strategic partnerships are coherent with themselves, according to their own logic, but this is not a meaningful measurement. Thus, horizontal coherence is to be considered in relation to other existing forms of interaction in a similar issue area, with the existence of other, *more* effective avenues for cooperation possibly acting against coherence in the EU's relation with a partner (Haastrup, 2017; Adelle & Kotsopoulos, 2017). In other words, these existing channels may provide support to the EU's foreign policy objectives, but their co-existence alongside strategic partnerships can either reduce or improve the overall horizontal coherence of the EU's foreign policy. The effect on overall horizontal coherence will depend primarily on the coordination between these channels. Similarly, vertical coherence functions by similar logic: it is important to identify and measure to what extent the existence of a strategic partnership is undercut by, or supported by, existing policies on the member state level.[3] This can be true of both partnerships that focus solely on realpolitik concerns, or those which follow a more normative bent.

Finally, the sustainability of a given strategic partnership is to be identified based on the durability of the relationship. This can be supported by pre-existing normative convergence, which will support the ideological sustainability of a partnership (Michalski & Pan, 2017b), as well as converging interests (Landsberg & Hierro, 2017). Clear, focused and long-term goals for a partnership, which are ideally institutionalised to reduce transaction costs and increase the reliability of cooperation, will be hallmarks of sustainable partnerships, critically adding onto the effectiveness of the EU's foreign policy.

This working paper corresponds to Deliverable 7.1 of the H2020 project ENGAGE.

[3] Vertical coherence in the case of strategic partnerships will be explored in further detail in future working papers.

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Appendix 1: The EU's Official Strategic Partners and Areas of Cooperation and Contestation

Table 2: The EU's Official Strategic Partners and Areas of Cooperation and Contestation

Country	Key Agreements/Documents	Identification by the EU	Areas of (Proposed) Cooperation	Areas of Contestation/Further Improvement
US	1990/The Transatlantic Declaration		Support for democracy/rule of law/human rights, international security, multilateralism with UN and similar institutions at the core, sustained economic growth, trade liberalisation, support for political and economic reforms in third countries, economic support for Central and Eastern European countries, strengthening multilateral trading system in line with GATT and OECD principles, terrorism, money laundering, international crime, environment, WMDs (European Parliament, 1990).	
	1995/The New Transatlantic Agenda and the Action Plan		Development of new European security architecture where NATO/EU/Western European Union/OSCE/Council of Europe play a role, promoting peace and security/democracy/development, democracy and economic reform in Central and Eastern Europe/Russia/Ukraine, Middle East security, non-proliferation, development, humanitarian assistance, organised crime in Russia/Ukraine/Central and Eastern Europe and other independent states, terrorism, migration, environment, strengthening multilateral trading system, economic relations, economic and political support for the reconstruction of former Yugoslavia, support for	

			democracy and market institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, support for democracy and stability in Russia and Ukraine, support for Turkey's further integration into transatlantic community, resolution of the Cyprus issue, support for Middle East peace processes, sustainable development, UN reform, support for KEDO, global health, establishing parliamentary links (European Parliament, 1995)	
	2003/European Security Strategy	Irreplaceable partner		
	2016/EU Global Strategy	Core partner		
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	EU's staunchest and most important strategic partner		
Russia	1997/Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation	Key global actor	Respect for democracy and human rights, political dialogue, free trade, investment, legislative cooperation for a fully functioning market economy, economic cooperation, energy, environment, transport, regional development, transborder crime, Money laundering, trade in nuclear materials, regional development, illegal immigration (Official Journal of the European Union, 1997)	
	1999/The EU's Common Strategy on Russia		Consolidation of democracy, public institutions, rule of law in Russia; integration of Russia into a common European economic and social space; stability and security of Europe and beyond; preventive diplomacy; nuclear safety; energy; environment; organised crime, Money laundering; health;	

