The Changing Nature of the EU's and NATO's Partnerships

The EU's embrace of its role as a "geopolitical actor," and NATO's renewed focus on deterrence and defense have had a significant impact on their respective approaches to partnerships. Both emphasize their partnerships are tailored, non-legally binding, and mutually beneficial.

By Gorana Grgić

Switzerland is in the midst of drafting its new Security Policy Strategy. While both recent official documents and commissioned reports make the case for closer security cooperation with the EU and NATO, the issue remains domestically contentious. With domestic debates mirroring diverse assumptions as to what security and defense cooperation with the EU and NATO actually implies, this analysis focuses on the supply side, offering an overview of recent changes in the EU's and NATO's approach to partnerships. It highlights the structural and institutional realities that any partner must understand. Both organizations have adapted their security and defense partnerships, reflecting a strategic reassessment that began before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Their internal reflections culminated in the release of key strategic pronouncements in 2022 – the EU Strategic Compass and the NATO Strategic Concept.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine only added to the urgency and scope of transformation that was already underway. Overall, the result has been a recalibration of definitions of threats and challenges and in some cases a greater focus on aspects of their organizational mission. For the EU, this shift has resulted in more firmly embracing its role as a "geopolitical actor," while NATO has reinforced its core mission of deterrence

Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government, Indo-Pacific and EU during the NATO Washington Summit on 11 July 2024. *Leah Millis / Reuters*

and defense. Furthermore, for both, Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated the drive for a more targeted and deeper cooperation with partner states, underscoring the necessity for an enhanced coordination among like-minded and capable countries.

Over the past two and a half years, the efficacy of these organizational responses has been evident. There has been a marked

increase in joint exercises, information sharing, and coordinated security and defense initiatives among the EU and NATO and their partners. Arguably, there is no lack of ambition when it comes to the efforts that aim to create more coherence in addressing multifaceted security challenges. At the same time, both the EU and NATO have relied on the same language to signal that their approach to partners is tailor-made, non-legally binding, and mutually

beneficial. This reflects the intergovernmental and pragmatic nature of their cooperation schemes with third parties.

The EU's New Partnerships

The EU is sometimes described as a relentless generator of agreements and strategies in constant search for more settled, stable, and predictable frameworks within which it would define and pursue its external relationships and activities. This is evident in a myriad efforts that have sought to systematize and institutionalize its growing range of partnerships, including in the field of security and defense.

One major criticism from scholars and policy practitioners regarding the EU's partnerships is that the EU has been overly generous and indiscriminate in labeling a wide range of countries and intergovernmental organizations as partners. This approach has diminished clarity about the EU's true partnership priorities and diluted the significance of being designated a specific type of partner within this broad array of labels. While the EU's Strategic Compass brought some clarity regarding its closest partners, it did not fully address all concerns.

The more recent policy developments offer a better indication of where the EU is heading in bolstering security cooperation. The EU signed its new "Security and Defence Partnership" agreements with Moldova and Norway in May and June 2024 respectively, and there are plans to extend this new framework further to Japan, South Korea, Albania, and North Macedonia. As non-binding executive agreements, these new partnerships serve as overarching frameworks grounded in political commitments, facilitating deeper security and defense collaboration.

For instance, the Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and Norway underscores the "tailor-made" and "mutually beneficial" nature of this partnership.

This agreement outlines the mechanisms for information exchange, oversight, and coordination. Namely, Norway will participate in the Schuman Security and Defence Forum and may be invited to EU high-level meetings by the EU's High Representative. An annual Security and Defence Dialogue will take place at the senior level, while working-level consultations will prepare and follow up on the dialogue to ensure effective implementation of the partnership.

The EU-Norway agreement details quite an extensive list of areas for cooperation, which includes long-term support for Ukraine, international peace and crisis management, maritime security, space security and defense, cyber issues, countering hybrid threats, countering foreign interference, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, capacity building for partners, training and education, peace mediation, economic security, cooperation in multilateral fora, and women, peace and security (WPS) agenda.

A similar partnership agreement between the EU and Moldova contains many of the same areas of cooperation, but unsurprisingly has a different focus in objectives compared to those in the EU-Norway agreement given the immediacy of the Russian threat and the need to build Moldova's defense capabilities.

Overall, by negotiating new security and defense partnership instruments, the EU is fostering more structured cooperation with like-minded nations. This approach ensures that EU member states and EU partners are better equipped to address security threats and challenges through coordinated efforts and shared resources. At the same time, the issue of the capability-expectations gap in the EU's external action remains as pertinent as ever.

