



# Diplomacy in a Changing World Order: The Role of Strategic Partnerships

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Anna Michalski





**Anna Michalski**  
Senior Associate Research Fellow  
The Swedish Institute of International Affairs



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## Strategic Partnerships: A New Form of Diplomatic Engagement in the International System

It is no longer disputed that the liberal world order is undergoing a profound transformation (Ikenberry, 2012; Bakardjieva et al., 2019). Although it is impossible to know today what shape the new world order will take, the consequences of the breakdown of the multilateral, rules-based system and the ensuing weakening of international organizations and negation of state commitments in international regimes, such as in the areas of climate change and disarmament, can already be felt. These features have played an important role in building trust and making international cooperation among states possible since the Second World War. The fact that they are currently being weakened is having a profound effect on the international system and the way in which states interact with each other. The era we are now entering will rely less on institutional structures, multiparty negotiations and positive commitments enshrined in international rules and structures, and more on zero-sum calculations, power politics and short-term gain. Because the international system is shaped by the states that operate within it (Wendt, 1992), it is pertinent to ask what forms of interaction this ongoing transformation will bring about. What are likely to be the dominant patterns of engagement? How will states navigate between power politics and rules-based interactions? How will key international actors seek to regulate a world of multiple poles?

The focus of this report is strategic partnerships, which have become a significant feature of the international

system in recent years. These partnerships form a criss-cross pattern of privileged bilateral relationships between states and between state and non-state actors with the purpose of enhancing diplomatic dialogue and problem-solving. Their importance is likely to grow as the fall-out from the weakening of the international order is increasingly felt, linked to the policies of key states, such as the United States, China and Russia, which prioritize power politics over multilateral solutions. The report explores the significance of strategic partnerships on the basis of a categorization of the existing partnerships of 12 significant international actors and an analysis of the approaches to strategic partnerships of three global powers: China, the USA and the European Union (EU).

### What are strategic partnerships?

The number of strategic partnerships has surged in recent decades. Between them, the two most prolific strategic partnership builders, the USA and China, have forged over 130 strategic partnerships, while other important international actors such as the EU, Russia, Brazil, India, Japan, South Africa and Australia count around 50 strategic partnerships among them (see table 1). Strategic partnerships total over 150, although the exact number at any one time is hard to ascertain with any certainty. Nonetheless, the steep increase in the number of strategic partnerships dispels all doubt that these privileged bilateral relations constitute an important new feature of the international system (Wilkins, 2008, 2012; Ferreira-Pereira and Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, 2016; Grevi and Vasconcelos, 2008; Michalski and Pan, 2017a). However, existing strategic partnerships take a number of very different forms in their approach and scope and fulfil a variety of purposes for the partners (table





2). Before examining the implications of strategic partnerships for the international system, it is therefore important to establish a general definition of this form of bilateral relations (Kay, 2000; Ferreira-Pereira and Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, 2016: 3). While authors have previously highlighted the security dimension of strategic partnerships (Wilkens, 2008), it is argued here that it is important to understand strategic partnerships in terms of their ability to structure the international system, shape bilateral interactions and provide a venue for actors to achieve reputational and ideological goals. Therefore, this report defines strategic partnerships as *a specific form of bilateral relations between states and between states non-state actors which through their presence shapes the social structures of the international system and provides venues for bilateral interaction and the realization of international roles.*

As the significance of strategic partnerships becomes clearer, so do the challenges they pose to the established principles and norms of the liberal order through shifts in the pattern of state interaction. Some experts fret about a shifting balance of global power caused by the rise of China, the aggressiveness of Russia, a weakening of US hegemony and an end to the West's ability to organize the principles of the prevailing world order (Ikenberry, 2008; Legro, 2007; Buzan, 2011, 2014). Others deplore the weakening of multilateralism, which is seen as the most sustainable approach to managing interdependence (Morse and Keohane, 2014; Colgan and Keohane, 2017). By their presence, strategic partnerships have introduced a new quality to the engagement between states through the ordering of bilateral hierarchies into dense networks of privileged partnerships that form elaborate patterns of interaction and the projection of state soft power in

parallel to, but largely outside, the structures of the liberal world order.

## **Strategic partnerships: Shaping contending state interaction in a new world order?**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the liberal order was set up around the hegemony of the USA, supported by a number of wartime allies and international institutions – the Bretton Woods institutions – that had been infused with principles that largely reflected US, and more widely western, norms (Färgersten, 2019). From the beginning, therefore, the liberal order harboured a dual quality in that it included notions of power, interests and influence while being grounded in the principles of international cooperation, such as multilateralism, rules-based international governance and universal human values. Since the mid-2000s, however, the liberal order has been undergoing a fundamental change caused by a structural rebalancing of power provoked by the relative decline of US hegemony and the rise of new powers, primarily Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS) (Lieber, 2014; Stephen, 2014).

