

# Heterogeneity of the European Union's Strategic Partners: Can They Still be Compatible?

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This article paper aims to investigate the EU's strategic partners using both theoretical and empirical analysis. Applying the technique of cluster analysis has allowed us, first, to demonstrate that not all of the EU's 'special ten' are strategically sound for the EU; second, to investigate which regional organizations represent the best interest of the EU from a strategic standpoint; third, to find out the true potential of the EU's strategic partners; and, finally, to prove empirically that the EU's strategic partners are so heterogeneous as to represent a collective response to multilateralism and that a bilateral approach should be applied instead, taking into consideration the specific character of every strategic partner.

## Introduction

Nowadays, with the ascent to power of the Trump administration, the USA seems to be drawing back from globalization and liberal values, and the EU can no longer entirely count on its main traditional partner. Moreover, the crisis of 2008, followed by the economic and political sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014 and, finally, the Brexit referendum in 2016, have combined to seriously challenge the EU's economic stability and internal unity. In such a situation, it is important for the EU to have support from other key players to promote common values and interests and to occupy a more important position on the international stage. In this regard, the concept of strategic partnership becomes very relevant due to its stated goal and implicit mandate of constructively uniting its own potential with that of other 'agents'.

The application of the EU's concept of strategic partnership started with the European Security Strategy of 2003, where strategic partnership was defined as a tool

for achieving effective multilateralism, and wherein, subsequently, the status of strategic partner was awarded to ten countries: Canada, Japan, USA, Brazil, China, India, Russia, Mexico, South Korea and South Africa. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the EU has continuously tried to maintain and develop what has proved to be a very difficult relationship with other key players and also to promote a strategic partnership with regional and interregional organizations, always having to manage the dilemma that emanates from numerous sources, including disagreements about democracy, human rights, the rule of law, the ongoing dependence on various 'carbon' generated resources, and the will to obtain maximal commercial benefits from bilateral and multilateral relationships.

The present contribution aims at analysing the EU's strategic partners by using both theoretical and empirical approaches. Within the theoretical framework of our research (in the next section) the diversity of the EU's strategic partners – traditional partners, new partners in a new multipolar World Order, and regional and interregional organizations – was investigated. In the third section, the level of institutionalization of the EU's official strategic partnership is analysed. In the fourth section, the different approaches that the EU, the USA, Russia and China, apply toward the concept of strategic partnership are compared.

Within the empirical framework (the fifth section), on the basis of three principal components (obtained by Principal Component Analysis), a cluster analysis is applied, which allows us, first, to show which of the EU's official strategic partners are really strategic and which are not; second, to point out regional groups that represent strategic interest for the EU; third, to identify the EU's best potential strategic partners; and finally to confirm the heterogeneity of the EU's strategic partners and the difficulty of rendering an efficient collective response to multilateralism.

### **Heterogeneity of the European Union's Strategic Partners**

The EU has developed a strategic partnership, first of all, with the traditional post-Second World War Western powers (Canada, Japan, the USA); second, with regional and interregional organizations (SAARC, NATO, African Union and others); finally, with individual special partners in a multi-polar, bilateral world order (BRICSAMS: i.e. Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Mexico and South Korea) (Gratius, 2011a: 1). In this section, we investigate the EU's commitments with these three groups of strategic partners.

#### ***The EU's Traditional Strategic Partners***

After the Second World War, the USA, Western Europe, Canada and Japan became loyal allies in the fight against the Soviet Union and communist ideology. Thus, when speaking about partnerships with traditional EU partners, it should be mentioned that these have been long-term, time-honoured relationships based on common values.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, most Eastern European countries decided to ally themselves with Western Europe rather than with Russia, and, accordingly, the

EU became the largest transatlantic strategic partner of the USA. Thus, Burghardt (2006), writing in 2006, argues that the EU–USA relationship, combining some 60% of the world's GDP, has been and remains the most powerful as well as the most comprehensive and the strategically most important relationship in the world because of major converging concerns, largely compatible values and overlapping interests. He stresses that the EU and the USA share common objectives with regard to coherent strategies for the promotion of peace, stability and economic development around the globe and cannot accept any other alternative to the EU–USA relationship. Joao Vale de Almeida (2010), ambassador of the European Union to the United States, highlights that the EU and the USA share strategic objectives on the most important foreign policy issues and cooperate closely on diplomatic solutions. It can be observed that the vast quantity of areas in which these agents cooperate derives from the huge number of goals that they share, which in turn is a reflection on the compatibility of values that characterizes this bilateral relationship.

Notwithstanding, the Trump administration seems not to follow the line previous American administrations had established with foreign partners. According to Demertzis *et al.* (2017), the current administration not only aims at reducing the USA's role as an anchor of the global multilateral system but also is probably on course to challenge it by imposing protectionist measures. The USA is drawing back from globalization and liberal values. Even the USA's military commitment to NATO is questioned. The Trump administration seems to consider not only China and Mexico, but even Europe as rivals rather allies. In such circumstances, the EU cannot count on the USA in constructing an efficient multilateralism and should seek for support from its other traditional partners or from emerging powers in the Multipolar New Order.