While the European Commission has increased its role in security matters, primarily through the European Peace Facility (EPF), member states continue to maintain control over national defense spending. This highlights the EU's enhanced capabilities while not fully granting more autonomy to the Commission. It remains to be seen how these dynamics will evolve and what they will deliver on security and defense. Equally, calls for a "true defense union" are yet to materialize.

"Interest-driven" NATO

NATO's organizational mission and extensive experience have led it to roll out different frameworks for structuring its partnerships. Over time, there has been a noticeable shift in objectives of partnering with interested states, resulting in NATO's partner network that has grown in both scale of ambition and geographical scope. In the 1990s, the primary impetus for partnerships across the former communist states was focused on democratizing and consolidating Europe. This was reflected in initiatives such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) from 1991, which was succeeded by the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994 and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in 1997.

The alliance's priorities shifted in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks to address the global threat of transnational terrorism. NATO sought to enhance regional stability by improving partners' capacities, and as its expectations grew, partners began contributing to military missions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, evolving from security recipients to active contributors.

NATO's latest shift in its partnership approach stems from the "NATO 2030" report, published in 2020. The report recommended an "interest-driven" approach, prioritizing partnerships based on strategic needs and available resources. In doing so, it revived the Alliance's original vision to shape the security environment, rather than merely responding to crises. Such a shift was seen as essential in the context of rising strategic competition and marked a clear departure from NATO's 2011 "demand-driven" partnership policy, which allowed partners to determine their level of engagement.

Following this recommendation, NATO introduced the "One Partner, One Plan" concept in March 2021, when the North Atlantic Council reformed its partnership framework to create Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPPs) for each partner country. The ITPP, replacing the earlier Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) and Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), integrated various partnership tools into a cohesive plan with specific and measurable objectives over four-year cycles. This new model includes a formal mid-term review process, enhancing accountability for both NATO and its partners.

The road to signing ITPPs has in some cases been lengthy and challenging as it first included negotiations with NATO's International Staff before seeking approval from all Alliance members. Previously, partners

> For the EU and NATO, Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated the drive for a more targeted and deeper cooperation with partner states.

The EU's Security Strategies and the Changing Labels of Partnerships

	European Security Strategy (2003)	Global Strategy (2016)	Strategic Compass (2022)
UNITED STATES	Irreplaceable partner	Core partner	Staunchest, most important partner
RUSSIA	Important, potential strategic partner	Key strategic challenge	Aggressor and revisionist power
NATO	Strategic partner	Deepening cooperation	Strategic partner
CHINA	Expanding partnership	Deepening relations	Partner, competitor, rival
INDIA	Room to do more in our relationship	Strategic partner	Security and defence partner
JAPAN	Close and longstanding partner	Strategic partner	Bilateral partner
SOUTH KOREA		Expanding partnership	Security and defence partner
CANADA	Close and longstanding partner	Transatlantic partner	Bilateral partner
SWITZERLAND	Partnership grown in significance		
NORWAY	Partnership grown in significance		Most closely associated partner
OSCE	Deepening relationship	A pillar of European security	Regional partner for closer work
UNITED NATION	Reinforcing cooperation	Framework of the multilateral system	Strategic partner
ASEAN	Developing engagement	Partner in connected Asia	Regional partner for closer work
AFRICAN UNION	Working more closely	Intensifying cooperation	Regional partner for closer work
UKRAINE	Far-reaching association agreement	Upholding cooperation	Eastern partner to boost cooperation
MOLDOVA	Far-reaching association agreement	Upholding cooperation	Partner to pursue close cooperation
GEORGIA		Success story in Eastern Partnership	Partner to pursue close cooperation
UNITED KINGDOM*			Bilateral partner

The growing depth of cooperation
The growing depth of competition

* EU Member State in 2003 and 2016
Source: compiled and developed by the author

were seen more as "security takers" under a demand-driven system, where they selected from NATO's Partnership Cooperation Menu the activities they wished to participate in. Now, NATO's partnerships have evolved into more strategic and bilateral relationships. Therefore, the negotiations offered an opportunity to align mutually beneficial initiatives. This was important given that NATO's "interest-driven" approach to partnerships raised questions over whether this is equally in NATO's and partners' interests.

No other group has experienced the impact of this changed approach to NATO's partnerships than the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) countries – Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. Namely, both sides now see their respective partners as significant for their own defense and deterrence, rather than as interlocutors in the provision of security for third parties, as was the case in out-of-area missions where crisis management and cooperative security were the central organizing principles of these partnerships. While the institutional basis of cooperation between NATO and the IP4 countries is still informed by bilateral ITPPs, NATO is also pursuing engagement with these partners as a minilateral group rather than as a collection of four individual partnerships. This commitment has resulted in four joint projects, announced at the Washington Summit in July 2024, which will focus on assistance to Ukraine, artificial intelligence, combating disinformation, and cybersecurity.