			regional cooperation in the CBSS, BSEC, Barents Euro-Arctic Council; trade and investment (Official Journal of the European Union, 1999).	
	2005/Road Map on the Common Economic Space, Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice, Common Space of External Security, Common Space of Research, Education, Including Cultural Aspects		Creation of an integrated market between EU and Russia, free market development, energy, environment, strengthening the international order based on effective multilateralism, human rights, conflict prevention, promotion of contacts between military structures, fight against terrorism, non-proliferation, crisis management, civil protection, adherence to democracy/rule of law/human rights/international law, free movement of people, transnational organised crime and money laundering, corruption, cooperation on justice (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the EU, 2005a and 2005b)	
	2008/Joint EU-Russia Summit	Strategic partner	Economic and trade interests, cooperation on common spaces, Russia's WTO membership, energy, security and stability of the common neighbourhood, cooperation on Kosovo/Middle East/Iranian nuclear issue, North Korea/WMDs. (Official Journal of the European Union, 2008a)	Human rights violations, freedom of speech, minority rights, visa rules for European businessmen (Official Journal of the European Union, 2008a)
	2010/ EU-Russia Summit Conclusions	One of EU's most important partners	Conclusion of a strategic partnership agreement, Russia's WTO membership, financial sector reform (Official Journal of the European Union, 2010)	Democracy and human rights, the issue of Georgia/Abkhazia/South Ossetia, energy, climate change, visa facilitation (Official Journal of the European Union, 2010)

	2010/Joint Statement on Partnership for Modernisation	Strategic partner	Democracy, rule of law, bilateral trade, investment, legal arrangements for free trade, transport, low-carbon economy, economy, climate change, civil society, development (Council of the European Union, 10b)	
	2014/EU Foreign Affairs Council Meeting			Russian annexation of Crimea (Council of the European Union, 2014)
	2016/EU Foreign Affairs Council Meeting			5 points guiding EU's stance towards relations with Russia: implementation of Minsk Agreement by Russia, selective engagement with Russia on issues of interest to the EU, support for Russian civil society, strengthening the EU's resilience in energy/security/hybrid threats/strategic communication, strengthening relations with EU's Eastern partners and Central Asia (Council of the European Union, 2016)
	2019/European Parliament Resolution on EU-Russia Political Relations	Recommended Russia to be not considered as a 'strategic partner' anymore	Trade, issues relating to the MENA and the Northern and Arctic region, terrorism, violent extremism, non-proliferation, arms control, strategic stability in the cyber sphere, organised crime, migration and climate change, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, EU-Russia-China-Central Asia dialogue on connectivity (European Parliament, 2019)	Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russia's violation of Georgia and Moldova's territorial integrity, EU's destabilisation of EU candidate countries, absence

				of steps for democracy/human rights/rule of law, Russia's military threats to other countries, organised crime and money laundering, Russia's disregard for international law, Russia's support for authoritarian regimes, Nord Stream 2 and energy, Russia's hybrid threats (European Parliament, 2019)
	2016/European Global Strategy	Key strategic challenge		Destabilisation of the Black Sea, Crimea, Ukraine (EEAS, 2016)
	2022/EU Strategic Compass			Military aggression in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea, de facto control over Belarus, Wagner mercenaries in Syria, Libya, Central African Republic and Mali (Council of the European Union, 2022a)
China	1998/Communication from the Commission: Building A Comprehensive Partnership with China	Key global actor	Political dialogue, open society, rule of law, human rights, civil society, China's integration into international community, dialogue with the UN and OECD, nuclear non-proliferation, illegal immigration and transborder crime, Money laundering, environment and climate change, Asian regional security, disarmament, dialogue on Korean peninsula and Central and	

			South-East Asia, cooperation over the autonomy of Hong Kong and Macau, integration into world trading system, China's accession to WTO, trade, investment, financial sector reform, technology transfer in the energy sector, the efficiency of EU fundings to China (Official Journal of the European Union, 1998)	
	2001/Communication from the Commission: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a more Effective EU Policy		Illegal migration and human trafficking, transnational organised crime, EU cooperation assistance to China, high-level political dialogue, security in Burma/Myanmar, resolution of sovereignty claims in South China Sea, disarmament, multilateral security dialogue through ARF/ASEM/UN, support for UN peacekeeping operations, Money-laundering, environment, transition to open-society/rule of law/human rights/good governance/steps to democratisation, China's integration into world economy, China's accession to WTO, China's economic reform, peaceful nuclear energy (Official Journal of the European Union, 2001)	Ratification of UN Covenant of Political and Civil Rights (Official Journal of the European Union, 2001)
	2003/EU Commission Policy Paper: A Maturing Partnership, Shared Interests, and Challenges in EU China Relations	Strategic partner	Sustainable development, peace and stability, trade liberalisation, China's transition to open society/rule of law/human rights/good governance, China's integration into world trade system, shared responsibilities in promoting global governance, security of the Korean peninsula, Hong Kong/Macau issue, Burma/Myanmar issue, illegal migration, transnational crime, climate change, South China Sea issue, promotion of ASEAN Regional Forum's role on regional security, conflict resolution, terrorism, support for China's economic and social reform, civil society development (Official Journal of the European Union, 2003)	Human rights, ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Official Journal of the European Union, 2003)