The first strategic partnerships were set up in the early 1990s, roughly a decade after the end of the Cold War, in a period characterized by intensifying economic, technological and people-to-people exchanges. The growing impact of globalization underlined the importance of upholding the international rules and principles that regulate the access of states to international regimes and organizations. It also made a thawing of interstate relations possible as the ideological stand-off of the Cold War gradually resided. As a result, the emerging powers began to aspire to become part of the world community and



influence a burgeoning new world order. Some 15 years later, the rise to prominence of new powers constitutes a key component of the fundamental reordering of the international system and the ensuing challenge to multilateralism as the governing principle of international cooperation. More recently, this trend has been encouraged by the policies of the US administration under President Donald J. Trump, which display a clear disregard for international rules and principles along with a penchant for personalized politics and deal-making with autocrats at the behest of the president himself.

It is assumed that this restructuring of the liberal order will have two consequences for strategic partnerships: first, a reordering of hierarchies among actors in the international system through the emergence of new social structures; and, second, increased uncertainty regarding the durability of the principles of international cooperation caused by a questioning of the universal quality of these principles among emerging powers and, more recently, the US administration. The way in which rising powers such as China have integrated into the multilateral system of governance is important as it has a bearing on the purpose and function of strategic partnerships in the international system. It actualizes the question of whether strategic partnerships are to be seen as competing structures with regard to the institutions and liberal regimes set up after the Second World War, or rather as a remedy for the inability of multilateralism to deal with power politics. In other words, are strategic partnerships to be understood as a threat to liberal social institutions or as a necessary complement to the changing world order and alternative venues for socialization and learning among states in the international system?

*The purpose of strategic partnerships in the international system*

Strategic partnerships have been defined as a specific form of bilateral engagement between two actors in the international system with the purpose of creating privileged bilateral relationships (Michalski and Pan, 2017a). When set up between states and between states and non-state actors, these partnerships contain a number of aims which are not mutually exclusive, such as achieving material or non-material foreign policy goals, shaping the international environment through the projection of norms and world views, and the realization of goals connected to the actors' international position by enhancing their status and international reputation. Strategic partnerships act at the international, the bilateral and the internal (domestic) levels of the partner actors.

Many strategic partnerships are set up at the initiative of a dominant actor with a specific purpose in mind. The intention behind such partnerships may be to create non-formal alliances with like-minded states in order to strengthen a particular world view or to reinforce an existing regional organization. A dominant actor may also seek strategic partnerships in order to bolster its standing in the international system and enhance its ability to influence the shape of the international environment by diffusing norms and world views to weaker or antagonistic partners. Strategic partnerships set up between more equal partners, whether friendly or antagonistic, often have as their prime purpose to manage bilateral relations in a changing world order by establishing a framework for diplomatic engagement with structures for problem-solving and the exchange of information. All functioning partnerships contain elements of socialization, learning and exchanges of view at the same time as they rely on more traditional diplomatic practice such as negotiations over material goals as well as symbolic interaction and summitry.



Strategic partnerships have the potential to perform a number of functions for the partner actors. Depending on the functions that strategic partnerships perform in international politics, and the degree to which they bolster the rules-based state interaction of international organizations or undermine it by strengthening the logic of power politics in the international system, they may be seen either as complementary to or competing with the prevailing order. Given the steep rise in the number of strategic partnerships in the past decade, it is clear that they satisfy a number of needs of the partner states that they believe could not otherwise be fulfilled. Setting up strategic partnerships with other states and international organizations around the world becomes part of a strategy to fulfil foreign policy objectives related to the partner actors' positions in the international system, such as spreading norms and values, gaining recognition for world views, achieving international roles and reinforcing international standing and prestige. Hence, strategic partnerships can be conceived as venues, or privileged settings where actors engage in persuasion, role play or other types of social interaction. At the same time, they may be conceived as vehicles through which specific material, ideational or strategic interests are pursued. From either perspective, strategic partnerships constitute important instruments in the partner states' foreign policy toolkits and create patterns of social interaction among states and other actors through structured diplomatic engagement.

