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# Flexible Security Arrangements and the Future of NATO Partnerships

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## Summary

NATO's engagement with partner countries has played a key role in the evolution of the alliance. Beyond laying the foundation for enlargement, it has been instrumental to peacekeeping and stabilization efforts. At the same time, it has helped facilitate interoperability of forces and exported standards of democratic governance and military professionalism. Yet, over time, NATO's partnership policy has been hampered by increasingly outdated frameworks, political barriers, and decreased institutional bandwidth. Simultaneously, security challenges have increased in and near Europe, as well as across the globe, altering traditional conceptions of security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Responding to these changes, several European NATO members and partners have pursued a networked approach to security, creating and joining smaller groupings to tackle various challenges. Some of these groupings address a specific problem within or in connection with NATO structures, while others operate outside of the alliance. This paper refers to the former as "flexible" and to the latter as "minilateral" formats.

This has allowed European NATO members and partners to work toward common interests and priorities, enabling more swift decisions making and filling gaps in capabilities and readiness by sidestepping institutional red tape. Meanwhile, NATO has tried to adapt its partnership policy, but it lacks a comprehensive approach for doing so. Yet, the global nature of challenges facing the alliance requires a broader and more efficient partnership agenda that builds on past successes and adapts to the current context.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg highlighted the importance of partnerships in the context of these growing global challenges as he launched NATO 2030 last year—an initiative to identify priorities for the coming decade to help inform a new strategic concept. To ensure that the alliance and its partners can effectively navigate the changing security environment, it needs to rethink its partnership policy. This should include a stocktaking of NATO's partnership frameworks and consider more collaborative and dynamic alternatives to the recent tendency to over-bilateralize its partnership engagement.

This paper explores how NATO can apply the lessons of its partnership history and successful examples of minilateral and flexible arrangements to an updated approach. It proposes a dynamic issue- and interest-based partnership policy that places a greater focus on relevant political dialogue and consultation with partners to help inform the alliance's strategic direction, particularly as it develops a greater political competency resulting from the NATO 2030 process. The paper also considers the viability of more flexible groupings of members and partners with shared interests under the NATO umbrella to address global threats emanating from a broad set of actors and circumstances—from geopolitical rivals to disruptive technologies and natural disasters.

Significant institutional hurdles remain a challenge to an ambitious partnership rethink, but NATO must find new creative ways to think about cooperative security to solidify its enduring relevance and to address challenges that neither its members, nor its partners, can tackle on their own.

## Introduction

NATO has faced questions of relevance and resilience since the end of the Cold War. Yet, as the alliance exited a bipolar world, it adapted and asserted its crucial place in the transatlantic space time and time again. NATO policies toward partner countries played an important role in this evolution, integrating new nations into the alliance, carrying out peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, creating interoperability of forces beyond member states for deployment in places like Afghanistan, and exporting standards of democratic governance and professional military conduct to partners.

Within the last decade, questions facing NATO's purpose have gained new urgency. Russia's resurgence and growing assertiveness, culminating in the invasion of Ukraine, altered Europe's concept of security in the post-Cold War context. Added to this, the last four years have heightened uncertainty among some European members regarding the United States' long-term commitment to their continent's security. The damage will be hard to repair even if the Biden administration makes good on the promise of strengthening alliances and international cooperation, particularly as the coronavirus pandemic and its knock-on effects will preoccupy policymakers and resources for some time.

With no shortage of challenges across multiple regions and domains, forging consensus among NATO's 30 members is hard enough. Adding NATO's 40 formal partners to this dynamic only complicates the process of setting a joint agenda. This often results in a policy process reduced to the lowest common denominator. To avoid this trap and respond to an increasingly complex threat environment through networked cooperation, European countries have been relying more on smaller groupings among themselves and with partners. Some of these groupings address a specific problem within or in connection with NATO structures; they are labeled here as "flexible" formats. Those that operate outside NATO structures are labeled as "minilateral" formats.

(When NATO talks of flexible formats, this usually refers to its "+N" format, in contrast to its more rigid

regional partnership frameworks—both of which involve all members. In this paper, the term is extended to address not just flexibility in the number of partners involved, but also the number of members. Thus, the flexible formats looked at here include smaller grouping of NATO members.)

While these two types of "coalitions of the willing" are leaner, more adaptable, and less cumbersome, they also pose distinct challenges. They can create redundancies or amplify divisions. They also risk eroding larger partnership endeavors. As such, they create difficult questions for NATO's existing partnership approach. Yet, as NATO confronts a complex global security landscape, an effective partnership agenda will be more important than ever. To achieve this, it will have to reassess the ultimate purpose of its partnership policy to ensure this supports its strategic goals in the coming years and to demonstrate the alliance's relevance as the primary forum for Euro-Atlantic security cooperation.

To inform this process, this paper explores the rise of minilateral arrangements and flexible formats across the Euro-Atlantic space, evaluates their efficacy, and discusses the implications for NATO and its partners. Additionally, it examines what lessons can be learned from this dynamic, specifically when it comes to driving a more output-oriented partnership policy to meet current and future challenges.

## The Evolution of NATO Partnerships

After the Cold War, NATO's strategic focus shifted away from territorial defense toward external crisis management and out-of-area operations. This first played out in the Balkans and later in the Middle East and North Africa. Meanwhile, NATO enlarged as countries in Eastern Europe joined the alliance while others joined partnership frameworks. These partnerships played an important role in NATO's mission to buttress democracy and security in Europe in the 1990s. They also advanced its mission to project stability in the Middle East and Africa.

Today, NATO boasts a robust menu of partnership formats and mechanisms. Some—including the Part-

nership for Peace Programme (PfP)<sup>1</sup> and the corresponding European-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), as well as the Mediterranean Dialogue<sup>2</sup> — date back to the 1990s. Others, like the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative,<sup>3</sup> were shaped by NATO's growing focus on issues like counterterrorism in the 2000s. The involvement of a broad set of countries in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan gave rise to a new category of partners labeled Partners across the Globe, which were emphasized by the Strategic Concept adopted at the Lisbon Summit in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

***NATO's partnership mechanisms are not currently achieving their full potential and are due for a rethink.***

While the EAPC (a forum for PfP countries), the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative were envisioned as multilateral formats, the tools developed in the PfP itself prioritize bilateral cooperation and are open to all NATO partners.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, NATO launched the Partnership Interoperability Initiative to improve the quality of partners' contributions to NATO-led operations, missions, and exercises. Within this framework, the Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships program offers additional pathways for cooperation to six countries: Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden, and Ukraine. Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia also all have separate and additional frameworks for dialogue and cooperation through the NATO-Georgia Commission, the

NATO-Ukraine Commission, and the NATO-Russia Council.

NATO's latest partnership effort has been dubbed One Partner, One Plan. Although it is still in development, its aim would be to streamline activities with respective partner countries. As this initiative evolves, it remains to be seen how it will impact other partnership mechanisms or partnerships more broadly. There are concerns it could lead to further bilateralization of partnerships as well as one-size-fits all approaches that provide less flexibility for the partner country.

Despite this impressive list, NATO's partnership mechanisms are not currently achieving their full potential and are due for a rethink. Many major issues are being neglected. This is not to say that partners no longer play a role in NATO's operations and priorities. On the contrary, some—such as Sweden and Finland—are about as closely integrated in NATO's planning as they could possibly be short of membership. But, as is also true with Georgia and Ukraine, most of these activities take place in bilateral or trilateral formats, although these countries are also part of other, larger partnership frameworks.