The EU–Canada strategic partnership has been a long-term relationship marked by a Strategic Partnership Agreement and other key agreements and declarations. Long and Paterson (2015) highlight Canada's preoccupation with the possibility of being absorbed into the USA and, from this perspective, Europe together with Japan were considered as options in Canada's attempt to strategically pivot away from the USA. Mérand (2015) stresses that regarding the specific challenges for the transatlantic area, the EU–USA/Canada relationship is not about widening, but about deepening, the already-strong existing bond.

Over a long period of time, the EU–Japan relationship was dominated by economic friction, and smooth-running political relations emerged very slowly. Nowadays, Japan's strategy seems to have taken on a more global look, enhancing its alliance with the USA, and promoting strategic partnerships with countries within a broad-based arc of 'freedom of prosperity'. According to Japan's National Security Strategy (2014), Japan will further strengthen its relations with Europe, including cooperation with the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). De Prado (2014) argues that the EU and Japan are developing compatible strategic capabilities, which facilitate greater bilateral, regional and global collaboration. Following

Japan's National Security Strategy it can be understood that the strategic partnership between Japan and the EU is based on sharing universal values of freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law, and principles such as market economy, and is aimed at taking a leading role in ensuring the peace, stability and prosperity of the international community.

### *BRICSAMS EU's Partners in a Multipolar World*

Peña (2010) highlights the increasing importance of new forms of policy-making in the international realm, with a lower degree of institutionalization as represented by G7, G20 and BRICS, when emerging countries try to get more power in the International System through new dimensions of cooperation, and multilateralism is becoming the principle behind the foreign policy of most States. Philipovic (2011) stresses the dissatisfaction with the global financial and economic order on the part of BRICS countries, criticizing G7 leadership and wanting to see the G20 reinforced. Following the recommendations by the European Council (2010), the European Union's strategic partnerships with key players in the world should provide a useful instrument for pursuing European objectives and interests such as enhancing trade with strategic partners through Free Trade Agreements, economic recovery, job creation and EU's security. In this regard, the full participation of emerging economies in the international system should allow benefits to be spread in a balanced manner and responsibilities to be shared evenly.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to speak about equal relationships between the EU and the BRICS countries, taking into account the different levels of economic development, the divergent political systems, incompatibility with EU values, and different goals and interests at the international stage, among other important issues.

The EU–Russian strategic partnership seems to be the most problematic. Thus, Smith and Timmins (2003) deny the existence of a real strategic partnership between Russia and the EU and state that a more precise terminology to define this relationship would be to consider it a 'pragmatic' partnership at best. De Wilde and Pellon (2006, 123) argue that 'the strategic partnership between EU and Russia is a real challenge from the point of view of common values.' Kempe and Smith (2006) also mention a growing gap concerning specific issues such as the structure of democratic institutions, the rights of civil society, and the concept of state sovereignty. Haukkala (2010) highlights that Russia at the outset demanded the more privileged status of a strategic partner. Blanco (2016, 47–49) argues that for Russia, 'strategic partnership' was an attractive conceptual framework that could be used to neutralize the asymmetries of EU–Russia relations at the end of the twentieth century. According to his point of view, the fact that for more than 15 years 'strategic partnership' was the political label accepted by both parties to frame EU–Russian relations and develop a number of institutional channels of dialogue and cooperation, demonstrates that a gap in values does not exclude the possibility of defining a relationship as a 'strategic partnership'. He highlights that although the gap in values definitely destabilizes EU–Russian relationships, the strategic partnership can be considered as a parallel

discourse that challenges the references to incompatibilities, allows the parties to overcome their differences and keep working together even in episodes of disagreement.

Despite the fact that Federica Mogherini (2014) declared that Russia is not, in reality, a strategic partner of the EU anymore, Voynikov (2015, 21) argues that even though at present EU–Russian relations have largely been determined by the political situation in Ukraine, the EU and Russia are not ready to give up their strategic partnership and that is why their relationship could now be defined as a ‘forced strategic partnership’. Thus, according to Voynikov (2015), Russia and the EU continue to consider each other important, even necessary, partners, and we can conclude that there remains a strategic partnership between EU and Russia, albeit in a chilly and mostly uncooperative state.

The strategic partnership with India, like the EU–Russia strategic partnership, was created as an asymmetrical relationship, in which the EU became the one who should show its partner the way towards development, whereas the EU–China relationship does not seem to be asymmetric. Thus, Rocha-Pino (2013) argues that the different meanings that each Actor gives to the concepts of sovereignty, global security, and Human Rights have not been an impediment for establishing cooperation nexuses between the EU and China. Blanco (2016, 47) points out that the cases of Russia and China demonstrate that despite EU being aware of incompatibilities with these countries concerning core values such as democracy and human rights, the EU has had a broad agenda with these states. The use of ‘strategic partnership’ by the EU, therefore, can be seen as a ‘pragmatic move’ through which the clashes on norms and values that could undermine cooperation with a group of ‘key partners’ can be neutralized but not totally removed. Demertzis *et al.* (2017) discuss whether the EU and China are willing and able to jointly support the multilateral system as the USA steps back from its central role, and if they can act in a coordinated manner, as the EU and the USA have done in the past, but at the same time they admit that this will be rather difficult, taking into account that the European and Chinese economic systems differ much more than the European and American ones.