The reasons why strategic partnerships are formed can be organized into a number of categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive as actors forge partnerships for a number of different reasons. Nonetheless, these categories make it possible to identify a range of underlying purposes and functions of strategic partnerships. They may be:

- Strategic partnerships *in lieu of alliances* set up as new (less-demanding) types of alliance between actors of similar leanings or ideology to enhance existing regional organizations or coalitions of states with the specific purpose of bolstering a particular world view or the international positions of like-minded powers.
- Strategic partnerships as *devices to strengthen existing alliances* set up as a complement to existing alliances in order to broaden the social interaction of the alliance partners, to widen the scope of cooperation to non-military areas/sectors or to broaden the alliance to a wider set of participants/stakeholders.
- Strategic partnerships as *vehicles for foreign policy goals* set up to achieve specific material foreign policy goals of a strategic, economic or social nature with friendly or antagonistic partners.
- Strategic partnerships as *environment-shaping venues* set up with friendly or antagonistic partners to pursue goals of influence, such as spreading norms, principles and world views that are conducive to shaping the international environment.
- Strategic partnerships as *role-enhancing arenas* set up to respond to specific ambitions concerning the actor's position in the international system tied to non-material interests such as prestige, status and identity.



## Patterns of strategic partnerships in the international system

This section analyses the strategic partnerships of 12 major players in the international system: China, the USA, Russia, India, South Africa, Brazil, Japan, Australia, Canada, Mexico, South Korea and the EU (see table 2).<sup>1</sup> These actors have considerable weight in the international system and in their respective regions. They have also made strategic partnerships a key dimension of their international engagement with individual states and international organizations. For some countries, such as China, strategic partnerships clearly constitute a major aspect of the diplomatic toolbox and hence form a key part of their foreign policy (Feng and Jing, 2014). For others, such as Russia, Brazil, Mexico, Australia and South Africa, strategic partnerships are seen as a useful form of diplomatic engagement to cement already close links with strategic allies. Still others, such as India, see strategic partnerships as a deliberate strategy for strengthening their position in a multipolar world order while at the same time retaining a high degree of strategic autonomy. As a long-standing great power, the USA has established strategic partnerships with a number of countries that share a similar outlook on the international system but without any obvious strategy behind them. Finally, the EU uses the possibilities that strategic partnerships offer to reinforce its diplomatic relations with states (or organizations of states), many of which it has concluded association agreements with (Renard, 2016; Barbé, Costa and Kissack, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Table 2 lists 44 bilateral relationships, of which 36 are designated strategic partnerships by the actors involved. Another set of relationships is based on formal military treaties between the USA and a number of allies in the Asia-Pacific

### *Strategic partnerships differ among each other*

Clearly, the actors surveyed here have adopted different approaches according to what they expect to achieve by setting up strategic partnerships and how demanding they assume the partnership structures will be in order to realize their aims. The variations in the intensity of interaction and scope of activity are clear indications of the strategic importance accorded by the partner actors to individual partnerships. In addition, the degree of formalization is a good indicator of the importance the partner actors attach to the bilateral relationship. In this context, it should be noted that no strategic partnership has been endowed with specific organs, such as independent secretariats or parliamentary assemblies, as most of them remain rather loose entities based on interactions of varying regularity and at different levels, from the expert to the prime ministerial or presidential. The emphasis on regular bilateral consultation and summitry reinforces the character of strategic partnerships as diplomatic venues quite different from many international organizations.

The strategic partnerships mapped out in this report constitute the most significant of the 150-odd partnerships currently in existence. They include a variety of different forms of relationship. The most extensive were established to complement formal treaty-based alliances, for example the strategic partnership between China and Russia. Others, such as the strategic partnership between China and the EU, are characterized by high-intensity interactions without being grounded in a formal treaty-

region. Only a few of these are designated strategic partnerships by the actors involved. Finally, one strategic partnership has been suspended (EU-Russia).





based structure. Still others are much less ambitious, basically denoting ongoing bilateral diplomatic consultations but lacking in common purpose or aims. Thus, the nature of strategic partnerships differs considerably, from extensive in scope, structure and intensity of interaction to having almost no stable structure, covering only a few areas of cooperation and containing little regular activity. The fact that the strategic partnerships look so different contributes to the difficulty in understanding their nature – quite simply because non-committal partnerships, such as those between Russia and Brazil or South Africa and India, have very little in common with the high-intensity partnerships between the EU and Canada, Canada and Mexico or China and India.

