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Making the Most of Germany's Strategic Partnerships: A Five-Point Proposal

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Key bilateral relations in world politics today – from Sino-Indo ties to EU-US relations – have been formalised under the label "Strategic Partnership". Germany's Federal Foreign Office maintains eight strategic partnerships with a broad variety of partners. We analyse the problems associated with strategic partnerships, and offer a five-point proposal whereby Germany could finesse this instrument and use it more effectively.

- Given the highly divergent group of countries with which Germany maintains formalised strategic partnerships, there is a lack of clarity as to what a strategic partnership entails.

- Whereas actual bilateral relations differ greatly from country to country, two key elements characterise almost all of Germany's strategic partners. They are located outside the transatlantic orbit and they play a growing or continuingly significant role in regional and global governance; many of Germany's partners are indispensable for the solution of 21st century collective action problems.

- Germany could put this diplomatic instrument to more effective use: 1) focusing on "ability" and "will" (rather than a resort to moralization) 2) asking the question "which global public goods" is the partner country willing to provide 3) identifying clear red lines and abiding by them 4) building in an incentive structure based on "Reform for Responsibility" and 5) working in coalitions.

Policy Implications

Being more explicit about the purpose of individual strategic partnerships would make them a more viable diplomatic instrument. Our proposal suggests ways whereby Germany's strategic partnerships could be better targeted. Effective strategic partnerships could generate very high gains – not only for Germany, but for the world at large via the attention they pay to the joint provision of public goods, and everyone concerned with questions of global order.

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The Diplomatic Instrument

The Federal Foreign Office has eight "Strategic Partnerships" with a variety of partners in Asia as well as one each in Africa, South America, and the Middle East. [1] The qualifier of "strategic" is seen by the partners and also third parties as a symbol of the high importance that is attached to the particular relationship. The question arises: does this diplomatic instrument generate gains proportionate to the expectations that it raises and the efforts that it requires? In this article, we analyse the problems associated with strategic partnerships, and offer a five-point proposal whereby Germany could finesse this instrument and use it more effectively. While the focus of this paper is Germany's strategic partnerships, some of the proposals may apply to the strategic partnerships of other countries too.

1 Australia, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates.

Problems

A strategic partnership is an important way of signalling Germany's commitment to harnessing and further enhancing the particular bilateral relationship. It also has demonstration value for other potential partners aspiring to a closer relationship with Germany. Insofar as strategic partnerships promote not only bilateral interests but also advance the provision of certain global or regional public goods, they can also generate systemic gains. But the concept of a strategic partnership also comes riddled with three problems.

First, analysts and practitioners question the utility of the concept when it is used to describe the country's relations with such a wide range of countries – democracies and non-democracies, large and small, countries with which Germany has only a few and very specific interests and others with which its interests are much broader, like-minded potential allies and also fundamentally different polities. With regard to China (and Vietnam perhaps), for instance, the strategic partner terminology seems to reflect the importance of a bilateral relationship, which suffers from fundamental disagreements in some fields but nonetheless is central to German economic interests. In contrast, in the case of Australia, the label appears to highlight a bilateral relationship characterised by close cooperation and agreement in a diverse array of fields – without necessarily touching Germany's core economic or indeed strategic interests. Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and India in turn comprise a group of democratic rising or regional powers widely regarded as key players in the so-called Global South. In contrast to Australia these countries have at times proven to be relatively "difficult" partners as Germany's core interests overlap only occasionally, cultural understanding is more limited, and the level of economic development diverges. Nonetheless, their current or future role in regional and global governance justifies the label "strategic." The United Arab Emirates are an outlier as relations neither touch upon Germany's core interests nor are the Emirates a partner with a key role in regional or global governance.

Naturally, the variety of the strategic partners is mirrored in the diplomatic instruments employed in bilateral relations. With Brazil, China, and India, for instance, Germany maintains regular intergovernmental consultations under the chairmanship of heads of governments – the most comprehensive form of bilateral consultations. By contrast, regular consultations with Australia, Indonesia, and

Vietnam are held on the level of senior officials from the foreign ministries. Nor is the definition of strategic partners uncontested within the German government itself, as, for example, the Chancellery maintains its own directory of strategic partners. Rather than serve as a refined instrument of German diplomacy, the concept seems to have become more of a catch-all and aspirational label for partners outside the transatlantic orbit. Finally, the obscurity surrounding the term is not surprising given the proliferation of so-called strategic partnerships globally: whereas the EU has established 10 (including all major world powers plus a group of industrialised, middle powers), reportedly India has more than 20 and China 47 (2014).