Regarding the EU–Brazil strategic partnership, Gratius (2008) argues that the EU is Brazil’s most important foreign partner, but this is an asymmetrical relationship, since trade relations with Brazil do not have the same importance to the EU. As there is no ‘gap in values’ with Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and South Korea, their entrance into the group of ‘privileged partners’ of the EU seems to be justified by a similar worldview rather than by common economic or geostrategic interests. For these countries, the strategic partnership with the EU serves rather for the elevation of their status at the international stage than for obtaining concrete economic and political benefits.

Thus, it can be concluded that the EU is trying to maintain a very difficult relationship with certain key agents, always having to manage the dilemma of disagreements regarding EU values and norms and the will to obtain maximal commercial benefits from bilateral relationships. The EU needs a kind of approach and strategy that allows it to develop a viable relationship with Russia, China and India, without focusing overmuch on the incompatibility of core values.

### ***Regional and Interregional Organizations***

The EU's intention was to develop strategic bilateral relationships not only with its key partners but also with certain multilateral, regional and interregional organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Council of Europe (CoE), the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU), with the purpose of reinforcing auspices of a global government.

Regarding this intermixed EU strategy, which presupposes a combination of bilateral and multilateral approaches towards strategic partnership, experts do not seem to agree with each other. Grevi (2010) argues that bilateral and multilateral partnerships should be seen as something connected instead of representing alternative levels. Bendiek and Kramer (2010) stress the uncertainties with regard to the relationship between bilateral 'strategic partnerships' and the EU's inter-regional 'strategies' (i.e. between EU–Brazil and EU–Mercosur or EU–China, EU–India and EU–ASEAN, etc.), which in the past led to undesirable levels of competition. Quevedo Flores (2012) perceives the EU's conception as languishing in a confused state, given that it implies the mixing of partnerships with multilateral institutions, regional groups and individual Actors. De Vasconcelos (2010), on the contrary, argues that the multilateral objective and bilateral approach of EU's concept of strategic partnerships is in fact totally coherent because, in such a way, the EU promotes the common understanding of shared global responsibility for global peace and security among different strategic partners.

González and Garrido (2011) suppose that for the EU it would be better to focus on the multilateral network given that this would make it easier to assert its ambitions as a global power, while Gratius (2011b) argues that the EU's strategic partners are so heterogeneous as to represent a collective response to multilateralism, and the bilateral approach should be applied, taking into consideration the necessities of each country. Demertzis *et al.* (2017) point out that, strategically, the EU should continue its bilateral trade and investment relationship with its partners but the bilateral deals should be designed as stepping stones rather than obstacles to the multilateral issues.

### **Institutionalization of the European Union's Strategic Partners**

There are three main elements of strategic partnership (Pałasz 2015, 5):

- Promoting trade and investment.
- Promoting multilateralism and strengthen international cooperation.
- Border-sharing in security matters.

Following Pałasz (2015), the procedure used to form a new Strategic Partnership starts with a formal proposal by the European Commission through a Commission communication which then is transferred to the Council of Foreign Ministers of the EU for their approval to establish the partnership. The EU Parliament approves the proposal and, finally, in agreement with the partner, a joint statement is made to

formally announce the partnership. Such a mechanism was applied for establishing Strategic Partnerships with China, India South Africa, Brazil and Mexico. The EU–South Korea Strategic Partnership did not follow this procedure as it was announced at a summit without any previous formal proposal.

The term ‘Strategic Partnership’ figures in various EU official documents and first was applied to Russia at the end of the 1990s (see Table 1).

It is worth mentioning that for carrying out the Strategic Partnership in practice it is necessary to prepare an efficient jurisdictional and institutional basis with the partner in question. The institutional framework usually reflects the characteristics of the strategic partnership. Strategic partnerships can be institutionalized in different ways. Thus, according to Zhongping and Jing (2014) the mechanisms established between Russia and China are the most comprehensive and effective, including the Sino-Russian Regular Presidents’ (together with a hotline for direct communication between them) and Ministers’ meetings, the Energy Negotiators’ Meeting, and the People-to-People Cooperation Committee. As for the EU, it tries to institutionalize and legitimize the Strategic Partnership with its partners. Nevertheless, while the EU’s partners increasingly work directly with EU institutions, the Treaty of Lisbon and other EU innovations have done little to diminish the EU’s institutional complexity and to facilitate collaboration with the EU as with a coherent and united actor on the international stage. Thus, despite continual institutional rejigging in Brussels, at the end of the day all policymaking in the EU still depends on the consent of member states, and as a result the EU’s strategic partners still have to develop strong bilateral relationships with individual EU member states. In this regard, Hamilton (2010) draws attention to ex USA Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s remark to her European colleagues that the system was designed in such way that it was impossible to have a real strategic dialogue.