Another confusing factor regarding the nature of strategic partnerships is that the USA, which before the advent of the Trump administration maintained close traditional diplomatic and strategic ties with various allies, has never pursued strategic partnerships as purposefully as the EU, Australia, China and India. Since the 2016 election, US foreign policy has been characterized by a more erratic and self-serving attitude to allies as well as a readiness to undermine commitments made in the framework of regional alliances and international organizations.

#### *Strategic partnerships as alliance constructions*

Another distinct characteristic of strategic partnerships is their propensity to coincide with alliance structures. They do this in two ways: (a) as support structures to long-standing military alliances, where the strategic partnership provides a venue for broadening existing cooperation into other areas and a vehicle for cementing diplomatic commitment to an important ally; and (b) by providing political

frameworks to coalitions of states that have been formed to support existing regional organizations or groupings, some of which, for instance the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), were formed with the purpose of opposing the dominant western liberal order.

The first type is found in the USA's strategic partnership with Australia, which is based on a military and strategic treaty, ANZUS. This builds on long-standing, intensive military cooperation with shared strategic and ideological foundations. The US-EU strategic partnership can also be seen as an effort to broaden cooperation with the EU institutions and its member states, many of which are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The EU-US strategic partnership and the many bilateral strategic partnerships that the USA has forged with European countries can be seen as the nexus of a broad western alliance with NATO at its core. From a different ideological standpoint, the strategic partnership between China and Russia is one of the most significant in political, strategic and ideological terms. It is based on a wide-ranging treaty of good neighbourliness and extensive military cooperation. The normative dimension is significant in the China-Russia strategic partnership, which has a clear aim to challenge the liberal order and strengthen the norms and principles of a world order based on Chinese and Russian interests.

In the second type of alliance structure, bilateral strategic partnerships form a political framework in support of existing regional organizations or groupings of like-minded states. The most striking example is the BRICS countries, which sustain their cooperation through a network of bilateral strategic partnerships. Some of these, such as the Sino-Russian strategic partnership (see above), are significant, while others are less obvious and are less developed, such as



the strategic partnership between South Africa and India or between South Africa and Brazil. Less visible here as the analysis is limited to 12 international actors, but important nonetheless, are the strategic partnerships forged between members of the SCO. While not all these countries are tied together by bilateral partnerships, China, as the most significant party to the SCO, has made a point of forging strategic partnerships with all the other SCO members. Moreover, many members of the SCO, such as India, formed strategic partnerships with China and Russia on accession to the SCO.

Another form of strategic partnership for bolstering bilateral relations in existing regional organizations can be found in the strategic partnership between Mexico and Canada, in part conceived as a counterbalance to the dominance of the USA in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In this context, it is interesting to note that the USA has forged a strategic partnership with Mexico but not with Canada, which is surprising given that the two have enjoyed long-standing strategic cooperation and that the USA has forged strategic partnerships with many of the European NATO members. Finally, a number of mid-sized powers in the Asia-Pacific have chosen to bolster their bilateral relations in order to supplement their respective military alliance with the USA and to balance the assertiveness of China in the region. Here, the most ambitious strategic partnerships are those between South Korea and Australia, and Japan and Australia.

#### *Strategic partnerships as venues for bilateral relations*

All strategic partnerships constitute bilateral diplomatic forums in one way or another, and all of them seek to advance the interests of the partner actors in one

dimension or another. However, the diplomatic dimensions of each specific strategic partnership take on different functions depending on the overall relationship between the partner actors. This category does not contain the formal strategic alliances discussed above but includes strategic partnerships that are grounded in close contractual relations such as association agreements or free trade agreements, where the diplomatic dimension functions as additional political consultation and reinforcement of friendships between states. Here, we also include those strategic partnerships which are forged between primarily antagonistic partners.

Interesting patterns emerge from this category. Most notably China, but also the EU, Australia, Canada, India and South Korea seem to value the opportunities that strategic partnerships provide to forge privileged bilateral partnerships and they all make full use of the commercial and strategic opportunities they offer. These transcend ideological boundaries and create privileged links between long-standing friends and antagonistic partners alike. China's more than 70 strategic partnerships makes it the actor that has perfected the art of forging relationships with other states and non-state actors to further its commercial, strategic and political interests and influence. All of China's strategic partnerships surveyed here are of commercial, political and strategic importance. Many of China's strategic partnerships not surveyed here also have a clear commercial purpose, such as those with a number of Asian and African countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a flagship project of Chinese foreign policy and, following the pattern of conscious Chinese partnering, those countries which have signed investment agreements with China have also entered into strategic partnerships with the country.