Second, once a country has been elevated to the status of a strategic partner, a downgrading is almost impossible without some very serious diplomatic costs. The concept is thus one that seems to lack flexibility.

Third, German foreign policy vis-à-vis its strategic partners often seems to pursue an array of "altruistic" goals. To be sure, German diplomats are aware of Germany's economic interests and they spend a great deal of time and effort in forging closer ties between German businesses and those of partner countries, particularly so in the growing Asian economies from China to India and Indonesia. Yet, when reflecting upon issue areas beyond economics, objectives such as the rule of law and human rights in partner countries, regional peace and stability, climate change mitigation, and the unobstructed dispensation of development aid figure prominently on the German side of the negotiating table. This is particularly the case when it comes to Germany's relations outside Europe and the European near-abroad, where Germany still lacks a clear role to fulfil. Foreign Minister Steinmeier's recent article in Foreign Affairs – although being primarily concerned with Germany's role in Europe and the Middle East – exemplified German foreign policy-makers' self-understanding as a global power in pursuit of altruistic foreign policy objectives: "Germany will be a responsible, restrained, and reflective leader, guided in chief by its European instincts" (Steinmeier 2016). However, although strategic partners recognise Berlin's growing importance they are unlikely to uncritically share Germany's self-depiction as habitually pursuing the global good over more narrowly defined national interests. The rift in mutual understandings may be deepened by a widespread perception on behalf of German diplomacy with regard to partner countries' interests, which – so the narrative goes – tend to focus on their own national interests from investments to technology transfer and military hardware. Insofar as many of Germany's strategic partnerships clearly aim to go beyond narrow bilateral discussions and seek to jointly provide some global or regional public goods – be it regional stability or climate change mitigation via green technologies – considerations above point to the difficulties that this instrument will continue to encounter in achieving Germany's "altruistic" goals.

Reframing the Negotiation Position

There is a major issue of definition in Philosophy and Economics on where altruism stops and where self-interest begins. And definitions can vary greatly depending on who one is and where one sits. What we in Germany see as altruism may be seen quite differently on the outside. So for example, if Germany tries to contribute to the maintenance of regional stability, we might see this as altruistic but the other

players might see this as a very straightforward interest-based attempt to pre-empt any adverse spill-over effects into Germany and Europe that are a consequence of unstable world regions. Or, to take an even starker example, Germany might see the push for better labour standards as highly altruistic, but the "Global South" will likely see this as an invidious attempt to undermine a major source of their comparative advantage. We find the same potential conflict arise when human rights are mentioned, and the old debate on intervention versus sovereignty.

It is also worth mentioning that negotiation analysis shows us that framing one's interests in terms of high-level moralistic principles – such as fairness or justice – tends to polarise the debate and makes the negotiation more deadlock-prone (Bazerman and Neale 2010). Altruism falls into this same category of moralistic framing. Throwing in even implicit expectations of altruistic behaviour on the part of one's strategic partners, and prior assumptions of one's own altruism in a negotiation, not only unnecessarily complicates the analysis but also may jeopardise the actual process of negotiation.

The heterogeneity of strategic partners and our critique of moralisation in international relations should not obscure a potentially timely and pertinent idea behind the concept: in a complex, multipolar world with ailing global institutions strong bilateral partnerships between established and rising, industrialised and developing, Northern and Southern governments are a prerequisite for the solution of global collective action problems. The provision of global public goods – for example in the economic, digital, environmental, and security domains – is a strategic interest shared by all major powers. Seen through this lens, strategic partnerships can and should be more than the mainly symbolic recognition of status in international affairs. They aim to be an expression of the mutual desire to go beyond the narrow management of bilateral affairs and to find a common approach to global issues. How might strategic partnerships build on these aims to achieve their full potential?

We suggest some ways in which the problems identified above might be overcome, and how Germany could put its strategic partnerships to more effective use. All the solutions we propose require (as discussed above) one important change in how Germany frames its own negotiating position, and also the demands that it makes of others, by reconsidering the notion of "altruism".

Solutions

Is there a better way to identify mutual interest profiles, and negotiate with strategic partners such that we find a decent zone of agreement and also contribute to some public goods? We suggest below a five-point proposal, which could potentially be incorporated in the framing of Germany's strategic partnerships.