The EU has institutionalized ways of understanding foreign policy and structuring relations around a document – in this case, a strategic partnership document. Regarding the jurisdictional basis of the Strategic Partnership, Pałłasz (2015, 6) highlights a so-called ‘holy trinity’ of agreements: modernized trade and investment agreements, an all-encompassing political agreement, and a framework participation agreement, which would allow partners to participate in EU crisis management operations. It is worth mentioning that the EU has signed all three agreements only with South Korea. The jurisdictional basis with EU’s ‘Special Ten’ is presented in Table 2.

From Table 2 it may be concluded that the EU not only extends and renews the jurisdictional basis with key partners but also actively carries out agreements with certain region and inter-regional organizations.

### **Misunderstandings between Strategic Partners**

The absence of an official definition of Strategic Partnership (Jain, 2008; Renard, 2010) has caused misunderstandings both within the EU and with third countries. Following Kim (2012), the term has usually been used to signify the establishment of long-term friendly relations in the commercial field.

**Table 1.** Strategic partnership in EU official documents.

Document	Year	Description
Presidency Conclusions of the Cologne European Council Declaration on Chechnya Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia Speech made by Javier Solana in Stockholm	1998–1999	The first appearance of the term ‘Strategic Partnership’ in EU official documents. The term was used in relation to Russia where Russia was considered to be EU’s strategic partner and the EU was therefore willing to help and support the country to overcome its financial crisis, including through food aid.
Declaration of RIO <sup>1</sup>	1999	Aimed at establishing the Strategic Partnership with Latin America and the Caribbean based on common values and interests, and historical-cultural roots.
European Security Strategy (ESS) <sup>2</sup>	2003	The EU’s intention to pursue its objectives by means of both international cooperation in international organizations and through the Strategic Partnership with the core actors was stressed. The EU highlighted its intention to develop Strategic Partnerships with those countries that would concur with EU norms and values. The Strategy primarily proposed the development of strategic relationships with the USA and Russia. The necessity of developing Strategic Partnerships with Canada, Japan, China and India was mentioned.
Report on EU Foreign Policy <sup>3</sup>	2008	The high status of the USA as a key partner was stressed. Russia continued to be considered an important partner. Relations with China were significantly increased. A close and long-term mutual similarity of values and norms with Canada and Japan was highlighted. The importance of relationships with Brazil, South Africa, Switzerland and Norway was strongly stressed.

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**Table 1.** (Continued)

Document	Year	Description
Lisbon Treaty <sup>4</sup>	2009	It was mentioned that partnerships should be based on normative convergence. Thus the legal basis for establishing partnerships was indirectly indicated
EU Global Strategy <sup>5</sup>	2016	Common interests, values, and principles, multilateralism and reformed global governance continue to remain the priorities of EU Foreign Policy. The transatlantic bond and partnership with NATO must continue to deepen. Intentions to connect with new players and explore new formats were declared, as well as plans to invest in regional orders, and to breed further cooperation among and within regions, while in the meantime strengthening relationships with EU partners.

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of EU's official documents.

<sup>1</sup>The full text of the documents is available at <https://eulacfoundation.org/en/documents/1999-rio-declaration> (accessed 5 February 2017).

<sup>2</sup>The full text of the documents is available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf> (accessed 5 February 2018).

<sup>3</sup>The full text of the document is available at: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/104630.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/104630.pdf) (accessed 13 March 2019).

<sup>4</sup>The full text of the document is available at: [http://es.euabc.com/upload/books/lisbon-treaty\\_3edition.pdf](http://es.euabc.com/upload/books/lisbon-treaty_3edition.pdf) (accessed 13 September 2018).

<sup>5</sup>The full text of the document is available at: [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/EUGS\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/EUGS_0.pdf) (accessed 13 October 2019).

**Table 2.** EU's jurisdictional basis with its 'Special Ten'.

EU's 'Special Ten'.	Date or current situation	Jurisdictional basis of Strategic Partnership
Brazil	1992	EC–Brazil Framework Cooperation Agreement
	1995	EU–Mercosur Framework Cooperation Agreement
	2004	Agreement for Scientific and Technological Cooperation
	2008	Joint Action Plan
	Negotiations not finished yet	Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with Mercosur
Canada	1959	Agreement between the Government of Canada and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy
	1976	Framework Agreement for Commercial and Economic Cooperation between Canada and the European Community
	1990	Declaration on Transatlantic Relations
	1996	Joint Political Declaration and Action
	2016	Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA)
	The European Parliament voted in favour of CETA in 2017. But the EU national parliaments must approve CETA before it can take full effect.	Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)
China	Sighed in 2013	EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation
India	1993	Joint Political Statement
	1994	Cooperation Agreement
	2005	Joint Action Plan
	2016	Joint Declaration
	2016	EU–India Agenda for Action 2020