Interestingly, China has not shied away from developing ties with ideological foes such as the EU, Australia, Japan, Canada and South Korea. These strategic partnerships are either highly or moderately well developed in terms of the breadth of the scope, structure and intensity of interaction. The EU is less prolific than China in forging strategic partnerships but has forged a number of partnerships which, without exception, are highly structured, broad and intense in terms of their interaction with the partner state or organization.

#### *Failing or lacking strategic partnerships*

This analysis would not be complete without accounting for suspended strategic partnerships or those which have not yet materialized and may never do so. Of the former, the focus obviously falls on Russia and its unaccomplished or suspended partnerships with the USA and the EU. A Russian-US strategic partnership was launched in the mid-1990s by the then presidents Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton but never really came into being. It was subsequently forgotten as bilateral relations grew tense under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In the case of the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia, bilateral relations developed under both Yeltsin and Putin, albeit in fits and starts. However Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the incursions by stealth into the breakaway republics of Luhansk and Donbas since 2014 have put considerable strain on relations and the strategic partnership was suspended in the wake of the sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU. Bilateral relations between the USA and China struggled for several years as the parties sought an appropriate form for their diplomatic engagement. For a long time, they were unable to go beyond the strategic dialogue set up in 2009 at the initiative of presidents Barack Obama and Hu Jintao.

Their level of ambition and extent, however, did not do justice to the importance of relations between the two most powerful states in the world. Since the advent of the Trump administration, Sino-US relations have descended into an acrimonious trade war and there is little prospect of a strategic partnership being forged between the USA and China in the foreseeable future.

Another dimension worth mentioning is that of the absence of strategic partnerships, a category which groups relations between both ideological friends and foes. The lack of strategic partnerships in the latter group is easier to explain as close partnerships among states, such as between China and Japan, which are long-time foes, Japan and Russia, which have also been troubled by long-time competitive and antagonistic relations, or the USA and China, as strategic competitors, are less intuitive and more difficult to bring about, mainly due to the lack of trust between the partners. The reasons for the absence of strategic partnerships between ideological friends and even alliance partners require a context-specific focus. For instance, the absence of a strategic partnership between the EU and Australia can be explained by the specific approach that the EU long took in its association agreements to the protection of human rights, insisting that a clause to this effect must be inserted into the text of any such agreement. The EU's insistence deterred both Australia and New Zealand from seeking closer relations. This stance has changed in recent years and both have now entered into negotiations on a free trade agreement with the EU. As these negotiations draw to a close, it is conceivable that strategic partnerships between these two countries and the EU will be forged. It is more difficult to explain the absence of strategic partnerships between the USA and its long-standing strategic allies in Asia, Japan and South



Korea, with which the USA concluded far-reaching defence treaties in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Korean War, respectively. The same is true of Canada, with which the USA has not concluded a strategic partnership despite their geographical proximity, long-standing strategic cooperation and joint membership of NAFTA and NATO. The reason might simply be that the USA has concluded that relations with these strategic partners are already extensive and that a formal strategic partnership would only add an unnecessary layer of diplomatic interaction. In a different vein, the absence of a strategic partnership between Japan and South Korea is also remarkable. Here, however, the explanation can be found in long-running, unresolved issues dating from long before the Second World War, which have taken on a symbolic meaning for both countries that is difficult to resolve.

## Strategic partnerships as a strategy for realizing international roles

Strategic partnerships have become an important feature of the diplomatic toolkits of the significant global players. The way in which they approach strategic partnerships varies significantly and three different logics can be said to dominate: the conventional, pursued by the USA; the relational, pursued by China; and the functional, pursued by the EU (Pan and Michalski, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

The USA has approached strategic partnerships from the perspective of traditional diplomatic statecraft. One aspect that distinguishes the USA from China is that US policymakers seem more cautious about the purpose of strategic

partnerships and how they should be integrated into the US foreign policy toolkit. In this context, it is telling that the USA does not always use the term 'strategic partnership' to describe its bilateral relations with some of its closest allies, such as Canada, Japan and South Korea, or even with several European NATO members. However, it is used in connection with Australia and a few select European allies, such as Georgia, Poland, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as in its renewed privileged bilateral relations of strategic importance such as those with India (Hamilton, 2014: 22–23). In many cases, the USA prefers to use the term 'strategic partner' to qualify its relationship with third countries, without setting up close or regularized inter-agency structures. At other times, it simply refers to bilateral relationships as 'strategic dialogues' rather than 'strategic partnerships', possibly indicating a lower level of intensity and strategic importance. The USA has therefore adopted a fairly non-strategic approach to strategic partnerships, treating them as a complement to formal alliances in order to bolster non-military dimensions with formal allies in some cases. This US view of strategic partnerships also explains why it has sought no formal strategic partnerships with antagonistic global powers, such as China and Russia, since the USA backed away from early attempts to set up a strategic partnership with Russia in January 1994. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, attempts by the USA and China to forge a strategic partnership were eventually abandoned in favour of a less ambitious bilateral relationship in the form of a strategic dialogue. One underlying reason why the USA views strategic partnerships differently from China may be that it does not see them as furthering any

