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EFPU roundtable: 'EU Foreign Policy after Lisbon: the View from the Strategic Partners'

Blog editor



On 30 April 2012 the LSE's European Foreign Policy Unit hosted the seventh of ten roundtables on 'EU Foreign Policy after Lisbon', entitled 'The View from the EU's Strategic Partners'. The panellists were Professor Derek Averre (University of Birmingham, UK), Professor Purusottam Bhattacharya (Jadavpur University, India) and Dr Andrea Ribeiro-Hoffmann (University of Erfurt, Germany). The event was moderated by Professor Christopher Hughes of the LSE.

At the risk of stating a tautology, the field of European Studies – and arguably particularly European foreign policy – always tends towards Eurocentrism. To remedy this, the latter few roundtables in this series ask how the EU is perceived from the outside. As the EU is still trying to find its place in an emerging multipolar world, its relations with other powers shaping this new order are crucial. Thus, the panellists saw themselves confronted with three questions: Do the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) (see footnote 1) view the EU as a coherent and effective foreign policy actor? What kind of an actor do they perceive the EU to be? What are the prospects for the development of relations between the EU and its strategic

partners?

The first order of the day was a collective semantic exercise in de-mystifying the EU's 'strategic' partnerships as all of the participants agreed that the term 'strategic' is hardly well deserved. In line with previous roundtables – e.g. see the [roundtable on the CSDP](#) – the often aspirational character of EU foreign policy finds expression in the labelling of its products. While interaction between the EU and its strategic partners is high, much of it is centred on technical/regulatory issues rather than political issues. In terms of cooperation in security affairs, the EU seems to have very little to offer to its partners.

Professor Bhattacharya stressed the crucial importance of China and Pakistan as the main security concerns of India yet the EU is seen as ambivalent on both. Dr Ribeiro-Hoffmann pointed out that Brazil and China see the EU as a potential counterbalance to US preponderance. However, while its image as a civilian power with considerable economic clout does carry influence with its partners, this also implies that the EU is not taken seriously when it comes to hard security concerns. Conversely, regarding Eurasian security Professor Averre remarked that Russia continues to perceive the EU as a geopolitical rival for influence in the post-Soviet space.

The most serious impediment to EU foreign policy as perceived from the outside is its lack of coherence. Somewhat ironically, China and Russia are catalysts of this in so far as they regularly adopt a *divide and conquer* approach to their relations with EU member states. Similarly, India is more comfortable dealing with individual member states on political and security questions – a lesson brought home by the rift between France and the United Kingdom on one side, and smaller EU member states on the other, regarding India's nuclear status and its ambitions for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.



L to R: Derek Averre, Andrea Ribeiro Hoffman, Purusottam Bhattacharya and Chris Hughes

The speakers were keen to stress that there are prospects for closer cooperation between the EU and its strategic partners. If the EU is serious about fostering a global order built around 'effective multilateralism', it needs to provide greater substance to its strategic partnerships. And if the EU wants to be taken seriously by its partners, greater emphasis on security issues may be unavoidable. Cooperation in anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden shows promise in this regard as states have a shared interest in open trading routes. However, what is the EU's stance towards more divisive security issues, such as intensifying competition among Russia, China and India in Central Asia?

As long as the EU has not identified its core security interests and priorities for collective action, the strategic partnerships are bound to lack in direction. Beyond this structural flaw at the heart of EU foreign policy, however, the EU currently faces an even greater challenge: its traditional core strength – *soft power* – seems to be waning. European integration as a historical project of reconciliation and cooperation still holds symbolic sway, especially for those partners of the EU who often enjoy strained relations with their neighbours. Yet, the recent Euro-crisis – and European leaders' collective failure to deal with it decisively – has deeply affected the EU's image in the world. Europe is increasingly perceived as a region in decline, signifying the demise of the EU as a social model and a model for regional integration. This will seriously hamper the EU's ability to shape the global order in the twenty-first century.

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I. This panel discusses only the EU's strategic partnerships with the BRIC states. Some of its other strategic partners are discussed in later roundtables (Japan – *The View from Asia*; South Africa – *The View from Africa*; United States – *EU-US Relations after the Lisbon Treaty*. For further information see:
<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalRelations/centresandunits/EFPU/EUFPAfterLisbon.aspx>

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