This reality reveals some flaws in NATO's partnership policy. There are not only redundancies, but many of the broader frameworks have lost momentum and purpose. Many formats lack clear processes and goals, lumping together diverse groups of nations that have very different hopes and expectations in how they engage with NATO. In addition, formats like the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which aim to catalyze broader cooperation beyond the traditional Euro-Atlantic area, continue to fall short of their intended purpose and lack a clear agenda for the future. While these frameworks demonstrate their usefulness by building political ties and space for dialogue, they are less effective when it comes to driving actual outcomes that benefit NATO's interests or strategy, or those of its partner countries.

NATO tends to create new formats as the security environment changes without first conducting a serious stocktaking and reformation of existing partnerships mechanisms—a process that has traditionally

1 Current members of PfP, which was launched in 1994, include: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Malta, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

2 Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia are part of the Mediterranean Dialogue, which was initiated in 1994.

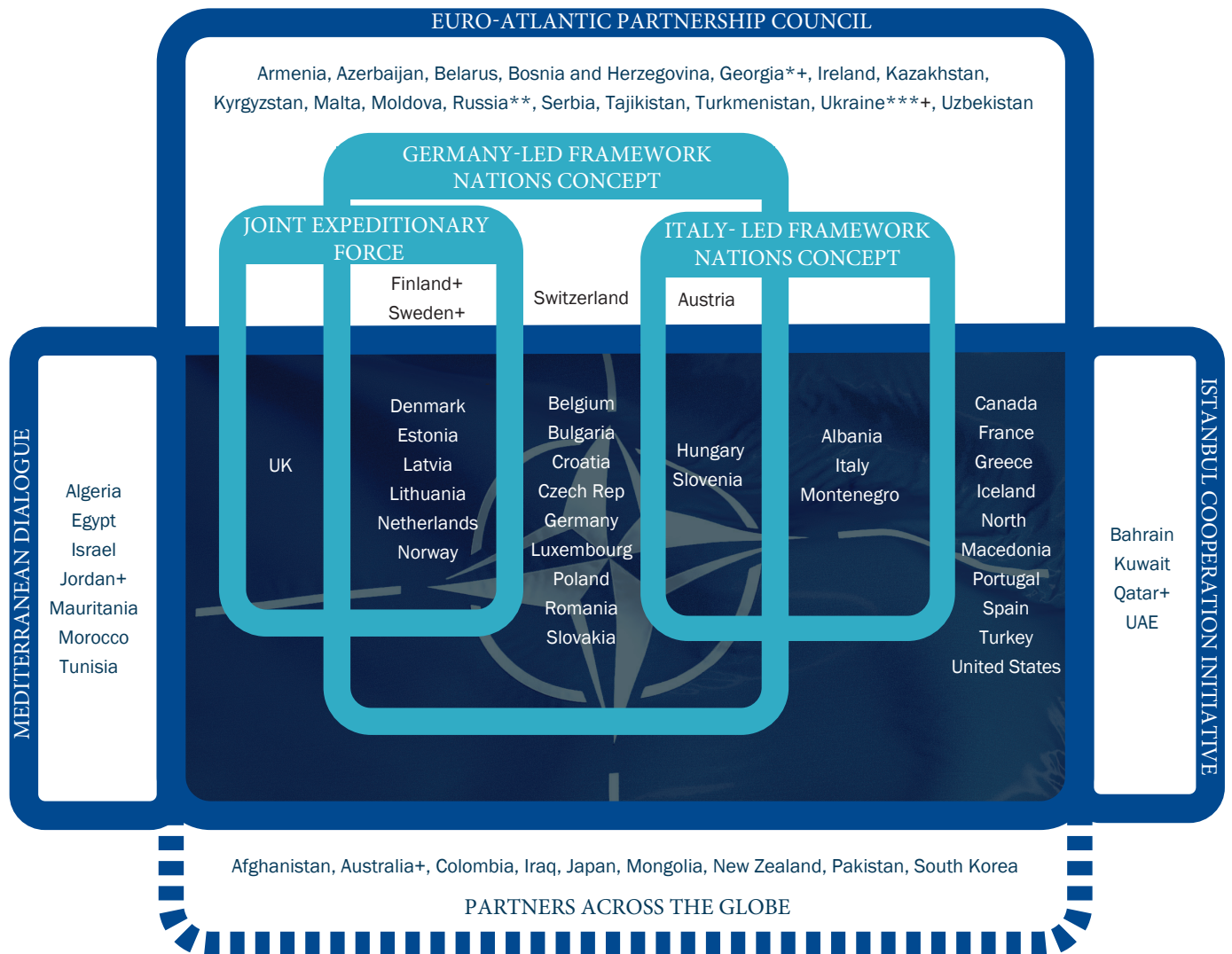
3 The ICI, launched in 2004, includes Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.




4 These are Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, and Pakistan.

5 NATO, "[Partnership for Peace programme](#)," March 23, 2020.



**Figure 1. NATO Regional Partnership Frameworks and Flexible Formats**



-  Partners engaged flexibly by all NATO members
-  Partners engaged collectively by all NATO members
-  Partners engaged collectively by select NATO members

\*NATO also engages Georgia NATO via the NATO-Georgia Commission  
 \*\*NATO also Russia via the NATO-Russia Council  
 \*\*\*NATO also engages Ukraine via the NATO-Ukraine Commission  
 + Enhanced Opportunities Partners

been extremely partner driven. This “principle of new challenge – new format”<sup>6</sup> creates a buildup of barely used, somewhat irrelevant, or effectively defunct mechanisms. On paper, there seems to be broad partnership engagement, but in practice little is produced. This puts into question the utility and purpose of NATO partnerships for all parties concerned.

The hodge-podge of partnership formats suggests a serious need for greater strategic and institutional drive on the part of NATO. The ISAF mission in Afghanistan was a slight turning point in this regard. Here, NATO played a crucial role in driving the integration of partners—giving rise to a more strategic and reciprocal approach to partnerships, with NATO not only assessing what it “can do for its partners,” but “what partners can do for [NATO].”<sup>7</sup> Despite this shift, most partnerships going beyond specific missions are still very much driven by partner initiative and shaped by partner interests. This creates inefficiencies and fails to maximize partners’ contributions, which could be a huge asset to NATO in the face of several emerging global challenges.

### Minilateral Approaches to Security

While NATO navigated the “new challenge – new format” issue, minilateral arrangements thrived in the Euro-Atlantic space, proliferating in the aftermath of defining security events, from the end of the Cold War to 9/11. They have gained new prominence throughout the last decade as NATO finds itself torn between competing priorities and struggles to balance territorial defense and external stabilization efforts. Differences in threat perceptions among members in Eastern and Southern Europe have added to this trend, as have internal political tensions and a growing desire for greater strategic autonomy among some European countries.

NATO’s eastern flank has been a particularly fertile landscape for minilateral formats. Events, from the

2007 cyberattack on Estonia to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, created a new impetus to enhance deterrence, readiness, and exchange within and outside of NATO.

### *NATO’s eastern flank has been a particularly fertile landscape for minilateral formats.*

Newer regional initiatives built on longstanding cooperative efforts, such as the Nordic Baltic 8, a regional format for political consultations formally established in 2000 that engages Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden.