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

EU's 'Special Ten'.	Date or current situation	Jurisdictional basis of Strategic Partnership
Japan	1991 2001 Negotiations launched in 2013 Negotiations launched in 2013 Negotiations launched in 2013	Hague Declaration, Joint Action Plan. Free trade agreement (FTA)/economic partnership agreement (EPA) Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) Strategic Partnership Agreement
Mexico	1975  Replaced previous Agreement in 1991 1995 Signed in 1997 and in force since 2000  Negotiations since 2016	Cooperation Agreement  Framework Agreement  Joint Solemn Declaration Global Agreement (Economic Partnership, Political Coordination and Cooperation Agreement) Updating the Global Agreement.
Russia	Concluded in 1993 and entered into force in 1997 Adopted in 2005 and suspended in 2014 due to Ukrainian crisis Negotiations started in 2008 and were suspended in 2014 due to crisis in Ukraine	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) Road Maps for the Common Spaces  New Strategic Partnership Agreement
South Africa	1999 2007 2016	Trade Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) Joint Action Plan Southern African Economic Partnership Agreement (SADC EPA) together with Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia and Swaziland
South Korea	2010  Applied since July 2011 and formally entered into force in 2015.	Framework Agreement  Free Trade Agreement (FTA)
USA	1995 Negotiations not finished yet	New Transatlantic Agenda Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of EU's official documents.

**Table 3.** Different approaches towards strategic partnership.

Country/Union	EU	USA	Russia	China
Basis of strategic partnership	Mutual interests Common strategic objections Market economic principles Common values Human rights, Democracy Rule of law Stability Multilateralism	Mutual interests Shared goals Common values and US beliefs Stability and legitimate international order	Equality, Pragmatism Respect towards the partner's interests Common approach to key security problems Multi-polarity world	Stability Long-term and win-win, cooperation, Mutual respect Mutual benefits Equal footing Multi-Polarity New World Order, Democratization of international relations, Impede hegemony, Multilateralism, building of a more favourable World Order, Non-interference Different development models
Character of partnership	Based on common values	Based on common values	Pragmatic	Pragmatic
Mechanisms	Bilateral dialogue with key partners Multilateral approach (collaboration with international organizations), Regional issues (collaboration with regional groups)	Strategic bilateral and regional dialogues; Policy of 'Disaggregated State' aimed at engagement to reach foreign citizens directly	Strategic bilateral and regional dialogues, new multilateral arrangement such as BRICS and G20, people-to people cooperation	Strategic bilateral and regional dialogues, new multilateral arrangement such as BRICS and G20, people-to people cooperation

(Continued)

**Table 3.** (Continued)

Country/Union	EU	USA	Russia	China
Priorities and perspectives	Depending on the partner: security with NATO and the USA; financial and monetary connection with China; energy dialogue with Russia, etc.	Depending on the partner: historical alliances with NATO; to manage difficult ties with Russia and China; to promote Euro-Atlantic integration with Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Ukraine; to build a regional architecture of supportive ties in East Asia and the Pacific, to improve relations with Nigeria, Angola, South Africa and Vietnam, etc.	Security and commercial fields, modernization of Russia's economy. Special role of strategic partnership with China and India aimed to strengthen collaboration in the commercial and security fields.	The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership of Coordination and the Sino-Pakistani All-weather Strategic Partnership are unique and unparalleled. And regarding the rest, 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' seem to have more importance than apparently more limited, mere 'strategic partnerships'.
Strategic partners	List of official 'Special Ten' (key countries). Regional (such as ASEAN and CARICOME). International organization (ONU, Security Council).	There is not an official list. More than 50 countries	There is not an official list. After the conflict in Ukraine, Russia crossed over from the EU and others 'West World' countries to all BRICS, countries of Latin America and partners of ASEAN	There is not an official list. 47 countries, the EU, ASEAN, and African Union (AU)

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of official documents.

Even when countries recognize each other as strategic partners and a treaty of strategic partnership is signed, if the parties involved continue to have different approaches and interpretations of what the partnership actually entails, then obviously the fulfilment of the development of their relations can be hampered by this fact. Thus, for instance, the different interpretation of the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia first led to isolation and then to open confrontation. The strategic partnership between the USA and the EU is still informal, and the New Transatlantic Agenda of 1995 continues to be the frame for the USA–EU relationship. Although The US Department of State (2013) describes the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as ‘building an economic and a strategic relationship’ with the EU, the USA still prefers to define their relationships as a ‘transatlantic partnership’ instead of applying the term ‘strategic partnership’. In this regard, Blanco (2016, 51) called strategic partnership ‘the new joker’ in the language of international politics and stressed the necessity of recognizing how other agents besides the EU conceptualize and employ this term. He argues that not only more empirical research is needed but also further development and operationalization of approaches that take into account the different meanings of the term ‘strategic partnership’ as it appears in varying usages. The different understanding of strategic partnership nations have is detailed in Table 3.

From Table 3 it may be concluded that Russia and China concur in a pragmatic approach towards strategic partnership while that of the EU and the USA is more tightly based on common values. It seems that multilateralism is a basis of strategic partnership for the USA, the EU, Russia and China, but for Russia and China this idea of multilateralism really means multi-polarity. After analysing four approaches towards strategic partnership, it is worth mentioning that only the EU has a clear official list of its strategic partners, and if China at least defines the priorities between strategic partners, the USA has used the term in a chaotic and unmethodical way. Thus, the term ‘strategic dialogue’ has been used to signal its intent to improve relations, as with Nigeria, Angola, South Africa and Vietnam, or to manage difficult ties, as with Russia and China (Hamilton, 2015). Moreover, Hamilton (2015) highlights that it has cobbled together a variety of partnership arrangements to deal more effectively with adversaries such as Iran and North Korea.

