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Priorities for NATO Partnerships in an Era of Strategic Competition

by Lisa Aronsson and Brett Swaney



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Cover: Extraordinary meeting of NATO Ministers of Defense with representatives of Finland, Georgia, Sweden, Ukraine, and the European Union, March 16, 2022 (NATO)

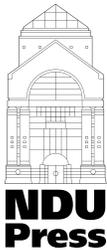
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Executive Summary

The Joseph Biden administration's 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) establishes the People's Republic of China as the "pacing challenge" and a priority for the United States, followed by Russia's "acute" threat in Europe.¹ The NDS also emphasizes the importance of working with allies and partners to address these threats and reinforce deterrence. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the most institutionalized and capable of U.S. alliances, aspires to play a role in addressing both the threat from Russia in Europe and the longerterm global security implications of China's rise. With a position of leadership in NATO, the United States has an opportunity to help shape the Alliance for this strategic competition at a critical juncture in NATO history.

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, a once-in-a-decade occurrence, updated the Alliance's core tasks—defense and deterrence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security—to reflect this era of strategic competition.² The war in Ukraine has dramatically changed the security environment in Europe and demands that NATO renew its focus on defense and deterrence, while also preserving and updating its other core tasks. The third core task, cooperative security, which includes NATO's open door policy and partnerships, is the subject of this paper. Cooperative security is essential for NATO to address the potential for prolonged conflict with Russia, China's rise, and transboundary challenges, such as emerging technologies or climate change. It is also through NATO partnerships that the United States can strengthen coordination among its allies and partners in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific region.

Since 2014, NATO has paid relatively little strategic attention to partnerships with non-member states around the world. After Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, NATO sharpened its focus on reassuring vulnerable member states in northeast Europe and restoring its capacity for collective defense. It was clear that Ukraine, a partner state, did not warrant the same level of protection as the Allies. Also, as NATO wound down out-of-area operations, some scholars believed the Alliance and its operational partner states in Afghanistan, for example, might go their separate ways and focus on their own regional security. NATO's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021 undermined the Alliance's partnership with that state and with its operational partners, too. Since then, the United States and other Allies have increasingly side-stepped NATO to work in more flexible formats, raising questions about the role of NATO as a platform for cooperation.

As the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept is implemented, the United States will have an opportunity to help set priorities for partnerships and adapt them to address competition with

Russia and China across multiple theaters and domains. Many European Allies are not only focused on Russia but also, increasingly, concerned about the implications of China's rise for their own security and for the rules-based order. European perspectives on China have hardened considerably in the last 2 years because of Beijing's military modernization, investments in European critical infrastructure, assertive "wolf warrior" diplomacy, human rights abuses, and growing cooperation with Russia. Yet many depend on trade with China, want to maintain some channels for cooperation, and resist policies that openly refer to China as an adversary.

NATO will never be a global alliance, but its new strategy reflects an awareness that allied security depends not only on addressing Russia's threat to Europe but also, increasingly, on China's rise a series of transboundary challenges such as emerging technologies and climate change. Under the core task of cooperative security, NATO partnerships offer a means of expanding the Alliance's global approach to security while strengthening its military and political dimensions. For the United States, these partnerships offer an opportunity to strengthen the sinews of cooperation among its most capable partners in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific, bolstering deterrence and resilience. Partnerships must serve NATO's interests, but because cooperation is voluntary, partner perspectives also matter.

This study evaluates how select NATO partner states in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region see the strategic value of cooperating with as the Alliance adapts for strategic competition, and it assesses the prospects for future cooperation. Through interviews with government officials from partners in two regions, including at the ambassador and deputy chief of mission (DCM) levels, through a focus group discussion among DCMs from European neutral states, and through a review of documents pertaining to NATO partnership activities, this paper finds that NATO partnerships offer significant strategic value for partners and that value depends on U.S. leadership and commitment to the Alliance. It depends on NATO's centrality for transatlantic consultations and its role in setting international norms and standards for modern militaries. Partners also value capacity-building and interoperability, science and technology (S&T) cooperation, and political consultations on topics of international concern.