	2013/EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation	Key global actor	Dialogue and cooperation for regional and global peace and security, cooperation on defence, maritime safety, cybersecurity, nuclear non-proliferation, humanitarian aid, transnational organised crime, multilateralism, human rights, trade and investment, free market access, transport and infrastructure, sustainable development, energy, climate change and environment, regional policy, social progress (EEAS 2013)	
	2016/ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Elements for a new EU strategy on China	Partnership based on mutual interest Aspiring global power	'One China' policy, 'One Country, Two Systems' policy in Hong Kong and Macau, support for China's structural economic/environmental/social reforms, trade and investment, digital economy, foreign policy cooperation on Syria/Libya/Afghanistan/overall Middle East and migration, cooperation in Central Asia and EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood, counter-terrorism, defence/peacekeeping/capacity-building cooperation in Africa, rules-based global governance, sustainable development, climate change, environment, energy (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016a)	Human rights/rule of law/ political accountability/civil society, ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and Arms Trade Treaty by China, China's accession to the Hague Code of Conduct on Ballistic Missiles (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016a)
	2019/European Commission's Joint Communication: EU-China - A Strategic Outlook	Economic Competitor Systemic Rival	Upholding the rules-based international order, effective multilateralism, human rights, sustainable development, good governance, regional security, denuclearisation of North Korea, peace process in Afghanistan, Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, transport/digital/energy connectivity between Europe and Asia (Official Journal of the European Union, 2019)	China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, cross-sectoral hybrid threats by China, China's business and investment activities in Western Balkans/EU's neighbourhood/Africa, climate change, a balanced and reciprocal trade and investment relationship, WTO organisation reform, rising

				protectionism, labour and environmental standards, supporting competitiveness, cybersecurity and surveillance technology for export control (Official Journal of the European Union, 2019)
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	Partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and systemic rival	Climate change (Council of the European Union, 2022a)	China's involvement in regional tensions, asymmetry in economic competition, cyber security and hybrid threats, China's militarisation, regional and global security (Council of the European Union, 2022a)
Canada	1976/Framework Agreement for Commercial and Economic Cooperation Between the EU and Canada		Most-favoured nation treatment, economic and commercial cooperation (Official Journal of the European Union, 1976)	
	1990/Declaration on European Community and Canada Relations		Democracy/human rights/rule of law, international peace and security, trade liberalisation, helping political and economic reform in third countries, stability of financial institutions, terrorism, organised crime, money laundering, disarmament, WMDs, sustainable development, migration (EEAS, 1990)	
	2003/European Security Strategy	Strategic partner		

	2004/EU-Canada Partnership Agenda	Like-minded partner	Effective multilateralism and international rule of law, terrorism, WMDs, failed states, strengthening transatlantic security, crisis management and peacekeeping operations, sustainable development, human rights, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, eliminating hunger in third countries, cooperate within the context of African Partnership Forum, closer coordination within the context of UN/OSCE/OECD/EBRD, global economic prosperity, maritime security, cooperation in justice and home affairs, climate change and environment (EEAS, 2004)	
	2005/Agreement Between the European Union and Canada on Crisis Management		Canada's participation in the EU's civilian and military crisis management operations (Official Journal of the European Union, 2005)	
	2016/ Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)		Establishment of a free trade area (Official Journal of the European Union, 2017)	
	2016/Strategic Partnership Agreement Between the EU and Canada	Strategic partner	Human rights/fundamental freedoms/democracy/rule of law, non-proliferation, WMDs, disarmament, terrorism, international peace and security, commitment to multilateralism with UN/NATO/OSCE/ OECD at its core, economic and sustainable development, climate change and environment, organised crime, corruption, money-laundering, cybercrime, migration (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016b)	
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	Like-minded partners		