As newer and nimbler initiatives such as IP4 have gained in prominence, the large legacy groupings are losing their organizational importance. Rather than engaging with partners through the prism of EAPC or PfP, NATO approaches partners on a discrete bilateral or minilateral basis governed primarily by the individual ITPPs. The shift towards more tailored and proactive partnerships reflects a prioritization of defense and defense capabilities and substantial transformation in NATO's overall engagement strategy.

Closer EU-NATO Cooperation

One cannot discuss the changing nature of the EU's and NATO's partnerships without acknowledging the growing cooperation and coordination between the two. EU-NATO cooperation has developed over more than two decades, beginning with a 2001 formal exchange defining the scope of collaboration on security matters. In recent years, EU-NATO cooperation has intensified and expanded, driven by three Joint Declarations (2016, 2018, and 2023) and the adoption of the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept. The Strategic Compass designated the EU's strategic partnership with NATO as essential for the Euro-Atlantic security, while the Strategic Concept singled out the EU as a unique and essential partner, emphasizing the need to strengthen and deepen the strategic partnership between the two.

The 2023 NATO-EU Joint Declaration marked a significant step in strengthening their partnership given it was the first one following Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and the evolving security challenges. This declaration emphasized the need for enhanced cooperation in areas such as cyber defense, military mobility, and the protection of critical infrastructure. It also highlighted the importance of addressing emerging security threats, including space security, the impact of climate change on defense, and the increasing use of disruptive technologies. Additionally, the declaration focused on

The EU is fostering more structured cooperation with like-minded nations.

countering foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, which have become key concerns in the current geopolitical landscape. By deepening cooperation on these fronts, NATO and the EU seek to use their partnerships to uphold a liberal, rules-based order.

Overall, the latest changes in membership, structure, and mandates, along with evolving inter-organizational relationships and better coordination, suggest the potential for a clearer separation of roles between the

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EU and NATO, but also a more useful pooling of resources where the mandates overlap. It is to be expected that the EU will keep a much broader interpretation of security, while NATO remains focused on collective defense. At the same time, one should not underestimate the potential for bureaucratic inertia and rivalries, as well as member states' particular interests to thwart the progress made.

Implications for Switzerland
The main challenge for any EU and NATO partner, including Switzerland, is to grasp the extent of recent changes and fully seize the opportunities for collaboration. In the context of its relations with the EU on matters of security and defense, Switzerland has already moved towards more structured cooperation as its consultations with the EU on security and defense were upgraded to a structured dialogue in November 2023, highlighting the regularity and depth of collaboration at the state secretary level.

There are opportunities to deepen cooperation with the EU, particularly with the anticipated signing of a Framework Agreement for Swiss participation in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) civilian and military missions. The EU has already established similar agreements with 21 partner countries. Moreover, the recent announcement of Switzerland's participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, notably in Military Mobility and Cyber Ranges Federation, allows for enhancing military capabilities and improving interoperability among armed forces. Additionally, Switzerland's participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) similarly provides an opportunity for cooperation in procurement projects, training, and logistical aspects in the area of ground-based air defense. The question of whether Switzerland would want to seek a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU like Norway or Moldova is more symbolically relevant than operationally urgent and can also be addressed further down the road.

It is also clear that NATO's operational needs will demand partnerships to be meaningful and not governed by objectives of legacy partner groupings. Prior to joining NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, Finland and Sweden were generally regarded as NATO's closest partners. Their accession has placed some of the remaining Western European neutrals such as Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland, in a peculiar

position. These established liberal democracies now stand apart from increasingly illiberal partners within the EAPC. In response, NATO has given them a non-NATO Nation Status, which is based on an individual security agreement that allows the exchange of classified information and participation in NATO training and exercises. Furthermore, the next iteration of Switzerland's ITPP, due for negotiation in 2025, offers scope for redefining the respective level of ambition in line with priorities to be identified in the upcoming Swiss security policy strategy.

Switzerland is seen as a capable partner that has proven itself across a range of areas—from cybersecurity, hybrid warfare, innovation, and resilience, to education, training, and peacekeeping. All of these will remain crucial in the evolving threat environment. The key challenge ahead is to capitalize on new opportunities for collaboration in ways that ensure domestic support and take into account the need to comply with the Swiss conception of neutrality. This conception, it is worth noting, still provides significant leeway for security and defense cooperation.

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