Concerning the number of strategic partners, it can be stated that only the EU has a limited number of partners according to a strict interpretation of the term. In this regard, Vasiliev (2014) defined the Strategic Partnership as the destination toward which the Agent intends to concentrate its main resources for achieving the main strategic objective, highlighting that it is impossible to have many strategic partners. Kim (2012) argues that what matters is not the number of strategic partners but the quality of such relationships.

As we can observe, economics and mutual economic benefits remain the basis for strategic partnerships. Nevertheless, with time, the focus of the partnerships has expanded to include horizontal, multilateral, and foreign policy issues. As examples of such extension, the following may be proposed: the EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, which started with security and peace, and the EU–Japan

relations, which were strengthened with common security and defence policy exercises. Thus, Quevado Flores (2012) argues that Strategic Partnership does not fragment into the function of just one economic, political or security system, given that the vital interests of the Parties passes through these different dimensions, thereby requiring the multidimensional approach toward collaboration. The negative experience of relations between the EU and Russia also demonstrated that it is impossible to build real a strategic partnership just by developing the commercial field while ignoring serious disagreements on security issues.

Despite the imperfection of the strategic partnership concept, many countries have decided that pursuing identified strategic partnerships might pay dividends for their national interest. In this regard, Zhongping and Jing (2014) argue that not only has China avoided war or serious confrontation with major powers and obtained enormous economic benefits from these partnerships but it also has successfully steered into a new multipolar world. However, they stress that the biggest deficiency of China's strategic partnership policy is that it has not prepared itself to become a great power owing to the lack of the global agenda.

It is logical to assume that Strategic Partnerships should have a high efficiency, which would be impossible to achieve via a different type of relationship. And if in the commercial field efficiency can be measured by such indicators as volume of investments, volume of commercial trade, number of joint venture companies, etc., it is quite difficult to find appropriate indicators for estimating efficiency in the political, security or cultural fields. Moreover, it must be remembered that strategic partnerships, being an essential instrument that enables dialogue and cooperation for effective multilateralism, constitute a long-term investment, which should not be abandoned because of transient difficulties. Thus, the problematic partnership between the EU and Russia has a high-gain or high-loss possibility for both parties. It should also be said that after the crisis of 2008 the EU's attractiveness as a strategic partner may have diminished.

Taking into consideration the theoretic framework and by using a multidimensional approach towards strategic partnership, the empirical framework will be described in the following section.

### **Data and Methods**

For our research database we included the indicators suggested by the European Strategic Partnerships Observatory (ESPO, 2012) and other indicators related to values of the EU, common historical-cultural roots, geographical proximity and legal and institutional basis.

In addition, the variables related to discriminating actions between partners, taking into consideration the negative European–Russian strategic partnership experience, were added. The period of research comprises the data from 2009 to 2014.

The research embraced 143 (we only researched countries for which we had not less than 80% of information for all variables) and six regional organizations, taking

**Table 4.** Ranking by countries and regional/interregional organization.

Rank	Country/Regional/ Interregional organization	Comp. 1	Country/ Regional organization	Comp. 2	Country/ Regional organization	Comp. 3
1	United States	5.031	Iceland	3.027	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.143
2	China	4.871	Norway	2.357	Ukraine	3.074
3	Mercosur	3.799	New Zealand	2.331	Norway	3.011
4	Japan	3.667	Switzerland	1.893	Macedonia FYR	3.001
5	EAEU	3.235	Barbados	1.881	Albania	2.878
6	Canada	3.133	Australia	1.837	Moldova	2.716
7	Russian Federation	3.088	Brunei		Darussalam	1.782
8	Turkey	2.497				
	ASEAN	3.054	Costa Rica	1.578	Russian Federation	2.493
9	SAARC	2.529	Canada	1.563	Montenegro	2.357
10	Brazil	2.514	Singapore	1.561	Serbia	2.331
11	India	2.130	Hong Kong SAR China	1.513	EAEU	2.064
12	Switzerland	1.942	Chile	1.465	Switzerland	2.048
13	Korea Rep.	1.777	Bahamas	1.420	Georgia	2.003
14	Australia	1.775	Qatar	1.386	Israel	1.777
15	Hong Kong SAR China	1.435	Mauritius	1.344	Iceland	1.690

Official EU Strategic Partner  
 Regional/interregional organization  
 Source: Own calculations on the basis of SPSS.

into account that the EU not only proclaimed the strategic partnership with key actors but also with regional and interregional organizations. The investigated regional and interregional organizations are the following: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Central American Integration System (SICA). The organizations were chosen according to criteria requiring them to demonstrate that at least they had managed to create a viable economic union, and limiting every regional organization to having as a member not more than one of the EU's official strategic partners. As further research is carried out, more regional and inter-regional organizations will be included.