In 2009, the Nordic Defense Cooperation was launched as a collaborative and voluntary effort between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden to strengthen these countries’ defense capabilities and strategic regional exchange. The Northern Group, which was established in 2010 by the United Kingdom as a forum to discuss common defense and security issues, has a wider geographical reach.<sup>8</sup>

The Bucharest 9, in contrast, is a minilateral format that includes all allies on NATO’s Eastern Flank—from Estonia in the North to Bulgaria in the South. Although it is independent of NATO, it is closely aligned with the alliance, with representatives meeting on the sidelines of NATO summits.<sup>9</sup>

Recent years have also seen a rise in broader ad hoc groupings among European nations that create capacity to respond to crises. In this regard, the French-driven European Intervention Initiative (EI2)<sup>10</sup> received significant attention. It is a lean, relatively

6 Markus Kaim, “Reforming NATO’s Partnerships,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2017, p. 19.

7 Ibid, p.12

8 The Northern Group includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the UK.

9 Members include Poland, Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia

10 EI2 currently includes Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.

informal structure that aims to drive a common strategic culture among participating European nations. It is deliberately independent of NATO and the EU to create a high degree of flexibility. Besides France, EU member states Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Italy, are part of the initiative, as well as non-EU countries, Norway and the United Kingdom.

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The EI2's primary focus is exchange, collaboration, and planning to better position participating nations to act quickly in a crisis. Underscoring its agility, a joint statement by EI2 Defense Ministers published at their second ministerial meeting in 2019 describes the initiative as “a flexible, resource-neutral and non-binding forum, where all the Participants are equal.”<sup>11</sup> And while members are not bound to participate in any operations, the format is designed to help prepare them to work together in potential future missions as part of NATO, the EU, UN, or other ad hoc groupings.

Part of the rationale for the EI2 initiative was the French Defense Ministry's exasperation with time consuming and excessive consultations between NATO members in crisis situations—a conclusion colored by experiences including the 2013 intervention in Mali and the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks.<sup>12</sup> The EI2 is designed to speed up this process by establishing a shared strategic culture that will make it possible to respond to crises more quickly. It enables European nations to set up groupings that can act swiftly and step in to act independently of larger institutions or

lay the groundwork for larger operation overseen by the UN, NATO or the EU.

The EI2 underscores frustration with NATO's consensus structure and the multi-body governance process of the EU. Both institutions are not known for quick decision making. As such, the EI2 could be an enabling asset in a crisis, but it also calls into question some of the core tasks assigned to NATO. Specifically, there are certain redundancies with other efforts, including some endorsed by NATO like the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (see further below). Moreover, it remains to be seen if significant divergences between the EI2 members in terms of strategic cultures – including their willingness to engage in conflict<sup>13</sup> – can really produce any successes absent the larger institutional momentum provided by an organization like NATO or the EU once they achieve consensus.

The EI2 was launched in the wake of French disappointments with the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which was established in 2017 to jointly develop defense capabilities within the EU. Although PESCO is part of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy, participation is voluntary and is open to those “capable and willing.”<sup>14</sup> The degree of integration became a sticking point for this format. For instance, France envisioned a selective initiative with more capable EU member states, leading to a leaner structure and a greater level of ambition.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, Germany's vision of a more inclusive model prevailed with all but two EU member states (Denmark and Malta) joining PESCO. In contrast, the EI2's “small, but mighty” scope is more in line with President Emmanuel Macron's vision of European leadership.

11 Government of the Netherlands, [Joint Statement, European Intervention Initiative, Meeting of the Ministers of Defence](#), September 26, 2019.

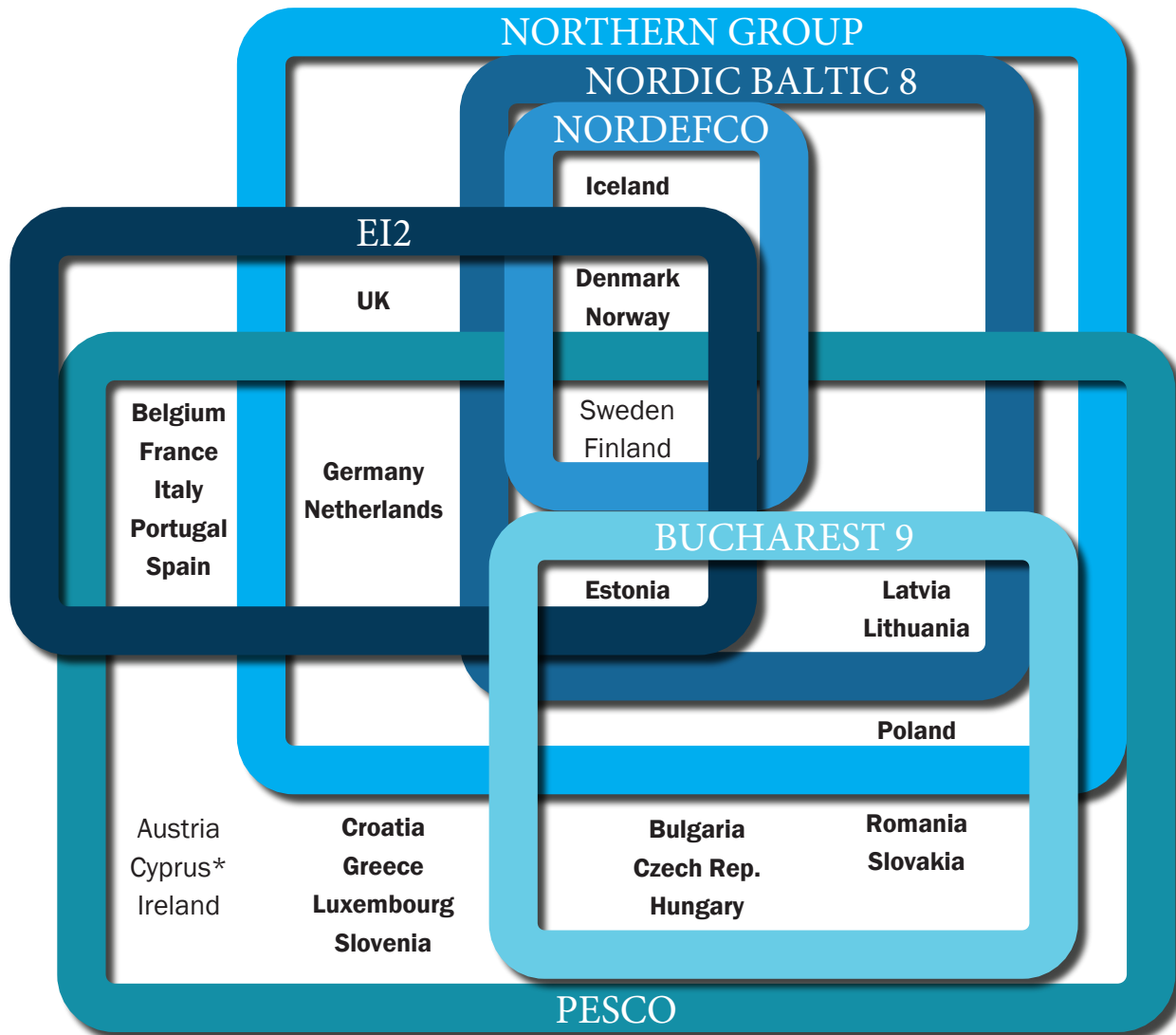
12 Olivier-Rémy Bel, “[Can Macron's European Intervention Initiative Make The Europeans Battle-Ready?](#)” War on the Rocks, October 2, 2019.

13 Dick Zandee and Kimberly Kruijver, “[The European Intervention Initiative: Developing a shared strategic culture for European defence](#),” Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, September 2019, p. 2.