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<sup>2</sup> The focus on China, the USA and the EU should not diminish the importance that strategic partnerships have in other states' foreign policy. India is a country for which strategic

partnerships have become a key element of its engagement with other states, as well as international and regional organizations (Panda, 2013)





reputational aims linked to its self-perception as a global hegemon. Quite simply, because the USA is convinced of its position at the top of the global hierarchy, it does not see the need to engage with potential partners in order to secure its position.

Compared to the USA, China is a much more deliberate partnership-builder, as is evidenced by its quest to painstakingly build up a network of privileged bilateral relationships which began in 1993 with Brazil and was followed subsequently by Russia in 1996. China's strategic partnerships range from those grounded in bilateral treaties (alliances) with global friends and allies, to those with like-minded states that work as complements to regional organizations such as the SCO. China also uses strategic partnerships to set up privileged bilateral relations with countries that are important to its material and strategic needs but do not necessarily share China's outlook on the world. China's strategic partnerships with African states are one example, while other interesting examples include China's strategic relations with the BRICS, many of which share China's objective of remodelling the world order, as well as the 16+1 grouping of European countries, which have welcomed Chinese investment within the framework of the BRI. China has also consciously used the potential offered by strategic partnerships to shape the international system by building structured relations with antagonistic partners as diplomatic avenues for the diffusion of norms and world views (milieu-shaping). China makes use of the full gamut of possible functions of strategic partnerships with the ultimate goals of strengthening its identity as a global power, its position in the international system, its commercial expansion and its strategic position in Asia. China has clearly ordered its strategic partnerships into a social

hierarchy that suits both its self-perception as a great power and its material needs.

The EU has established a much smaller number of strategic partnerships compared to the USA and China. Its approach to strategic partnerships also differs quite substantially in that it is more functionally oriented, although more recently it has been forced to take a more strategic view. Originally a reluctant partnership builder, as it maintained that the principle of multilateralism was the most equitable and efficient approach to managing global economic governance, over time the EU has adopted a more strategic approach (Council of the European Union, 2003) that recognizes the importance of forging strategic partnerships with global powers. Nonetheless, its 2016 strategic review highlights the concept of 'principled pragmatism' rather than strategic considerations (European External Action Service, 2016). The increasing weight given to strategic partnerships in international politics can be seen in the EU's relationship with China and the USA, as well as its alliances with a number of regional organizations – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the African Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. However, driven by its atypical nature, the EU has adopted an approach to strategic partnerships that sees them more as diplomatic complements to its association agreements than an important element of a strategically oriented foreign policy. It has therefore entered into strategic partnerships that are ambitious in structure and policy scope with the aim of maintaining a continuous dialogue and problem-solving frameworks with countries with which it already has well-developed economic, social and diplomatic ties linked to existing contractual relations (Japan, South Korea, Canada and Mexico, among others). However, in order to further its interests and increase its



influence on the global stage, the EU has also developed highly structured strategic partnership with the USA and China, despite the absence of extensive contractual arrangements with these countries. The fact that the EU maintains 10 partnerships with major powers and four with important regional organizations demonstrates that strategic partnerships fulfil an important function of self-reinforcement of the EU's international identity and role as an international actor. Even with antagonistic partners such as China, the EU maintains an ambitious partnership in which both actors engage with each other on socialization and norm diffusion (Michalski and Pan, 2017b).

## Concluding remarks

The focus of this report is on the increasing importance of strategic partnerships in the international political arena and the great variation in their nature, orientation, scope and intensity. The report understands strategic partnerships as privileged bilateral relations with implications for the social structures of the emerging new world order. It has also explored the strategies of three global actors: China, the USA and the EU. What does the recent emergence of an increasing number of strategic partnerships mean for the international system and the future world order?