The main hypotheses of our research are the following:

- Not all of the EU's official strategic partners are really strategic.
- The ASEAN, the EAEU, the Mercosur and the SAARC are attractive as strategic regional partners for the EU.



**Table 5.** ANOVA.

	Cluster		Error		F	Sig.
	Mean Square	df	Mean Square	df		
Comp. 1	23.550	6	0.284	142	83.044	0.000
Comp. 2	19.956	6	0.322	142	61.919	0.000
Comp. 3	17.294	6	0.311	142	55.602	0.000

Sources: Own calculations on the basis of SPSS

- The EU's strategic partners are too heterogeneous to formulate a collective response to multilateralism, and that is why the bilateral approach should be applied toward every partner.

First of all, the variables were arranged into the following groups: economic, commercial, political, social, common values, geographical-cultural, juridical, institutional and discriminative. Second, for every group the Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA)<sup>1</sup> was applied, and we obtained the following 14 categories: partner's economical weight, partner's economic freedom, common commercial interests, partner's sustainable governance, partner's political weight, partner's social development, collaboration in science and education, common values, partner's geographical closeness, common historical-cultural roots, common legal basis, common institutional basis, economic adversarial relationship and obstruction regarding a free circulation of citizens. Third, the Principal Components Analysis (PCA)<sup>2</sup> was applied, which led us to three principal components (the description of these components obtained in the analysis is provided in the next section). Finally, on the basis of the three principal components which we obtained, Cluster Analysis was applied.

## Results

The three principal components account for 66.12% of all the information. The first component (Comp. 1) represents 44.1% of the total variance and explains where the highest weights comprised such factors as the partner's political weight, partner's

1. Categorical principal components analysis (CATPCA) can be thought of as a method of dimension reduction. A set of variables is analysed to reveal major dimensions of variation. The original dataset can then be replaced by a new, smaller dataset with minimal loss of information (IMB Knowledge Center, [www.ibm.com](http://www.ibm.com)). According to Kemalbay and Korkmazoğlu (2014, 731) the CATPCA has been developed for the data with mixed measurement level, i.e. this method should be used when we have different types of variables such as nominal, ordinal or numeric, which may not have a linear relationship with each other.
2. Principal component analysis (PCA) is a technique used for identification of a smaller number of uncorrelated variables known as principal components from a larger set of data. Principal component analysis is widely used in many areas such as market research, social sciences and in industries where large data sets are used. ([www.techopedia.com](http://www.techopedia.com)).

**Table 6.** Number of cases in each cluster.

Cluster	1	1.000
	2	14.000
	3	62.000
	4	5.000
	5	6.000
	6	56.000
	7	5.000
Valid		149,000
Missing		0.000

Sources: Own calculations on the basis of SPSS

**Table 7.** Initial clusters' centres.

	Cluster						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Comp_1	4.87136	-0.20058	0.61416	5.03131	3.08809	-0.17392	1.94150
Comp_2	-3.36958	-0.12522	0.98581	0.31401	-2.08649	-1.99574	1.89304
Comp_3	-0.61673	3.07420	-1.22908	-0.45794	2.49266	-0.36859	2.04756

Sources: Own calculations on the basis of SPSS

**Table 8.** Distribution by cluster.

Cluster	1	4	5	7
Countries/regional organization	China	Brazil Canada Japan Korea Rep. United States	ASEAN EAEU India Mercosur Russian Federation SAARC	Australia Chile Iceland Norway Switzerland

Sources: Own elaboration

economic weight, partner social development and common commercial interests. The second component (Comp. 2) represents 33.95% of the total variance and explains where the highest weights comprised such factors as partner's political freedom, partner economic freedom and common values. The third component (Comp. 3) represents 21.94% of the total variance where the highest weights comprised such factors as geographical closeness, legal and institutional basis. The results of the PCA for the first 15 countries or regional organizations by three components (Comp. 1, Comp. 2, Comp. 3) are presented in Table 4.

From Table 4 we can deduce that the EU's official strategic partners hold high positions and are situated very close to each other only in the first component. That is why

this component is called the *Strategic Component*. The second component embraces the countries with whom the EU shares common values and concurs in point of view regarding global issues. We call this component the *Partner in Spirit Component*.

The EU has developed what may be referred to as predominately a legal and institutional basis with countries that might be regarded either literally or figuratively as its ‘neighbours’, in particular with those nations that could then be viewed as potential EU members. Therefore, we call this the *Good Neighbour Component*.

While the EU’s official strategic partners hold high positions and are situated very close to each other only in the first component, the other two components also are not irrelevant for our research. The Cluster Analysis applied on the basis of the three components is carried out with SPSS software using the K-means Cluster Procedure.<sup>3</sup> The first Component has the largest F contributing the greatest separation between clusters (see Table 5).<sup>4</sup>

We stopped with seven clusters, as this to us seems to yield the most realistic results. This first allowed us to discard a huge number of counties and, second, to concentrate on those countries that are of at least some interest as EU strategic partners. The number of cases in each cluster is presented in Table 6.