14 PESCO, “[About PESCO](#).”

15 Steven Blockmans and Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, “[Differentiated Integration within PESCO](#),” Centre for European Policy Studies, December 2019.

**Figure 2. Select Euro-Atlantic Minilateral Formats**



Bold: NATO members. \* Cyprus is neither a NATO member nor a NATO partner

Although PESCO is an initiative driven by EU members and so far no third states have joined, it is a format embedded within the EU that allows third states to participate if they are invited by the participating members. Progress has been less ambitious than originally envisioned in this treaty-based format, in part due to a lack of sufficient funding.

**A More Agile Alliance and Partnership Model**

Seeing the need to establish a more agile approach to partnerships, NATO has made significant efforts over the last decade to adapt to evolving threats in the Euro-Atlantic security landscape. Starting with the 2010 Strategic Concept, this has included adding flexible formats to the partnership policy following a



review in 2011. This played out in a NATO+N format, which offers a model of targeted engagement with all 30 members plus a selection of partners unattached to regional frameworks.

The 2014 Wales Summit then gave rise to other options. Members endorsed the Framework Nations Concept (FNC), proposed by Germany in 2013, as a viable flexible format within NATO. Voluntary and bottom-up, this approach enables individual NATO members—or framework nations—to work with a limited set of other members to fill critical capability and operational gaps. The FNC model creates more formal groupings and commitment among the participants than the +N model. Against the backdrop of strained defense budgets and varying threat perceptions, it was designed to combine the limited resources of large and small European members while decreasing redundancies. The concept builds on those of NATO's "Smart Defense" and the EU's "Pooling and Sharing," taking a step further by creating a more structured, coordinated approach focused on outputs and measuring success against national capability targets set in NATO's Defense Planning Process.

Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, as larger and more capable "framework nations," head separate FNC initiatives. Although these differ quite significantly, there is a common denominator: they are voluntary, multinational frameworks led by members focused on furthering NATO's mission. They may often rely on the alliance's organizational and command structure, yet they remain independent of its operational structures. And all three have been expanded to include non-NATO countries, serving as an important link between the alliance and its partners.

Given that participation of and consensus among all NATO members is not required, the FNC initiatives provide greater flexibility. Focusing on capability development, the German-led FNC group has taken a more inclusive approach with 21 members and partners participating in a variety of working groups or

clusters.<sup>16</sup> The FNC groups led by Italy and the United Kingdom are more selective, building on each country's specific expertise in crisis management and military readiness. The Italian group,<sup>17</sup> which is the least developed at this point, focuses on multinational formations, operations, and potential capability development.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the United Kingdom used the FNC as an opportunity to reinvigorate its efforts to create a Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a multinational high-readiness force with the participation of Nordic, Baltic, and Western European countries.

***Given that participation of and consensus among all NATO members is not required, the FNC initiatives provide greater flexibility in tackling the priorities of individual ones.***

A successor to the British Joint Rapid Reaction Force, the JEF was announced in 2012 and endorsed at the Wales Summit under an FNC umbrella.<sup>19</sup> Operational since 2018, it enables participating nations—including non-NATO countries such as Finland and Sweden—to contribute assets and capabilities to missions under the operational leadership of the United Kingdom in national or ad hoc formations. Although the JEF is designed to complement NATO, in 2020 U.K. Defense Secretary Ben Wallace signed "a Readiness Declaration that commits the JEF to

16 The 17 NATO members are Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. NATO partner nations Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland were invited to join in 2017.

17 FNC-ITA currently includes Albania, Austria, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro, and Slovenia, with NATO's latest member, North Macedonia, seeking to join the format.

18 NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence, "[The Framework Nations Concept Italian-Led Group \(FNC-ITA\) Visits The NATO SFA COE](#)," July 19, 2019.

19 In addition to the UK, the JEF consists of Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway.

making an enduring and substantial contribution to NATO's Readiness Initiative."<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the JEF's operational focus, Germany's FNC initiative started out as an effort for multinational capability development among interested European NATO members organized around "capability clusters," ranging from "logistics support, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) protection, delivering firepower, and deployable headquarters."<sup>21</sup> The idea was to combine forces of larger and smaller members to create capabilities identified in NATO's Defense Planning Process. The scope of the initiative was expanded when it started to focus on collaborative force planning in 2015. The hope was to set up larger multinational military formations across the German military by 2032, improve interoperability, and provide a pool of forces to reinforce NATO's follow-on forces.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the 17 NATO members mainly from Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe, non-NATO nations Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland were invited to join in 2017.<sup>23</sup>

The FNC model was initially received well, inspiring hopes that it could provide a model for future NATO efforts, including partnership engagement. However, it has lost momentum and nearly disappeared from Euro-Atlantic security conversations. When it is discussed, it is often lamented as an opportunity lost.

## Lessons for NATO and the Future of NATO Partnerships

With NATO's attempts to create flexible, quasi-minilateral formats within its own partnership program failing to produce lasting results to this point, questions remain about what it can learn from the increased

ad hoc approach to addressing various challenges. How does the rise of minilateral arrangements impact NATO, what makes them successful, and how can it apply the experiences of these various formats to its own partnership policy?

Minilateral or flexible arrangements can create adaptable options for engaging in political dialogue, missions, or operations—even for larger multilateral organizations. They are not as constrained by consensus rules or lengthy decision-making processes. Instead, they provide opportunities for the "willing and capable" to take swift action. As such, they fill an important readiness and political gap. They also create connections with key partners and across institutions to foster greater consensus and interoperability among Euro-Atlantic states.

But ad hoc approaches also pose challenges to organizations like NATO. Madeleine Albright warned against the "three Ds" in the 1990s when she highlighted the risks of de-linking from, or duplicating NATO efforts, as well as discriminating among members.<sup>24</sup> These issues remain an important concern—particularly in U.S. policy discussions – when it comes to more recent ad hoc or minilateral formats focused on European defense. A more concerted NATO role in guiding flexible efforts within the alliance could help address this concern to minimize redundancies and buttress cohesion.

NATO should work as much as possible with members and partners to ensure minilateral formats complement, rather than compete with, the alliance. Moreover, NATO should consider how it can more effectively apply the lessons of these formats to its partnership policy to craft a more flexible approach. This includes lessons from previous efforts to create flexible formats within the alliance.

There are few metrics to evaluate a model's success. In many ways, weighing the differences between minilateral arrangements outside larger multilateral frameworks and flexible formats inside them is tantamount

20 U.K. Ministry of Defence, "[UK further commits to NATO and European Security through JEF Readiness Declaration and deployment of Typhoons to Lithuania](#)," February 2020.

21 NATO, [Wales Summit Declaration](#), September 2014.

22 Rainer L. Glatz and Martin Zapfe, "[Ambitious Framework Nation: Germany in NATO. Bundeswehr Capability Planning and the 'Framework Nations Concept'](#)," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, September 2017, p.5.

23 Ibid.

24 Madeleine K. Albright, "[Statement to the North Atlantic Council](#)," Brussels, December 8, 1998.

to comparing apples and oranges. But there are a few factors that are instructive, including mutual interest in cooperation, shared threat perceptions and security priorities (which are often aligned with geographic location), and a high level of ambition of all involved participants. Moreover, on a procedural level, clear, defined goals and a focus on outputs, coupled with regular consultations, can help drive success. Ad hoc formats with lean and focused structures that are built around voluntary participation allow for quicker responses—especially in crisis situations—but they may be less suited to driving and verifying success on long term deliverables and capability goals.