Japan	2019/EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement	Strategic partner	Democracy/rule of law/human rights, international humanitarian law, nuclear non-proliferation, arms trafficking, terrorism, effective multilateralism and UN reform, sustainable development, transnational organised crime, humanitarian assistance, sustainable economic growth, fiscal policy, transport, industrial cooperation, environment, climate change, energy, maritime security, global health, money laundering, cooperation on cyber issues, migration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019)	
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	Like-minded partner		
India	2004/Communication from the Commission: An EU-India Strategic Partnership	Increasingly important international player and regional power	Multilateralism, conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction, nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism, transnational organised crime, migration, democracy/human rights, peace and stability of South Asia, development, economy, trade, investment, finance Official Journal of the European Union, 2004)	
	2020/EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap for 2025	Strategic partner 'Unions of diversity'	Military-to-military relations, disarmament, maritime security, cybersecurity, non-proliferation, free trade, private sector investment, financial regulation, human rights, sustainable modernisation, climate change, green energy, environment, information and communications technology, transport, health and food security, effective multilateralism, connectivity, stability and security of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, global economic governance, development partnership in third countries, migration (EEAS, 2020)	
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	Like-minded partner		

Brazil	2007/Communication from the EU Commission: Towards An EU-Brazil Strategic Partnership	Regionally pivotal actor, BRICs	Strengthening multilateralism with UN and other international organisations at the core, cooperation in peace-building missions, nuclear non-proliferation, global finance governance, human rights and democracy promotion, development, climate change and environmental protection, renewable energy, regional cooperation on Latin America with Mercosur and EU-LAC Forum at the core, developing trade and investment, maritime governance, transnational organised crime, corruption, migration Commission of the European Union, 2007)	
South Africa	2007/The South Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership Joint Action Plan	Strategic partner	Political dialogue, development, trade, investment, environment, climate change, macro-economic policy, peace and security, migration, transport, housing, education and training, information and communication technology (ICT), employment, regional inequality, crime, science and technology (Council of the European Union, 2007a)	
Mexico	2008/ Towards An EU-Mexico Strategic Partnership	Global player, active player of G8+G5 Group, like-minded country	Multilateralism, democracy, human rights, rule of law, cultural dialogue, Latin America, regional integration, fight against terrorism, failed states, organised crime, drug and human trafficking, climate change, natural disasters, fight against overexploitation of fish stocks, development policy, investment and social responsibility, innovation and intellectual property rights, open markets, trade, social policies, decent work/social protection, migration, poverty, global macro-financial stability, good governance in the tax area, energy security, sustainability and improved efficiency, food prices, fisheries, maritime policy and ocean governance, transport issues of common interest (Official Journal of the European Union, 2008b)	

	2010/Joint Executive Plan on the EU-Mexico Strategic Partnership	Strategic partner	Multilateralism, international financial crisis, food crisis, nuclear non-proliferation, arms trafficking, UN reform, peacekeeping, transnational organised crime, corruption, migration, development, humanitarian aid, terrorism, human security, regional dialogue, electoral cooperation, cooperation in Latin America/Africa, trade relations, sustainable development, environment, climate change, human rights (European Parliament, 2010)	
South Korea	2010/Framework Agreement Between the EU and The Republic of Korea	Strategic partner	Political dialogue, non-proliferation and WMD, disarmament, terrorism, cooperation in regional and international organisations, trade, investment, energy, transport, sustainable development, climate change and environment, democratic principles, human rights, rule of law, corruption, organised crime, migration, Money laundering and terrorism financing, cyber crime (EEAS, 2010)	
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	Like-minded partner		
NATO	1997/ The New NATO and the European Security Architecture		Crisis management, peace keeping, humanitarian assistance; devising a new European Security Architecture; cooperation for the evolution of an outward-looking, democratic and prospering Russia, Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean region, Bosnia, Ukraine (NATO, 1997)	
	2002/EU-NATO Declaration on ESDP	Strategic partner	Crisis management cooperation, conflict prevention, addressing the security risks of the 21st century, doing military operations where NATO is not wholly engaged (NATO, 2002)	
	2003/Berlin Plus Agreement		Access to NATO planning capabilities for EU-led crisis management operations, availability of NATO assets and capabilities for EU-led crisis management operations,	