The second, third and sixth clusters have a low value of the Strategic Component (Comp. 1) (see Table 7) and that is why we conclude that the countries concerned are not interesting for the EU as Strategic Partners; hence we excluded them from our further investigations. Countries of the second cluster with a strong Good Neighbour Component (Comp. 2) could be defined either as potential EU members or partners for the EU Good Neighbour policy.

Distribution of countries and regional organizations by the clusters with high Strategic Component is presented in Table 8.

From Table 8 we conclude that ASEAN, EAEU, Mercosur and SAARC have a high value in the Strategic Component while SICA and CARICOM are not interesting for the EU as strategic partners. Mexico and South Africa, being official strategic partners of the EU, seem to be almost irrelevant, according to our cluster analysis.

3. Cluster analysis is a technique to group similar observations into a number of clusters based on the observed values of several variables for each individual (Sinharay, S. in International Encyclopedia of Education, Third Edition, 2010). In other words, it groups similar observations into homogeneous subsets. Cluster analyses can be performed using the TwoStep, Hierarchical, or K-Means Cluster Analysis procedure. The K-Means Cluster Analysis procedure is limited to continuous data and requires you to specify the number of clusters in advance, but it has the following unique features: the ability to save distances from cluster centres for each object and the ability to read initial cluster centres from, and save final cluster centres to, an external IBM SPSS Statistics file. Additionally, the K-Means Cluster Analysis procedure can analyse large data files (IBM Knowledge Center, [www.ibm.com](http://www.ibm.com)).
4. The ANOVA table (abbreviation of Analysis Of Variance) indicates which variables contribute the most to your cluster solution (IBM Knowledge Center, [www.ibm.com](http://www.ibm.com)). The F-ratio is the ratio of two mean square values. Variables with large F-values provide the greatest separation between clusters. Thus, in our case the Strategic Component having the largest F-value contributes the most to the separation between clusters. Sig. (significance level) is the interpretation of probability. Typically, probabilities >0.05 are not significant and probabilities <0.05 are significant for the test being performed. In our case all three components are significant (Sig. <0.05).

The fifth cluster represents countries with a strong strategic component with whom the EU has developed a jurisdictional-institutional basis but that do not concord with EU norms and values (the Partner in Spirit Component [Comp\_3] is negative). These countries are strategically attractive partners for the EU but they are problematic when it comes to common values. Mercosur is probably situated in the fifth cluster due to Venezuela's membership. Venezuela was suspended in 2016, but our research only includes data until 2014, when it was still member of Mercosur.

The first cluster also represents countries strategically attractive for the EU but with low coherence regarding common values. With these countries the EU does not have a strong jurisdictional-institutional basis. Only China is situated in the first cluster, and this is what makes it special in comparison with other partners.

The fourth cluster includes five partners of the EU's 'Special Ten' which are of strategic value for the EU and have a positive Partner in Spirit Component but with whom the jurisdictional-institutional basis is not well-developed. Finally, in the seventh cluster we find countries that, in spite of their Strategic Component not being so high in comparison with the other three clusters, show very high coherence with EU norms and values and have a strong jurisdictional-institutional basis with the EU. They are the EU's potential strategic partners based primarily on shared values.

### **Conclusion**

In this contribution, the EU's strategic partners were subjected to analysis. It was empirically demonstrated that not all of the EU's official strategic partners concur with the EU's values, norms and general point of view regarding global issues. Moreover, the EU's understanding of 'strategic partnership' does not always tally with what is understood by the term by the EU's partners themselves. Despite the EU's leaders' rhetoric regarding the priority of common values, democracy, human rights and the rule of law in relationships, the main criteria of being chosen as a strategic partner for the EU seem to be the political and economic partner's weight together with common commercial interests.

The cluster analysis has demonstrated that Mexico and South Africa are not of sufficient strategic interest to qualify as the EU's official strategic partners. Thus, our first hypothesis was proven. Australia, Chile, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, despite not having such a high strategic component as other strategic partners, nevertheless have the potential to become EU strategic partners based on common values. Regarding the investigated regional organizations, it was empirically demonstrated that ASEAN, EAEU, Mercosur and SAARC are attractive as strategic regional partners for the EU, while SICA and CARICOM are not. So our second hypothesis is also proven.

The cluster analysis has confirmed that the EU's strategic partners are too heterogeneous to formulate a collective response to multilateralism that would confirm our third hypothesis. There are at least two different groups of strategic partners: one group concurs with EU norms and values, the other group is, right from the outset, problematic from the perspective of common values. With respect to the latter, the

EU should decide either to aim for a more pragmatic approach towards strategic partnership, which presupposes collaboration in fields of common interest and glosses over common values, or to refrain from considering them as EU strategic partners, giving priority to common values rather than common commercial interests. The former course of action would mean renegeing on the initial concept of precisely developing a strategic partnership with those countries that concur with EU norms and values. By all accounts, only by developing an individual approach toward every partner, and by taking into consideration the particular features of each, can the EU confidently entertain the likelihood of its heterogeneous strategic partners being compatible with its articulated foreign policy – or indeed with its overall Global Agenda.

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