***In its effort to create greater political cohesion in Euro-Atlantic defense, NATO cannot ignore the application and improvement of its flexible partnership engagement.***

Flexible formats embedded within NATO, like the FNC and the NATO+N model, or alongside NATO in the case of PESCO can increase agility for member and partner cooperation. But the diminishing enthusiasm around the German FNC and challenges surrounding PESCO funding indicate continued hurdles. The NATO+N model has proven effective in engaging two or three partners around common regional security challenges (for example, NATO members, Finland, and Sweden). Yet, its limits risk a default bilateralization or trilateralization of NATO's engagement with partners and may fail to leverage a broader capacity of partnerships.

In its effort to create greater political cohesion in Euro-Atlantic defense, NATO cannot ignore the application and improvement of its flexible partnership engagement. The tendency of NATO members and partners to participate in various minilateral formats has significant implications. If NATO cannot figure out how to engage partners more effectively and flexibly, they and members may increasingly be inclined to engage in various minilateral formats rather than

NATO or simply pursue bilateral ties. In this context, NATO partnerships could end up as little more than a “talk shop,” forfeiting the alliance's agenda-setting power.

### **NATO 2030 and the Role of Partners**

The coronavirus pandemic has further sharpened the difficult questions facing NATO's ability to simultaneously tackle numerous and seemingly disparate challenges. This is particularly true when considering its 360-degree approach. Officially adopted in 2017, this grants equal importance to the alliance's eastern and southern flanks and associated challenges. Looking at NATO's three core tasks—territorial defense, crisis management, and cooperative security—in the current geopolitical context creates a significant and, at times, nearly unmanageable burden for members.

Understanding this, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg launched a reflection process at the 2019 Leaders' Meeting in London, dubbed NATO 2030. The ultimate aim is to shape priorities for an updated strategic concept for the alliance. A recent report by a NATO 2030 expert group offers a robust set of recommendations on the importance of partners in this regard.<sup>25</sup> As the secretary general reviews these, a stocktaking of partnerships will be crucial particular in addressing NATO's global role.

During the launch of NATO 2030, Stoltenberg stressed the role of partners for the future of the alliance, underscoring the continued relevance of cooperative security. “As we look to 2030,” he said, “we need to work even more closely with like-minded countries like Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, to defend the global rules and institutions that have kept us safe for decades.”

This is key. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, crisis management and cooperative security beyond the eastern flank have sometimes been eclipsed by the renewed focus on territorial defense. But broad-

<sup>25</sup> NATO, “[United for a New Era: Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General](#),” November 25, 2020.

February 2021

ening NATO's definition of security has become more important than ever in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Here partners can play an important role. Examining the successes and failures of minilateral formats will be instructive for developing an effective future partnership policy, one that is agile, interests-based, and more directed by NATO.

***Many partners that were eager to contribute to NATO missions are looking for new avenues of cooperation.***

This will require NATO to move beyond current partnership dynamics, which are largely partner driven and defined by partner interests. Greater emphasis on NATO's strategic interests in partnership engagement could create more tangible outcomes for members and partners. Partners should also have opportunities to shape priorities in areas in which they have valuable expertise. Such a process would allow them to engage in key issues and share relevant threat assessments with like-minded members and other partners more proactively. This recommendation is supported by the NATO 2030 expert group report, which states that NATO should "shift from the current demand-driven approach to an interest-driven approach" in partnership engagement.<sup>26</sup>

Partner nations have many different reasons for pursuing ties with NATO. Beyond seeking membership, which applies to very few nations today, other neutral or nonaligned countries in Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific may be interested in different aspects of engagement from enhanced national security to interoperability, political capital, and capacity building.

Moreover, many partners that were eager to contribute to NATO missions are looking for new avenues of cooperation. Countries like Australia and

New Zealand, which have contributed to ISAF and the Resolute Support Mission, can play a larger role in the alliance's thinking when it comes to dealing with emerging challenges, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, NATO should seize the opportunity to further deepen partner relations with Japan and South Korea, both of which can lend their experience as the alliance seeks to address "opportunities and challenges"<sup>27</sup> presented by China's growing assertiveness across the globe. Engagement must include the gamut of partnership tools, including capacity building, standards setting, meaningful political dialogue, and, where applicable, missions. While political consultation cannot be an end in itself, it can be an important tool to project stability and to align strategic priorities. With certain members demanding that it become a more political alliance, NATO can increasingly become a forum for members and partners to discuss global issues and coordinate responses when appropriate.

### **Reshaping NATO's Partnership Agenda**

Surveying the evolution of NATO partnerships reveals several important takeaways. First, the era of doing big things with several partners across the alliance has largely come to a halt, at least for the time being. Absent a significant investment of energy to revive efforts like the European-Atlantic Partnership Council (which faces nearly intractable political hurdles and has not produced anything of substance since its policy for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2014)<sup>28</sup> or to consider new ways to engage a broad range of partners, it is hard to see how this dynamic will change. NATO's increasing tendency to engage with a more limited set of partners confirms that broader frameworks are no longer the preferred approach. If successfully imple-

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> [London Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London, 3-4 December 2019](#), December 4, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> NATO, [NATO/EAPC Policy for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and related resolutions](#), April 1, 2014.



mented, NATO's plans to streamline its partnership agenda under "One Partner, One Plan" may continue the trend of bilateralizing relationships with partner countries without facilitating broader networks of partner engagement.

Even NATO's more recent mission-driven partnership efforts, like the Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships program (EOP), are running out of steam as members and partners consider winding down the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. The EOP has successfully deepened integration and interoperability of its six partners with NATO forces. But post-Afghanistan, it will be little more than a conglomeration of heterogenous partners that are more interoperable with NATO but are clearly guided by varying motivations. Georgia and Ukraine hope to ultimately join the alliance. Finland and Sweden want to be more interoperable to contribute to NATO efforts in line with their own defense and security concerns. For Australia and Jordan, it is about connecting to an institution that gives the opportunity for cooperation with a broad spectrum of nations in the Euro-Atlantic space. In the near-term, NATO is unlikely to undertake new out-of-area missions, particularly with increased reluctance of the United States to engage militarily. Translating the EOP into a broader flexible engagement is extremely unlikely given the varying political calculations of its participants. As a result, it is difficult to see how its successes can be carried forward, again reinforcing the need to think in new terms about the contours of NATO partnerships.

NATO cannot afford to miss the opportunity to think through ways to create a new, more sustainable partnership approach. This is particularly true considering the NATO 2030 effort and the fact that Secretary General Stoltenberg wishes to reopen and adapt NATO's strategic concept this year. Lessons learned from NATO partnership dynamics and the increased reliance on minilateralism in Euro-Atlantic security can help inform a more effective future partnership approach.

### *The Contours of a New Approach*

To start, rather than focusing on a regional or bilateral framework, NATO should consider an interest and issues-based approach to engaging multiple partners. The need is particularly apparent given that many of today's challenges are no longer region-specific. NATO members and partners should identify what issues pose the most critical challenge to their security and should be encouraged to play a greater leadership role where applicable. But this alone should not drive NATO's partnership policy. The alliance must define a strategic set of challenges that it sees as most pressing, while still maintaining a level of adaptability to future challenges to avoid the trap of "outdated challenge, outdated format." The NATO 2030 reflection process is a prime opportunity to do this.

***Even NATO's more recent mission-driven partnership efforts, like the Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships program, are running out of steam.***

At the same time, existing efforts like the NATO 360 partnership symposium are a ready-made space for members and partners to work through mutually relevant issues that could inform these efforts. Guidance and buy-in from both sides will be important for a successful partnership process. Partners must be able to contribute where needed if interests align. But a nexus must exist between the interests and ambitions of members and partner countries or there is little hope of establishing a successful partnership that yields results.