1) Through their number and sheer persistence, strategic partnerships create a new kind of structure in the international system. It is too early to determine whether strategic partnerships are a complement to or a rival structure in the multilateral order. However, by providing a venue for ongoing diplomatic dialogue, they allow significant global actors to achieve a number of foreign policy goals of a material, strategic and ideational nature. Here, China is the country that has been most successful at forging privileged bilateral relations through

strategic partnerships with a large number of state and non-state actors to the benefit of its commercial and strategic interests, while also reinforcing its position in the international system. Compared to China, the USA has been less strategic in its approach to partnerships, viewing them more as complements to existing bilateral and multilateral alliances than an important element in the US foreign policy toolkit. The EU has opted for fewer but more extensive partnerships of a less strategic nature, seeing them more as diplomatic venues for supporting existing association agreements. More recently, it has also taken a more strategic view on forging, or suspending, strategic partnerships with strategic allies such as the USA, as well as strategic foes such as China and Russia. India is another interesting example. It has resorted to strategic partnerships as a strategy for managing relations with significant states and organizations in order to achieve foreign policy objectives, gain strategic autonomy and play its role in a multipolar world order.

2) Strategic partnerships perform a number of functions for the partner actors. They provide venues for the pursuit of a number of material and strategic foreign policy goals. These goals are directed at the international system, cementing hierarchical orders and managing the balancing of power in an emerging world order. Strategic partnerships build on bilateral relations, allowing dominant actors to play their foreign policy roles by providing an arena where international identities are strengthened through the diffusion of norms and principles. In this regard, China has made the most consistent use of its many strategic partnerships in order to structure the international system in a direction that lies closest to its interests and by enhancing its role as a great power through the imposition of norms and principles central to its concept of



international engagement. The EU has made use of strategic partnerships to a lesser extent to strengthen bilateral relations with both antagonistic partners such as China and established partners such as South Korea, Japan and Canada. More recently, the EU's relations with Japan, South Korea and India have been strengthened in order to form a counterweight to China's and the USA's power politics and boost the rules-based international order.

3) As the transformation of the liberal world order gains speed, it is unavoidable that strategic partnerships will play a part in the emerging world order, not least through their ability to rearrange global hierarchies by providing dominant actors with opportunities to create privileged bilateral relations with other states and international organizations. In one sense, strategic partnerships provide an essential complement to the multilateral structures of international organizations because states and other actors, such as the EU, need stable, ongoing diplomatic dialogues to engage in mutual learning and problem-solving in order to sustain international cooperation in a multipolar world. In another sense, however, strategic partnerships can be used to solidify alliance structures, create and maybe even impose loyalties in looser groupings of states or intergovernmental organizations or just as part of an attempt by a dominant actor to tie other states closer to it. Here, China has been very active setting up strategic partnerships with the BRICS countries, the members of the SCO, countries that have

signed agreements within the framework of the BRI and countries in Asia and Africa on which China relies for natural resources. It has also been more judicious than certainly the USA, and probably also the EU, in making use of strategic partnerships to promote its norms and its status as a global power. From this perspective, strategic partnerships have become tools in an ongoing competition over which norms and world views will prevail in the emerging world order.

The contrast between the approach of China and that of the administration of Donald J. Trump is quite striking. While China resorts to punishing states that do not comply with its rules on interaction, it at the same time prioritizes its ability to set up structures, often through strategic partnerships, that will permit a continuance of bilateral diplomatic dialogues and problem-solving mechanisms. The Trump administration, on the other hand, has developed a self-centred foreign policy accompanied by abusive presidential rhetoric that drives it to undermine international organizations and rules-bound interactions among states, break international norms and principles, and punish foes and allies alike without any consideration for the consequences. As the USA disregards the rules of international organizations and refuses to uphold their institutional integrity and functioning, it accelerates the weakening of the liberal world order in a way that would have been inconceivable before the advent of the Trump administration.



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**Table 1. Summary of strategic partnerships of 12 major international actors**

	China	US	EU	Russia	India	S.Africa	Brazil	Japan	Australia	Mexico	Canada	S.Korea
China		-	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X
US	-		X	-	X	-	-	-	x	X	-	-
EU	X	X		*	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X
Russia	X	-	*		X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-
India	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
S.Africa	X	-	X	X	X		X	X	-	-	-	-
Brazil	X	X	X	X	X	X		-	X	-	X	-
Japan	X	-	X	-	X	X	-		X	-	-	-
Australia	X	X	X	-	X	-	X	X		-	-	-
Mexico	X	X	X	-	X	-	-	-	-		X	X
South Korea	X	-	X	-	X	-	-	-	-	X	X	
Canada	X	-	X	-	X	-	X	-	-	X		X