Collectively, this study's findings demonstrate that the Biden administration has already taken steps to ensure that NATO remains an important platform for coordination among U.S. allies and partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. The United States should advocate for partnership policies that strengthen NATO's capacity-building programs, which have tangibly strengthened Ukraine's resilience, for example. NATO should expand S&T cooperation with select partners on emerging and disruptive technologies and consider partnerships as a component of its overarching strategy to preserve NATO's technological edge. To be sure, the United

States will always seek flexible formats for cooperation, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States or the Australia–United Kingdom–U.S. trilateral security pact, but it should not lose sight of NATO and its core task of cooperative security as a tool for adapting the U.S. system of alliances for a new era of strategic competition.

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is among America's most important international defense commitments. As a military alliance and political organization, NATO has proved adaptable and resilient for more than 70 years. Ensuring its relevance for a new era of strategic competition with Russia and China and enhancing cooperation among U.S. allies and partners is of vital interest to the United States. The Biden administration made revitalizing NATO a priority early on and has committed to advancing U.S. interests and values not only by strengthening the United States but also by "working in common cause with our closest allies and partners."³ The United States has played a leading role in adapting NATO in the past, and 2022 presents another opportunity for the United States to help set priorities for NATO at a critical juncture in Alliance history.

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept updates its core tasks—defense and deterrence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security—to reflect 21st-century realities.⁴ The Euro-Atlantic region is not at peace, and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has changed the environment for Allies, setting NATO on a path to restoring its capacity for defense and deterrence. In addition to meeting the threat from Russia, however, NATO faces other threats and challenges. Allied security is not only linked with stability along the eastern and southern peripheries, but it is also increasingly tied to security elsewhere in the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region, in other domains such as cyber and space, and in the global commons. China's rise is chief among these other challenges. Beijing is acquiring European infrastructure, leeching technological and economic assets, creating technology dependencies, and challenging the = commons, including through its militarization of outer space and expanding naval reach into the Atlantic.⁵

Defense and deterrence must be NATO's chief priorities, but it is through cooperative security that NATO can address the challenges associated with strategic competition, China's rise, relations with Russia, and emerging transboundary challenges. The Allies agreed nearly a decade ago that "Euro-Atlantic security is best assured through a wide network of partner relationships with countries and organizations around the globe."⁶ This is especially true for those challenges originating beyond the Euro-Atlantic. Cooperative security encompasses NATO's open-door policy and its various programs with partner states (or nonmembers), and three international organizations. This study focuses on a subset of NATO partner states: European and Indo-Pacific partners. These partners are on the frontlines of strategic competition and include European aspiring members and neutral states and like-minded democracies with capable militaries in the Indo-Pacific.

These partnerships are a strategic asset for NATO, but they are also changing and have come under pressure. The war in Ukraine demonstrated the limits of partnership for deterrence; Sweden and Finland decided to apply for membership. The conflict has effectively frozen Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations for membership, their primary driver for cooperation. The 2022 Strategic Concept reaffirms the open-door policy, but there is still no clear commitment or path for them to one day become members.⁷ In addition, NATO's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 left the government of a strategic partner to collapse after two decades of cooperation. It also undermined cooperation with partners that had contributed to NATO operations there. Furthermore, NATO's regional partnership groupings continue to meet but produce fewer deliverables. The United States, United Kingdom (UK), and others are increasingly sidestepping NATO to explore more flexible formats, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (QUAD) or the Australia-UK-U.S. (AUKUS) trilateral security pact, raising additional questions about the relevance of NATO partnerships.⁸

NATO has paid relatively little attention to these relationships since renewing its focus on collective defense in 2014. And yet these partnerships still matter; they are an external political and military tool for NATO, and they are unparalleled in Moscow or Beijing. They help the Allies confront Russia politically, address China's rise, and mitigate new challenges, especially those that lie outside the traditional defense remit. Partnerships have also delivered results. NATO's enhanced cooperation with Ukraine after 2014, for example, has strengthened Kyiv's ability to leverage its asymmetric advantages and resist Russia's full-scale invasion. Other partners are contributing to Ukrainian resistance. Switzerland joined sanctions against Russia,⁹ Australia provided approximately \$70 million in lethal aid early in the war,¹⁰ and Japan reversed its efforts to strengthen relations with Moscow. By sharing intelligence and consulting widely, the United States helped generate this remarkable political cohesion.¹¹