Most importantly, NATO needs to take on a steering role in driving engagement, assembling multiple (that is, more than two or three) members and partners around mutual interests and priorities. As convening larger groups of members and partners has grown increasingly difficult over the years, NATO will have to think innovatively to come up with ways to incentivize such an effort using its agenda-setting power.



While the Framework Nations Concept has lacked tangible results, the model might be worth revisiting. This flexible, voluntary format that can rely on NATO's institutional expertise and yet delegate leadership to larger member states based on their interests and strengths could be adapted elsewhere. Applied to political dialogue and capacity building within NATO partnerships, the FNC model could facilitate a more agile approach to leverage the collective expertise of several members and partners. Clearer expectations, goals, and time horizons will be vital as well as established processes that ensure that momentum is not lost as soon as competing priorities arise.

Lessons learned from NATO efforts like the FNC, and non-NATO ones like PESCO and the EI2, suggest that an ideal format would be inclusive without sacrificing ambition. It should maintain a high bar of ally and partner expertise and contributions. While guidance from NATO is key when it comes to defining priorities, effective flexible partnership approaches are only attainable if large members play a more active leadership role within these groupings to ensure that goals are met and adapted to keep pace with alliance priorities.

***Lessons learned from NATO efforts like the FNC, and non-NATO ones like PESCO and the EI2, suggest that an ideal format would be inclusive without sacrificing ambition.***

To achieve this, NATO could either opt for a top-down or bottom-up approach. In both scenarios, large members will have to actively drive and measure success and recalibrate approaches to ensure that initiatives remain relevant and lead to valuable outputs. In a top-down scenario, priorities would be defined and communicated by the secretary general and North Atlantic Council and be implemented in voluntary groupings under the leadership of a “framework nation” within NATO.

As an alternative bottom-up approach, NATO's priority setting could encourage certain members to initiate and develop unilateral efforts in line with the alliance's goals outside its formal structures. Here, a large member would crystallize a grouping of members and partners to work on commonly agreed issues (much like what happens among Northern European states around security issues). In this model, ownership would fully fall to a member, while NATO could incentivize cooperation and collaboration, or even a path to more formally integrate the initiative, following the example of the JEF. This could include funding for unilateral efforts that have a “proof of concept” and could benefit members and partners as well as new avenues for partners to engage more formally in NATO's deliberations and planning processes. The co-funding schemes proposed by the NATO 2030 expert report are examples of how such an incentive for more formal engagement with NATO could develop.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Focus of a New Approach*

Given the breadth of the NATO 360 approach, it will not be easy to prioritize a more deliberate interest-based partnership agenda. But there are obvious global issues that the alliance will have to confront to remain relevant, from great-power rivalry and non-state actors to arms control and climate change. NATO cannot face these issues alone and would greatly benefit from the expertise and collaboration of partner countries. At the same time, partners rarely have the capacity to do this type of work on a scale that NATO can, which makes cooperation appealing.

The three critical areas looked at below require for a more robust issue- and interest-driven partnership model within a more political NATO. These examples highlight the role of partnerships in tackling the alliance's most pressing challenges and demonstrate how the lessons outlined in this paper can be applied to key issues facing it.

<sup>29</sup> NATO, “[NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#),” November 25, 2020.

The members should focus on energizing political dialogue in partnerships discussions on the most important geopolitical challenges, particularly related to China's increasingly aggressive foreign policy. Additionally, clustering joint capacity-building initiatives around military and mission resilience to pandemics or natural disasters should become a partnership priority given the impact of the coronavirus crisis. Finally, global issues like the militarization of space, which will be critical to the future of conflict, could be explored in the partnership context. In different ways, these issues are also identified by the NATO 2030 expert report as pivotal challenges facing the alliance in the coming years.

### Geopolitical Challenges and China

In his address to launch NATO 2030, Secretary General Stoltenberg argued that NATO must “stay strong militarily, be more united politically, and take a broader approach globally” to remain resilient over the next ten years “in a more uncertain world.”<sup>30</sup> Partnership engagement will be key to achieving this goal.

One of the most significant geopolitical challenges facing NATO member states is the rise of China and its increasingly aggressive behavior across diplomatic, economic, and military domains. Not merely limited to the Indo-Pacific, Beijing's actions pose concerns for NATO's mission and the security of partners. Given this, the alliance must develop a better understanding and response to China's application of disinformation, coercive diplomacy, and the purchase of critical security infrastructure.

These issues are not limited to China. Other actors are using similar tools, and this impacts how NATO can respond to security challenges. But China's open and blatant use of these tools—increasingly in the Euro-Atlantic space—is new. A coordinated partnership dialogue could play a significant role in better understanding and responding to this new reality. While NATO is already capitalizing on some partner

expertise, for example Australia's participation in the June 2020 teleconference defense ministerial,<sup>31</sup> a broader approach would benefit the members.

***The breadth and expertise offered by several partners, including Australia, Japan, and South Korea, would be invaluable.***

A Global Strategic Imperatives Dialogue modeled after the FNC format, chaired by either a NATO member or group of members could provide a flexible way to strategically cluster members and partners around these issues. The breadth and expertise offered by several partners, including Australia, Japan, and South Korea, would be invaluable as NATO members seek to better understand these challenges. Actionable items could always be returned to the North Atlantic Council for consideration and approval to prevent fracturing of the alliance over the issue. Or the alliance could encourage a more informal process through the NATO+N mechanism, as occurred around the December 2020 ministerial.<sup>32</sup> Encouraging more regular consultations, including additional partners, will create greater institutional benefit and send a stronger message about the key challenges confronting NATO. It would also create more predictability and institutional expertise on the Euro-Atlantic approach to these challenges. Thinking through ways to formally incentivize such work should be a priority given NATO's increased focus on the challenges posed by China.

An effective political dialogue that is based on mutual interests could lead to significant outputs, potentially synchronizing approaches to counter hybrid or multi-domain challenges. For example, at the June

30 NATO, “[Secretary General launches NATO 2030 to make our strong Alliance even stronger](#),” June 8, 2020.

31 NATO, “[Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers by teleconference](#)” June 18, 2020.

32 Shannon Tiezzi, “[NATO Huddles With Asia-Pacific Democracies to Talk China](#),” *The Diplomat*, December 3, 2020.

2020 Defense Ministerial, defense ministers argued that security of supply chains must be revised as part of NATO's guidelines for national resilience.<sup>33</sup> This is a space where some partners and members are already ahead of NATO, and they could leverage their experience through consultations leading to standard setting and capacity building. Supply-chain security has been a priority for Finland and integrated into their efforts within the Nordic Defense Cooperation as well as EU defense conversations.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, partners like Japan and Australia are already considering ways to counter the specific challenges in supply chain security, particularly as it relates to China.<sup>35</sup>

Another deliverable could be the creation of a Center of Excellence devoted to tackling these challenges and located in a partner country outside of the Euro-Atlantic area. While the NATO 2030 report proposes a Centre of Excellence for Democratic Resilience,<sup>36</sup> this would be limited to members. Expanding such an effort to key partners would be particularly useful in facing global challenges. Nevertheless, such efforts must focus on specific issues identified by NATO. Here, members and partners could leverage partner expertise and NATO's ability to set standards into joint capacity building in response to these challenges. NATO could also coordinate with existing sister institutions tackling similar issues in the Euro-Atlantic space.