			consultation for crisis management operations in Europe and beyond, WMDs and terrorism (European Parliament, 2003)	
	2010/EU-NATO Lisbon Summit		Commitment to develop the Euro-Atlantic partnership as per the NATO Strategic Concept, crisis management, stability and security of the Black Sea/Mediterranean/South Caucasus/Moldova, NATO missile defence architecture, terrorism, organised crime, extremism, cyber threats, the acquisition of key enabling capabilities (NATO, 2010)	
	2016/The Warsaw Declaration on Transatlantic Security		Russia's actions in Ukraine, stability and security of the Middle East and North Africa, strengthening defence and deterrence against cyber threats/hybrid threats/ballistic missiles/terrorism, support for Moldova/Ukraine/Georgia, operational cooperation at sea and on migration, developing complementary defence capabilities, a stronger defence industry, a stronger maritime capacity, cooperation on exercises (NATO, 2016a and 2016b)	
	2017/NATO-EU Joint Summit		Hybrid threats, cooperation on threats coming from the East and South, strategic communications, bolstering resilience, operational maritime cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, cyber security, defence and security capacity building for Libya/Afghanistan/Iraq/Western Balkans, exercises, counterterrorism	
	2022/EU Strategic Compass	Like-minded partner Essential partner for	Defence against multiple threats including hybrid threats, cyber diplomacy, foreign information manipulation and interference, disarmament, non-proliferation, maritime security, climate change and environmental risks, Russia's aggression in Ukraine, information and intelligence sharing, crisis management operations, military capability	

		Euro-Atlantic Security Core partner	development and military mobility, joint coordinated exercises (Council of the European Union, 2022a)	
CELAC	2015/Shaping Our Common Future: CELAC-EU Strategic Partnership	Strategic partner	Deepening bilateral ties, sustainable development, climate change, transnational organised crime, fight against drugs, international peace and security, multilateralism, counterterrorism, human rights, arms trade and investment, nuclear non-proliferation, trade, eradication of poverty, green economy, renewable energy, corruption, information technologies, migration, citizen security, gender, regional integration, social cohesion through education (European Parliament, 2015b)	
The African Union	2007/The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership: A Joint Africa-EU Strategy	Partnership based on common values, interests and strategic objectives	Peace and security, migration, clean environment, sustainable development, democracy/human rights/gender equality, good governance/corruption/institution-building, regional and continental integration of Africa, effective multilateralism, UN reform, global health, WMDs, disarmament, energy security, climate change, terrorism, conflict prevention/conflict resolution/peace-building/post-conflict construction, civil society development, free trade, transnational organised crime, international humanitarian law, money laundering, private sector development and investment, Millennium Development Goals, agriculture and food security (Council of the European Union, 2007b)	

The Arab League	2014/Athens Declaration and the EU-LAS Strategic Dialogue	Strategic partner	Counter-terrorism, radicalism, WMDs, humanitarian assistance, transnational organised crime, human rights/economic and political empowerment of women/civil society, regional energy cooperation, climate change, environment, migration, Middle East Peace Process, Syrian crisis, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Lebanon, the issue of islands between Iran and the UAE, Libyan crisis, Yemeni crisis, peace and stability of Somalia, peacebuilding and reconstruction of Sudan, stability and security of the Sahel with a focus on Mali and Morocco, Ukrainian crisis (EEAS, 2014)	
	2015/Memorandum of Understanding on Counterterrorism		Counter-terrorism efforts based on fundamental human rights principles, consensus on an unambiguous definition of terrorism, avoiding human rights violations and breach of international humanitarian law in the name of security, empowering ethnic and religious discrimination and fight against discrimination, radicalisation and violent extremism, transnational organised crime (European Parliament, 2015a)	
	2019/First Summit Meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh		Security, conflict resolution, socio-economic development, investment, sustainable development, trade, energy security, sustainable and peaceful political solution in Yemen/Syria/Libya, terrorism, terrorist finance, radicalisation, disarmament, WMDs, transnational organised crime, fight against religious discrimination and extremism (Council of the European Union, 2019)	
ASEAN	2007/Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership		Multilateralism and political dialogue, combatting terrorism, maritime security, money laundering, cyber-crime, transnational organised crime, disarmament, WMDs, trade, economic liberalisation, private sector interaction, climate	