The United States should not neglect NATO partnerships as part of its efforts to forge integrated deterrence with Allies and partners in an era of strategic competition.¹² Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recognized their importance in 2020 and tasked a reflection group with making recommendations to strengthen NATO's political dimensions and expand its global approach. The group's NATO 2030 Report argues that through partnerships the Alliance can proactively shape an international "order in which open societies can flourish and be secure and prosperous."¹³ The group recommended reforms to ensure partnerships are driven less by partners and more by NATO interests. The group's recommendations reflected internal challenges—that NATO struggled to steer cooperation toward coherent objectives—and external realities—threats can be global or geographically unbound in cyberspace or space.¹⁴

This paper contributes to the debate about how to implement NATO's Strategic Concept and focuses on NATO partnerships with other states. It argues that the traditional demand-driven framing has not entirely lost its value. This framing has allowed partners to target cooperation to meet their needs. It enabled a diverse group of partners to work with NATO, provide for their own security, and, in some cases, become anchors or hubs for regional security. The demand-driven framing broadened NATO's appeal, including states that may never contribute to a NATO operation but want to be able to work with others in coalitions of the willing or under the European Union (EU) or the United Nations (UN).

Partnerships continue to depend on NATO's appeal. NATO's partner states will always have options to work bilaterally with Allies or through other international organizations, and their resources and bandwidth are limited. Partnership with NATO is always voluntary, and so this study asks how partners in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific region see the value of NATO partnership programs in an era of strategic competition and what ought to be the priorities for cooperation. To answer this question, this study opens with a framework for analysis, an overview of the literature on NATO partnerships, and the research methodology. The authors conducted more than 30 interviews with partner government officials from European and Indo-Pacific partners, including ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission (DCMs) to NATO, policy staff in partner ministries of defense and foreign affairs, academics, and analysts, and they also reviewed their NATO partnership documents. The findings present their perspectives on the value of NATO partnership and their priorities for cooperation.

Collectively, study findings demonstrate that the Biden administration has already taken steps to ensure NATO remains an important platform for coordination among U.S. allies and partners in these two regions. As NATO implements its new strategy, the United States should advocate for partnership policies that strengthen NATO's capacity-building programs.¹⁵ The United States should also encourage expanded science and technology (S&T) cooperation with select partners, including on emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), and conduct more frequent political consultations with partners on topics of major international concern. To be sure, the United States will always seek flexible formats for cooperation, such as the QUAD or AUKUS security pacts, but it should not lose sight of the strategic value of NATO as a valuable tool for adapting the wider U.S. system of alliances for strategic competition.

Partnerships: Framework for Analysis

NATO's cooperation with partner states forms a constituent part of the Alliance's core task of cooperative security. NATO defined this concept and elevated it to a core task in its last

Strategic Concept in 2010, *Active Engagement, Modern Defense*.¹⁶ In that document, the Allies explained NATO is “affected by, and can affect, political and security developments beyond its borders.” They stated that under the core task of cooperative security:

*The Alliance will engage actively to enhance international security through partnership with relevant countries and other international organizations, by contributing actively to arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament, and by keeping the door to membership in the Alliance open to all European democracies that meet NATO standards.*¹⁷

This is how NATO organized and defined its partnerships as part of cooperative security; it had placed a significant emphasis on partnerships in the years leading up to the 2010 strategy.