Regardless of the specific framework or format, the importance of global challenges like China's increased aggressions bears more deliberate consideration by NATO and its partners. A more flexible approach is most likely to succeed, but if NATO fails to find a way

to set a more definitive agenda, members and partners will be left to fitfully go it alone or seek out ad hoc groupings with potentially mixed outcomes for NATO itself.

### Pandemics

The coronavirus crisis is an example of how NATO, NATO member states, and NATO partners can be caught flat-footed in responding to today's challenges. As the pandemic took a costly and terrible toll, NATO—like other institutions—was playing catch up. The training mission in Iraq was essentially put on hold, while the largest U.S. military exercise in the last three decades, DEFENDER-Europe 20, was abandoned. Despite this, NATO again showed an ability to adapt. By using strategic airlift capability and leveraging institutional experience in logistics, the alliance was able to help coordinate and distribute PPE and medical supplies to NATO nations and a handful of partner countries, leading Secretary General Stoltenberg to clarify that “NATO and Allied militaries have also played a crucial role supporting the civilian response to COVID-19.”<sup>37</sup> In preparation for a second wave, NATO agreed on a new operation plan in support of members and partners, creation of stockpiles of medical equipment and supplies, and establishment of a fund to quickly acquire medical supplies.

Although NATO adjusted as the crisis progressed, this experience has raised difficult questions for its resilience in the face of new and unexpected challenges. Given that threats of this nature are unlikely to disappear and will likely be exacerbated by the effects of climate change, members and partners must find ways to be more prepared for various scenarios where health security impacts hard security in the future. They must also minimize the impact on NATO missions and military readiness, as well as political cohesion. Due to the pan-regional nature

33 NATO, “[Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers by teleconference](#),” June 18, 2020.

34 Rasmus Hyndren, “[Yes, and implement its own initiatives regarding Security of Supply. Which, incidentally, has been a priority for Finland nationally, within #EUdefence and in #NORDEFCCO](#),” Twitter, August 21, 2020.

35 Pranab Dhal Samanta, “[India-Japan-Australia supply chain in the works to counter China](#),” Economic Times, August 19, 2020.

36 NATO, “[NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#),” November 25, 2020.

37 NATO, “[Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers by teleconference](#),” June 18, 2020.

of pandemics, NATO partnerships can create added value in addressing this issue in the future.

***Members and partners with experience and assets in the infectious disease and health sector could provide helpful guidance.***

NATO should devise strategies to better leverage its partnership policy and expertise. Members and partners with experience and assets in the infectious disease and health sector could provide helpful guidance here. Many of the requisite components for capacity building are already there. What is lacking is a deliberate approach to the issue. Lessons learned from partner engagement with the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre will be instructive, with over a dozen members and partners requesting international assistance to fight the pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, NATO's Center of Excellence for Military Medicine based in Hungary should be a space to create innovative thinking on issues surrounding the crisis. Particularly when it comes to military force health protection, sharing best practices among members and partners to create greater resilience and finding ways to build capacity in NATO members and partners in the face of these crises, should be considered.

### **The Militarization of Space**

In recent months, NATO has taken important steps to better position the alliance against threats in space—from recognizing space as its fifth domain and adopting its first (classified) space policy to announcing the creation of a space center housed at Allied Air Command in Ramstein, Germany, “to monitor space and satellites as well as collect data on possible threats.”<sup>39</sup> According to NATO, the center is

expected to begin operations on a modest scale in the coming month staffed by current air command officers and experts and “will collaborate with Allied and partner nations to provide space-related products and services in support of NATO operations, missions, and activities.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, in February NATO announced the creation of a new Center of Excellence for Military Space in Toulouse, France, which will be an important resource for allies and partners as the alliance refines its space strategy.<sup>41</sup>

This collaborative approach seems promising. Like the cyber sphere, space is critical to allied defense and to the smooth operations of both military and civilian infrastructure<sup>42</sup> beyond the alliance and it offers many vulnerabilities for adversaries to exploit. Attacks against allied space assets could not only undermine deterrence and strategic missile defense;<sup>43</sup> satellite jamming technology threatens the operability of global positioning system services which are central to both military operations and civilian technologies across the globe.

Secretary General Stoltenberg has made clear that NATO has “no intention to install weapons in space.” However, China and Russia leave little doubt that they see conflict in space as inevitable and are actively preparing for such a scenario.<sup>44</sup> Both countries are investing heavily in modernizing their national space force, including counter-space technologies.<sup>45</sup> And they are not alone. India and the United States have also demonstrated their direct-ascent, anti-satellite

38 NATO, “Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EAD-RCC).”

39 NATO, “NATO Agrees New Space Centre at Allied Air Command,” October 23, 2020.

40 Ibid.

41 Christina Mackenzie, “NATO names location for new military space center,” Defense News, February 6, 2021.

42 Tim Sweijts and Frans Osinga, “Maintaining NATO's Technological Edge,” in John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *Future NATO: Adapting to New Realities*, Royal United Services Institute, 2020, p. 109.

43 Ibid, p. 115.

44 For more on Russia's and China's aggressive space policies, see Steve Lambakis, “Foreign Space Capabilities: Implications for U.S. National Security,” September 2017.

45 Jon Harper, “BREAKING: Space Command Hints at New Capabilities to Counter China, Russia,” National Defense, August 21, 2020.



capability.<sup>46</sup> Put simply, the growing weaponization of space will have intentional and unintentional consequences for alliance security.

This, along with the increasing number of actors in space, makes it vital that NATO leverage the expertise and assets of its members and partners, many of which are important players in this domain. For context, the number of non-U.S., NATO member-controlled satellites in orbit roughly tripled in the past decade.<sup>47</sup> In turn, NATO can lead by example when it comes to norms and peaceful behavior. Two of NATO's largest members, the United States and France, are among the top five space powers globally, along with China, Russia, and NATO partner country Japan.<sup>48</sup> While Europe's space capabilities lag behind China, Russia, and the United States in military terms,<sup>49</sup> members including Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain have the capacity to put Europe in a more serious position in this discussion. Along with other members and partners, they are important contributors to the European Space Agency (ESA).<sup>50</sup>

***A system that incorporates allied and partner capabilities may discourage a potential adversary from attacking the assets of an individual nation by increasing the prospects for a NATO response.***

Cooperation with like-minded partner nations and organizations—like the ESA and the EU—to share expertise, assess threats, and integrate assets will be important if NATO members want to keep pace with competition in this domain. Collaboration is not

only cost effective, but it creates necessary layers of redundancies to ensure that hostile efforts like satellite jamming cannot create a single point of failure and paralyze allied infrastructure. Moreover, partners, especially in the Indo-Pacific, can help to expand networks and capabilities through their sensors and improve situational awareness in space.<sup>51</sup> According to experts from The Aerospace Corporation, more collaborative approaches to space can also enhance deterrence. A system that incorporates allied and partner capabilities may discourage a potential adversary from attacking the assets of an individual nation by increasing the prospects for a response. The new space center for excellence could serve as an important resource and force multiplier in this regard. It can help drive more informal exchange with NATO partners and ultimately improve interoperability across Alliance borders.

Limitations on intelligence sharing within the alliance and with partners pose a significant hurdle. But given the importance of space for civilian and military domains, NATO must think of creative ways to encourage and incentivize cooperation. This should include consulting with partners to establish common methods for space observation and threat-assessment tools and developing procedures to share information and assets to aid NATO's situational awareness in space. Joint efforts for capability development including partners could also be considered given the prohibitive cost of space-based technology. This could include joint initiatives or funding mechanisms following the FNC model.

