

Catherine Ashton

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and
Vice President of the European Commission

Speech on EU foreign policy towards the BRICS and other emerging powers

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament

Bruxelles, 01 February 2012

Thank you Mr President.

May I welcome very much the report and thank Mr Saryusz-Wolski for his work

The growing role of the emerging powers, and we focus for this debate on what we call the BRICS, is really important: when we think about the relationships that India, Brazil and South Africa have developed in their coordination through IBSA; and the relationship between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa in what we now call the BRICS. We know the economic statistics that have brought about the phenomenal rise of the emerging powers, but for me the essence of this is about the politics. What matters is that the economic clout is translated into political clout, into self confidence and ambition for the role that can be played. We know that the five members of the BRICS of course are 5 strategic partners of the EU and each of them, as Mr. Saryusz-Wolski has said, are very different in many ways; each of them has a strong and deep relationship with the European Union. I think that it is incredibly important that we invest in our relationship with these countries, and are active and creative in our engagement with them. We have got a lot in common and potentially a lot that we can do together. This is precisely what I have been doing, what colleagues in the Commission and in the Council have been doing and it's why, Honourable Members, you will remember that, when I took on this role I said that for my mandate I have 3 priorities: to get the service up and running, our neighbourhood long before the events of the Arab Spring, and thirdly our strategic partners. I will just mention that there are other emerging powers, like Mexico, South Korea and of course Indonesia and others that we work closely with but I want to concentrate for the purpose of this debate on the five that we call the BRICS.

We need to develop a strong relationship with each of them. In China, I not only met with my interlocutor State Councillor Dai Bingguo but I also met Minister of Defence Liang Guanglie to talk about how we can work together on tackling the problems that we face together on piracy and counterterrorism. One of the advantages of the many hats of this post is that I can move between the Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry in many countries and express the views of the European Union with both. We have also been talking in India in the last 2 weeks. Again trying to break new ground on how to develop the strength of our relationship, particularly on some of the security issues that are so important; joint work to develop the capacity to deliver on the world food programme, joint work on tackling some of the global issues that we face and that they face and recognizing the significance of India in the region. This weekend I travel to Brazil and Mexico. Again our ambition is to strengthen the relationship that we have and to talk about issues of importance between us. In Brazil I will focus in part on Iran and in our work with Brazil on development and our work together in the UN Human Rights Council. In Mexico, we will discuss how they played such an important role on climate change and on some of the challenges that they face in their part of their region.

I should mention too South Africa. I met the Foreign Minister in November again to discuss some of the issues that are extremely important. South Africa's work with the EU in Durban for the climate change discussions has been of enormous importance. And of course we have just discussed our relations with Russia, a very important bilateral relationship, a significant partner in foreign policy and of course our concerns internally. So in each of those countries we are trying to invest by developing a strong bilateral relationship. Each of them is different, each of them has a different history and relationship traditionally not only with the EU but also with the Member States of the EU. I agree that we need a more creative and joined up approach as we look at how we deal with those bilateral relationships, but also to work with that group of countries in regional and global forums.

And that brings me to a thread that runs through your report which I think is really important; the extent to which they form a harmonious bloc. As you have stressed, there are major differences economically and politically and socially and anyone looking at those countries would see how significantly different they are. Whether they manage to coordinate their position depends on whether their interests coincide. There are issues on which coordination is relatively straightforward, others where is more difficult; many where perhaps they would want to develop that coordination further. So my proposal, Mr President, is that we need to invest in these countries as strategic partners in a very strong and dynamic bilateral relationship; finding the themes and issues where we can work closely, economically and politically, bilaterally and internationally. We need to do that because it is in our interest to do it. But I also believe that it is in our interest to avoid a mindset that says it is the West versus the rest. Something that I have discussed with President Obama and Secretary Clinton at the summit in December in the US.

So I think it is important that we deal with them as individual strong strategic partners. And I think that what Mr. Saryusz-Wolski just said about coordination is completely right. May I instantly take up that proposal and say that I will as a direct result of your report and your comments make sure that we find ways in which to coordinate in the future. Which brings me to my last remarks: Individual countries, yes; individual relationships, absolutely critical; but as they start to come together, it is really important that we think about what it is that brings them together to form a common position. We need to find ways in which we can create a different dynamic and create common calls with some or all of them when that works.

Mr. Saryusz-Wolski, if I may again thank you so much for your report and say that you have already achieved at least one thing in creating a new coordination within the service.