In 2010, NATO considered Russia as a potential strategic partner, the risk of war in Europe was considered low, and China did not appear in NATO documents until nearly a decade later.¹⁸ At the time, NATO was focused on out-of-area missions and operations, including in Kosovo, the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden, off the Horn of Africa, and in Iraq and Afghanistan. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the largest coalition in history, had become the most significant and challenging operation for NATO. At its peak it had 400 bases in Afghanistan and engaged more than 130,000 troops from 51 allied and partner states.¹⁹ The Allies considered its partners' military, political, and financial contributions essential for operational success and political legitimacy. This experience led NATO to include a special session for partners during the 2012 summit—dubbed the “partnership summit”—and to conclude that future operations would be conducted with partners.²⁰

Concepts and Definitions

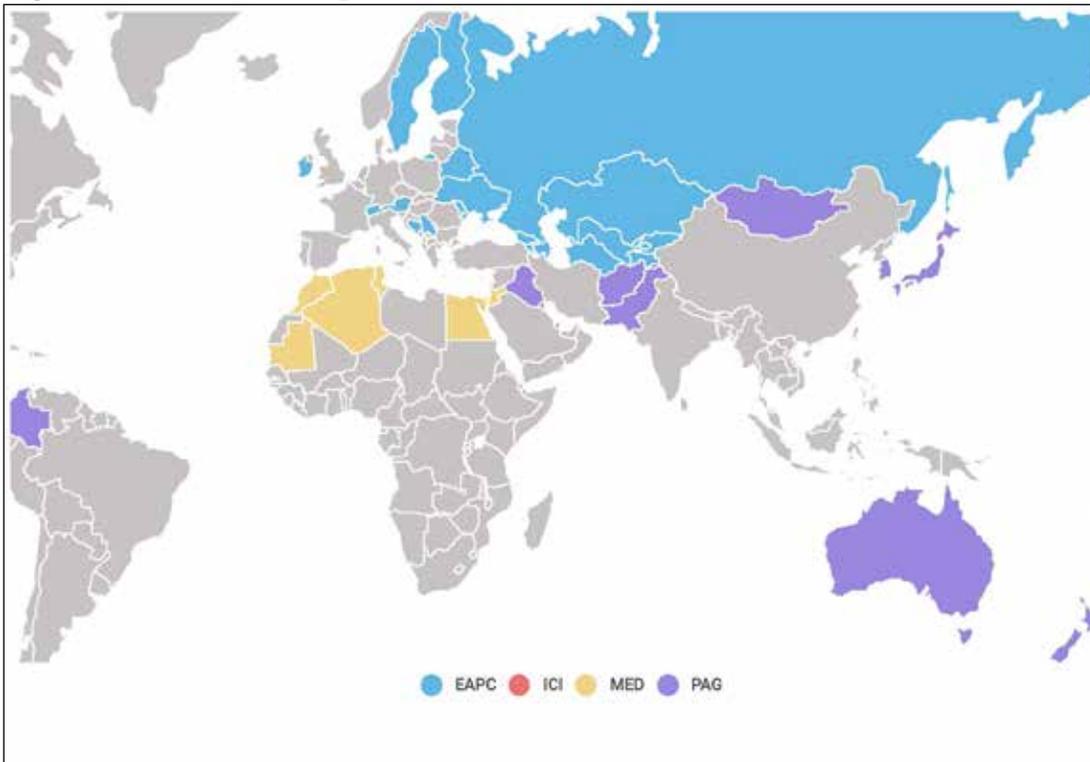
As NATO implements its 2022 Strategic Concept, the circumstances have changed. NATO is focused on defense and deterrence in Europe while continuing to work with its network of partners around the world. This network now extends to 40 states in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Gulf region, Latin America, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific region. Partnership between NATO and nonmember states involves political dialogue and practical cooperation on a range of security and defense related topics. NATO helps to strengthen partner capacity, build interoperability, and facilitate cooperation on issues of common interest. Partnerships prepare aspiring countries for membership, promote defense and security sector reform, and generate

support for NATO. They build mutual understanding and awareness, including early warning, and they operate in part as a vehicle for diplomacy.²¹

NATO engages partner states through numerous activities, ranging from informal consultations to the shaping of formal policy at the level of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO's highest decision-making body. NATO also engages regional partner states in efforts to "project stability" in its southern neighborhood through capacity-building, counterterrorism cooperation, and by developing interoperability between NATO and partner military forces. Having worked with partners for more than 25 years, the Alliance now has an array of mechanisms to facilitate practical cooperation, including through a Partnership Cooperation Menu that includes more than 1,200 activities related to education, training, and consultation, and is open to all partners. It also offers advice and support for reforms, participation in exercises, S&T cooperation, and lessons-learned for future policy.