			change, energy security, environment, global health, development (EEAS, 2007)	
	2020/23rd EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting	Strategic partner	Global health and COVID-19, economic cooperation and trade, sustainable development, climate change, environment, connectivity, cyber security, maritime cooperation, transnational organised crime, terrorism, regional economic integration, stability of the South China Sea (Council of the European Union, 2020)	
The Gulf Cooperation Council	2022/EU Council Conclusions on A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf	Strategic partner	Energy supply security, green transition and climate change, de-escalation of tensions in the Gulf region and the greater Middle East, cooperation over Iran's nuclear issue, ballistic missiles and proxies, counterterrorism, Money laundering and terrorist financing, cyber security, maritime safety of the Hormuz, human rights and democratic principles, sustainable development (Council of the European Union, 2022b)	

Source: own elaboration

Appendix 2: Characteristics of the EU's Strategic Partners

Table 3: Matrix of the Characteristics of the EU's Strategic Partners

Partner	State/ IO	Region	Borders EU	Formalisation	Start of Strategic Partnership (SP)	Year of Formal Agreement	First Label	Most Recent Label	Normative Proximity	Issue Areas covered
US	State	N. America	N	No	1997	X	Irreplaceable partner (2003)	EU's staunchest and most important strategic partner (2012)	Lib. Dem.	23 (1997)
Canada	State	N. America	N	SP Agreement	1976	2004	Strategic partner (2003)	Like-minded partner (2022)	Lib. Dem.	14 (2016)
Japan	State	Asia	N	SP Agreement	2019	2019	Strategic partner (2019)	Like-minded partner (2022)	Lib. Dem.	21 (2019)
South Korea	State	Asia	N	Framework Agreement	2010	2010	Strategic partners (2010)	Like-minded partners (2022)	Lib. Dem.	19 (2010)
China	State	Asia	N	Formal Procedure	1998	2003	Key global actor (1998)	Partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and systemic rival (2022)	Auth.	22 (1998) 6 (2022)

Brazil	State	SA	Y	Formal Procedure	2007	2007	Regionally pivotal actor (2007)	Regionally pivotal actor (2007)	Dem.	15 (2007)
Mexico	State	N. America	N	Formal Procedure	2008	2008	Strategic partner (2008)	Strategic partner (2010)	Dem.	31 (2008)
India	State	Asia	N	Formal Procedure	2004	2004	Increasingly important international player and regional power (2004)	Like-minded partner (2022)	Lib. Dem.	22 (2020)
Russia	State	Europe/ Asia	Y	Agreement on Partnership	1997	1997	Key global actor (1997)	Key strategic challenge (2016)	Auth.	16 (1997) 6 (2022)
South Africa	State	South Africa	N	Formal Procedure	2007	2007	Strategic partner (2007)	Strategic partner (2007)	Lib. Dem.	17 (2007)
NATO	IO	N. Atlantic	Y	Formal Procedure	1990s	2002	Strategic partner (2002)	Like-minded partner, Essential partner for Euro-Atlantic Security, Core partner (2022)	IO	8 (1990s) 12 (2022)

The Arab League	IO	MENA	Y	Formal Procedure	2014	2014	Strategic partner (2014)	Strategic partner (2014)	IO	15 (2019)
African Union	IO	Africa	Y	Formal Procedure	2007	2007	Partnership based on common values, interests and strategic objectives (2007)	Partnership based on common values, interests and strategic objectives (2007)	IO	24 (2007)
CELAC	IO	SA	Y	SP Agreement	2015	2015	Strategic partner (2015)	Strategic partner (2015)	IO	21 (2015)
ASEAN	IO	SE Asia	N	Formal procedure	2007	2007	X	Strategic partner (2020)	IO	13 (2020)
Gulf Co-operation Council	IO	Gulf	N	No	2022	X	Strategic partner (2022)	Strategic partner (2022)	IO	12 (2022)

Source: own elaboration

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