**Table 2. Survey of strategic partnerships and bilateral relations of twelve actors**

Name	Year	Basis	Link	Nature/Aim	Interaction	Structure	Intensity
China-Brazil	1993	Political declaration	BRICS	Promote roles, cooperation	moderate	medium	intense
China-Canada	2005	Political declaration		Cooperation	moderate	medium	moderate
China-EU	2003	Strategic agenda		Cooperation	broad	high	intense
China-India	2005	Political declaration	BRICS, SCO	Security, cooperation	broad	high	intense
China-S. Korea	2008	Political declaration		Security, commercial,	broad	medium	intense
China-Mexico	2003	Political declaration		Development cooperation	broad	high	moderate
China-Russia	1996	Treaty of good neighbourliness	BRICS, SCO	Strengthen shared norms	broad	high	intense
China-S. Africa	2004	Cooperation program	BRICS	Strengthen shared goals	broad	medium	intense
China-US	Ambiguous (1997/2005)	Joint statement		Improved relations	moderate	medium	moderate
China-Australia	2014	Political declaration FTA		Cooperation general, commercial	moderate	medium	intense
US-Canada	No formal SP	Sectoral MoU/ agreements	NATO, NAFTA	Long-standing close cooperation	broad but no formal political structure	pragmatic, sector-driven, not structured	intense in some sectors
US-Mexico	2013	Political declaration	NAFTA	Cooperation in various issues	broad	moderate	intense and tense
US-EU	1995	Political declarations and platforms, sectoral agreements	(TTIP-neg. frozen)	Strengthen shared norms, cooperation	broad	high	intense
US-Russia	No; ambiguous relations	no	Non-proliferation treaties	Security, military issues	low	low	?
US-Australia		ANZUS treaty, FTA, more	Allies	Wide-ranging, military, economic	broad	medium	intense
US-India	2001	Political declaration, policy papers		Security, cooperation trade	broad	medium	moderate
US-Japan	no	Defense treaty	Pacific allies	Military strategic	broad	high	intense
US-S. Korea	no	Treaty	Pacific allies	Security, military, cooperation	broad	high	intense
US-Brazil	2012	Joint statement		Cooperation in all areas	moderate	high	high
US-S. Africa	2010			Cooperation	moderate	low	low
EU-Brazil	2007	Action plan, FTA		Cooperation general, development	broad	high	intense
EU-Canada	1996	AA		Cooperation extensive and general	broad	high	intense
EU-India	2004	Agenda for action		Cooperation general	broad	high	intense
EU-Japan	2001	AA		Cooperation general	Broad	high	intense



EU-Mexico	2010	FTA, AA in view		Cooperation general	broad	high	check
EU-Russia	2003 (suspended)	PCA, Common spaces roadmap	antagonistic	Cooperation general	broad	suspended (high)	suspended (intensive)
EU-S.Korea	2010	AA		Cooperation general	broad	high	intensive
EU-S.Africa	2007	TDSC, Action plan		Cooperation general	broad	high	intense
EU-Australia	no	EU/Australia framework agreement		Cooperation general	broad	high	intense
India-Brazil	2006	Political declaration	BRICS	Economic development	low	low	Low
India-Australia	2009	Political declaration MoU		Cooperation general, strategic, commercial	medium	medium	medium Neg. on FTA stalled
India-Japan	2014	Political declarations, sectoral treaties		Extensive cooperation	broad	high	medium
India-S.Korea	2017	Political declaration		Economic, strategic, regional stability			
India-S.Africa	1997	Political declaration	BRICS	Shape world order	moderate	low	low
India-Russia	2000	Joint statement	BRICS, SCO	Political broad-based	broad	high	medium
Russia-Brazil	2002	Political declaration	BRICS	?	moderate	low	low
Russia-S.Africa	2006	Treaty of friendship	BRICS	Political, strategic	broad	medium	intense
S.Africa-Brazil	2007	Political declaration	BRICS		Potential broad	low	low
S.Africa-Japan	2010	Political declaration		Economic, development	moderate	low	medium
Brazil-Australia	2012	Political declaration		Economic broad	moderate	low	medium
Japan-Australia	2014	Economic partnership agreement	(US)	Broad-based, strategic, economic	broad	high	high
Mexico-Canada	2004	NAFTA	NAFTA	Strategic regional, economic	broad	medium	high
Mexico-S.Korea	2005	Political declaration		Strategic non military), economic	moderate	medium	medium
Canada-S.Korea	2014	FTA		Economic, strategic (regional)	broad	medium	medium







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