1) Focus on "Ability" versus "Will"

"Ability" is one of the axes that many German diplomats already take into account when defining their own interests as well as those of their strategic partners. Adding the "will" variable allows us to capture another parallel set of considerations. The idea of using both "ability" and "will" variables for systematically developing mutual interest profiles derives from the seminal writings of Charles Kindleberger on the

Great Depression (Kindleberger 1973). Kindleberger had argued that the reason why the Great Depression was so severe and prolonged was because, "In 1929, the British couldn't and the Americans wouldn't" take on the responsibility of providing the necessary conditions to preserve global economic stability. And in some ways, we have seen a replay of the same debates, in recent years, when the established powers have turned to the rapidly growing economies of China and India, and asked them to take on global responsibilities in proportion to their enhanced economic power. When working with these expectations, we in the West were pointing to their growing abilities. But what we also need to pay more attention to is the question of their "willingness" to provide global public goods (Narlikar 2013). And this inevitably requires us to engage with the question of values because willingness derives from the values of a country and its people – be they religious values or secular values – and how these in turn shape their notions of territoriality, sovereignty, human rights, and free markets.

What would it mean to work with an axis of ability and willingness? For example, we might find that a country like India has increasing ability (deriving from its growth and development) to contribute to climate change mitigation, but also increasing willingness to do so as the Paris negotiations of last year showed (Narlikar and Plagemann 2016). A country like China may have the ability to contribute to regional peace, but has shown a clear lack of will to do so in recent months with the escalation of maritime disputes. In the case of Germany, engaging with the willingness and ability of others will be important because this will help determine which buttons can be pressed, where the pressure can be applied, and also what the deal-breakers might be. A systematic analysis of strategic partners' willingness and ability in contributing to global public good provision will be more helpful in identifying mutual zones of agreement, and the limitations thereof, than expecting and – even if implicitly – requesting the same kind of "altruistic" behaviour that we – falsely or not – attribute to our own foreign policy. Key to this, of course, is a profound understanding of the limits with regard to the willingness and ability of partner countries in those policy fields important to German interests. Surely, the German Federal Foreign Office with its wide network of representations and sources possesses the capacity to generate such an understanding, a comparative benefit when seen against the capacities of many of its strategic partners as well as other line ministries within Germany.

2) Ask the question: "Which Public Goods"?

In discussions with some of the countries that are our strategic partners it frequently seems that they very unwilling to share the burden of public goods that we would like them to join us in providing – be this values such as human rights, or things we have always assumed to be fairly pragmatic and straightforward such as free trade and climate change mitigation. In the blame games that result, sometimes these strategic partners respond with the argument: you cannot expect us to share the costs of providing public goods that we had no voice in choosing in the first place. This is a fair point, but the discussion cannot stop there. We need to ask our strategic partners, if not *these* global public goods, which alternative public goods are you willing to provide (Narlikar 2013). This requires a much better understanding of the cultural traditions and historical trajectories that underlie the negotiating positions

of our counterparts (Narlikar 2016). In some cases, we might get easy answers – for example climate change mitigation efforts from the small island economies work in the same direction as ours. In others, we may find some surprising and new ideas and allies for cooperation – in the case of India, respect for democratic institutions, policing the open seas, or animal ethics, for instance, are likely to find considerable support. Even asking the question of – which public goods – will be an important step as it will be likely welcomed by many of our strategic partners as a genuine opportunity for agenda-setting.

3) Identify clear red lines

We need to know our clear red lines and also those of our partners. Of course, these red lines should be used with caution. And in general, it's a good idea to abide by the red lines – identifying a red line publicly and then not sticking to it is seldom a good idea because it reduces the credibility of one's demands. But the red lines (be they internal or external) are important also for another reason: because they can help one distinguish between one strategic partnership and another, and thereby fine-tune this instrument much more than is the case at the moment. We might, for instance, decide that we would rather not work too closely with non-democratic regimes, but nonetheless want to make the most of our trade with them. If this is the case, the strategic partnership then needs to be framed as such, in a more limited manner. This may sometime make the negotiation process more difficult. But clarity on these goals upfront can effectively communicate our expectations and avoid misunderstandings among the partners. With others, we may choose to have a deeper and broader strategic partnership, especially if the partner has both values and interests that align better with ours.