NATO should also use joint multi-domain exercises and training to work with leading partners in the field. Efforts led by the U.S. Airforce—like the Schriever War Game and Exercise Red Flag—could serve as examples. These exercises have included key NATO partners, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and Finland, as well as other

46 Sweijs and Osinga, "Maintaining NATO's Technological Edge," p. 110.

47 Benjamin Silverstein, "NATO's Return to Space," War on the Rocks, August 3, 2020.

48 Simon Seminari, "Global government space budgets continues multiyear rebound," Space News, September 24, 2019.

49 Sweijs and Osinga, "Maintaining NATO's Technological Edge," p. 110.

50 For more, see The Space Foundation, "The Space Report Q2 2020," July 2020.

51 Robert S. Wilson, Colleen Stover, and Steven R. Jordan Tomaszewski, "Defense Space Partnerships: A Strategic Priority," Center for Space Policy and Strategy, September 2020, p. 2.



countries with growing ambitions in space, including India. In addition, NATO should use all tools at its disposal to consult on space priorities with key partners through formats like the NATO 360 partnership symposium and consider hosting additional partner-country liaison officers with space expertise at NATO facilities to ensure more consistent exchange.

### **Roadblocks to Rethinking Partnerships**

While the need for NATO to adapt its partnership model for today's challenges has been detailed, there are several significant hurdles to any reform effort. First, institutions are slow to change and NATO is certainly not immune to this dynamic. NATO's consensus-based approach to decision making only exacerbates this—allowing one member of an increasingly diverse alliance to block the action of the other 29 given related or unrelated political reasons. This puts any transformation in NATO's partnership policy at the mercy of complicated political and institutional dynamics. Unfortunately, the more “hostage taking” policy-making or lowest-common-denominator thinking persists in alliance realities, the less likely it is going to be the institution of first resort for partners (and members). To avoid this, members and partners may opt for the second “bottom-up” approach advocated above. A more informal initiation that docks into NATO rather than formally overseen by NATO could prove its utility to the alliance's strategic priorities and play on NATO flexibility through the +N format.

Second, NATO's ability to adapt and set out a more ambitious, organizationally driven partnership policy is hampered by its own staffing bandwidth. NATO international staff are already responsible for a broad spectrum of activities across the organization's core tasks. As such, a more flexible model following the parameters of the FNC may prove useful. While NATO officials should play a role in driving the key issues framing the partnership clusters, the real burden of organizing political dialogue and capacity building could be offloaded to the lead nations under the auspices of NATO. This would allow for an insti-

tution-driven approach without posing too heavy a burden for the already understaffed organization.

Third, the lessons learned from failed expectations around various partnership frameworks or mechanisms have resulted in aversion to assembling new ones. As the partnership menu has grown and various outdated mechanisms have accrued, thinking beyond bilateral or trilateral ad hoc groupings is seen as outmoded. It will take a creative and ambitious approach to combine NATO's more flexible +N tendencies with a broader and more deliberate partnership strategy to various interest-based issues that NATO leadership and key members need to tackle together.

***NATO members other than the United States will have to play a greater leadership role in the alliance and help to drive issues that align with their security interests in cooperation with partners.***

Finally, political leadership within the alliance has been critical in moving discussions forward when institutional jams occur. This role has mostly fallen to the United States. But recent years have increased doubts as to whether the United States will, or should, continue to play the same role it has in the past. Recent unilateral U.S. foreign policy decisions like the decision to withdraw troops from Germany have eroded trust in the United States as a reliable partner among some members. While President Joe Biden has already indicated a return to treaty-based alliance politics, growing demands facing the United States in other regions, including the Indo-Pacific, as well as at home, will continue to focus policymakers attention and divert resources from the Euro-Atlantic space. A continued absence of strong leadership that can serve as a unifying force within the alliance when political cohesion issues arise will be detrimental to moving any ambitious reforms forward, including NATO partnerships.

Given this, NATO members other than the United States will have to play a greater leadership role in the alliance and help to drive issues that align with their security interests in cooperation with partners. Moreover, if NATO partnerships are to stay relevant for all members, including the United States, a more global outlook is inevitable. This is a clear principle guiding the NATO 2030 effort.

### Conclusion

Partnerships have been a core component of NATO's work to strengthen transatlantic security and defense since the end of the Cold War. But as the security environment changed, its partnership policy increasingly lagged. Large and bulky partnership mechanisms are no longer as useful as they once were and NATO's success in creating a more flexible approach to partnerships has been limited, often engaging only bilaterally or trilaterally, while other efforts have lost momentum. Such inefficiencies in leveraging partnerships are an opportunity lost for members and partners.

*With strong leadership, competing threats can be tackled by smaller groupings while avoiding widespread fragmentation.*

Of course, tackling regional threats with smaller networks of local players will remain important. Here, a continued emphasis on common security with partners in Europe is key, particularly with Finland, Georgia, Sweden, and Ukraine. In this regard, it may be useful to rethink ways to continue the successes of the EOP as the mission in Afghanistan winds down by expanding it beyond external missions and moving beyond bilateral ties, particularly for partners in the Euro-Atlantic area. The intensified cooperation mechanism with NATO could provide a successful way to address common regional security challenges with these key partners, as it has with joint operations.

NATO will have to face one of its perennial struggles: Doing more with less. The exacerbated finan-

cial strains resulting from the coronavirus crisis will be severe for defense budgets. Finding more ways to cooperate on these security challenges will be critical for NATO if it is to remain capable and relevant. Consequently, it should rethink the purpose of its partnership policy, aligning this with its interests and strategic goals. Secretary General Stoltenberg's desire to revisit NATO's strategic concept this year will provide an impetus to do so. Partnership policy should be part of this discussion.

Many global and regional partners share NATO's threat perceptions and can contribute to its mission, while buttressing their own security. This opportunity should not be wasted. Whether it is on its northeastern flank, in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, or on global issues, NATO should empower interest-focused regional and broad groupings modelled on minilateral or flexible formats to tackle challenges with members and partners through its partnership policy.

Political disagreements and grievance-driven roadblocks by individual members should not inhibit NATO's ability to address the security challenges facing it today. The alliance needs to find a way to harness the flexibility, agility, and speed in decision making that minilateral or flexible formats allow, while using its leverage as an agenda-setting platform for members and partners. A more dynamic partnership policy is key to this effort. To achieve this, NATO's leadership needs to play a more active role in defining the alliance agenda in cooperation with members and partners. With strong leadership, competing threats can be tackled by smaller groupings while avoiding widespread fragmentation. The NATO reflection process can continue to help drive this effort and forums like the NATO 360 partnership symposium can demonstrate how this might be practically accomplished. It is up to NATO members and partners to prove the relevance of the NATO partnerships in 2030 and beyond.

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This policy paper is a part of a project supported by the Swiss Confederation Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Switzerland will host the 360 NATO Partnership Symposium in Geneva this year in order to provide a platform for informal dialogue between allies and partners. In order to avoid that this exchange is a one-shot event, Switzerland designed the “road to Geneva,” a series of organized discussions around topics of common interest to inform and stimulate discussion. One of the key findings of the previous discussions in Berlin, Germany and Chania, Greece was the strong call from partners for building thematic “communities of interest” with allies as means to step up dialogue and consultations. This paper was conceived as a way to operationalize this policy recommendation and provide inputs and fresh ideas to stimulate discussions on the future of partnerships.

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