4) Build in incentives: "Reform for Responsibility"

For many of the countries with which Germany wants to negotiate, the inadequacy of governance structures – such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank – is clear, and they have lobbied hard for their reform. And indeed, at least in theory, the legitimacy of global institutions would increase considerably, once their decision-making processes better reflect today's multipolar world. The mistake that the established powers have made thus far is not to have a clear strategy on this – individually or collectively. So reform has been knee-jerk and not systematic. On the one hand, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is one of the few organisations which has come to include major developing countries at the high table of negotiations. On the other hand, it seems to be caught up for several reasons in perpetual deadlock. This is not an exemplar of reform from anyone's perspective. In other organisations though, reform has been even slower and hard to come by. A smart strategy here would be to have clear incentives in place; reform is a bargaining chip that should not be yielded easily. But it should be exchanged in return for a greater willingness to provide certain agreed upon public goods. So we suggest that we try to come up with a system of reform in exchange for responsibility. The exact details would have to be worked out, but the point here would be that for certain strategic partners, Germany could offer support for the reform of international institutions on the condition that these partners agree to show greater

initiative and cooperation on the provision of certain public goods. This strategy would make even more sense once it has become clear that the purpose of "strategic" partnerships should be a collective engagement in global governance. And if there is one common thread uniting all rising powers, it is their discomfort with present global governance arrangements.

5) Work in coalitions that go beyond strategic partnerships

Our strategic partnerships offer us a vital instrument, which with some finessing, could help us to build certain umbrella coalitions. By way of example, we flag up just three ideas here:

1. European Union: the European project has taken a real battering in recent years via the Eurozone crisis, the migration and refugees crisis, and now the latest blow that takes the shape of the Brexit referendum. None of our strategic partnerships is directly with members of the European Union. But these partnerships hold a key to vital relationships outside of the European Union that impact upon Europe and are also affected by crises in Europe. This is all the more true as non-European partners will look to Berlin for continental leadership. So, for example, it would be pre-emptive and sensible to build alliances with important third parties, which might help strengthen the European project further. These alliances could involve market access and green technology deals with some strategic partners. Working on this wisely could not only strengthen Europe's hand, but could also come in handy in worsening Britain's alternatives and thereby ensuring Brexit takes place on terms that help deter future defections. Germany's role in the European Union makes it a natural facilitator for such negotiations. To do this effectively requires an intensive coordination between the Political Departments 2 – managing Germany's bilateral relations with European countries – and 3 – responsible for relations with African, Latin American, Asian and Middle Eastern countries – in the Federal Foreign Office.
2. The group of the 20 major economies (G20): Germany will be chairing and hosting the next G20 summit in July 2017. We have vital opportunities here, and the Chancellery should draw on the extensive expertise of the Federal Foreign Office with respect to the many G20 countries that it deals with. It would make sense to establish some continuity in the G20 agenda via Germany's strategic partnerships, and use windows of opportunity with different partners on issues on which Germany has a long-standing interest – such as sustainable development and climate change mitigation. In fact, some of these issues could be built in more proactively with selected strategic partners as the first step. The second step would involve building support for this agenda in the G20 working in alliance with the same strategic partners. Finally, the strategic partnerships could then be used to facilitate the implementation of the agenda, and thereby leading by example.
3. United Nations Security Council (UNSC): Especially with the recently launched bid for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC by Germany, the timing seems to be right for rebuilding a coalition for reform. This is not a new agenda, and it is true that previous attempts at coalition-building have not been so effective. But this time, especially if Germany were to integrate this consideration into its strategic partnerships, more could be made of the coalitions that emerge. Espe-

cially if one were to link this up with the "Reform for Responsibility" plus the "Which Public Goods" ideas, we might have some very potent and influential coalitions in the making.

Conclusion: A Sharper Diplomatic Instrument

A careful consideration of Germany's strategic partnerships today is a timely endeavour. We have suggested ways in which this diplomatic instrument can be made more nuanced and better targeted. Our five-point proposal requires a framework where less reliance is placed (in general) on high levels of moralising. Within the proposal, we suggest ways in which Germany can identify its own interests more effectively (via explicit awareness of its red lines) and also communicate them more effectively (in terms of political will). In the same proposal set, we offer ways whereby Germany can streamline its own initiatives through a better understanding of the ability and will of its potential and actual partners on different issues. We also present bargaining mechanisms that Germany could use – via "which public goods", "Reform for Responsibility," and coalition-building – and thereby construct and sustain more effective strategic partnerships. Effective strategic partnerships could generate very high gains – not only for Germany, but for the world at large via the attention they pay to the joint provision of global public goods, and for all those of us concerned with questions of global order.

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