Cooperation is primarily bilateral, but NATO grouped its partners into regional formats (see figure).²² It set up the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in the mid-1990s, which

Figure. NATO Partnership Formats



Key: EAPC: Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council; ICI: Istanbul Cooperation Initiative; MED: Mediterranean Dialogue; PAG: Partners Across the Globe.

convenes allies and 20 European partners for political consultations. NATO has other specific formats to manage relations with Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. The EAPC and Partnership for Peace cooperation menu were followed by new formats for the southern periphery, including the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1995 and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2004. The latter were informed by Western assumptions that NATO's cooperation partnerships could be transformative for those partners while also enhancing stability along the periphery of the Alliance, thereby reducing the risk that conflict or instability could spill into NATO member states. Partnerships in the Middle East and relations with non-NATO troop contributors took on increasing importance as NATO's operational tempo increased in the 2000s and 2010s.

NATO's assumption that the primary threats to Alliance security stemmed from beyond NATO's territory led to growth in its global network of partners. While in Afghanistan, NATO launched a new and less formal partnership structure, Partners Across the Globe. This format was effectively a catch-all group for partner states around the world and included states that hosted NATO missions (Iraq and Afghanistan), as well as Pakistan, Colombia, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. The Allies have periodically debated a role for NATO beyond its borders, from the "out-of-area, out of business" debate in the 1990s to the "global NATO" debate in the early 2010s in which some in NATO might serve as an international hub, contributing to security in other regions.²³

After elevating cooperative security to a core task in the 2010 Strategic Concept, NATO implemented a major set of reforms to partnership policies. In 2011, Alliance foreign ministers met in Berlin and endorsed what became known as the Berlin partnership reforms. This package of reforms strengthened the bilateral focus for NATO's cooperation with partner states and effectively downgraded its regional groupings for political consultations. The Berlin reforms also opened the Partnership for Peace cooperation menu to all partners around the world, regardless of their geographic location, and established new mechanisms to give partners more access to NATO's operational planning processes. Together, the Berlin reforms attempted to build inclusive, flexible, and more strategically oriented partnerships.²⁴ Until NATO implements its 2022 strategy, these reforms continue to guide NATO partnerships.

Literature Review and Research Question

NATO's network of partners now extends to 40 states around the world, but partners' relative strategic importance to NATO has become less salient since 2014. Not only did NATO's high operational tempo and the need for operational support decline as the Alliance wound down operations in Afghanistan, but Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its destabilization of

Eastern Ukraine in 2014 shifted NATO's attention and geographic focus back to Europe. NATO immediately reassured its vulnerable member states on the eastern front and began restoring its military capacity for collective defense and deterrence, which had atrophied while NATO engaged in out-of-area crisis management operations for two decades. Aside from a few capable partners in Europe, notably Finland and Sweden, NATO's other global partners came to be seen as more discretionary than of real strategic value.

Scholarly literature on NATO partnerships also declined. The Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) published a report in 2013, *Cooperative Security: NATO's Partnership Policy in a Changing World*, that did not include a chapter on Russia, though it was agreed at the conference before publication (and before the annexation of Crimea) that Russia was "NATO's most important partnership."²⁵ The DIIS study traced NATO partnerships from the end of the Cold War through 2013 and, in the introduction, Trine Flockhart argues that NATO partnerships evolved to support U.S. strategic priorities for over 20 years. They helped consolidate democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and ensured NATO's (and America's) continuing relevance. During the "liberal decade" of the 1990s, partnerships mirrored the Bill Clinton administration's focus on liberal internationalism, and during the 2000s they reflected the George W. Bush administration's pursuit of influence through intervention as well as the push for closer relations with Georgia and Ukraine.²⁶

NATO partnerships also supported President Barack Obama's priorities. The "pivot" to Asia led to a more practical approach to global partnerships.²⁷ U.S. grand strategy and policy documents continued to reference "partnerships," "old alliances," and "cooperative approaches," Flockhart argues, but these relationships received less U.S. attention. The National Security Strategy at the time stated these partnerships to be "no end in itself;"²⁸ the focus was on using them to "sustaining American leadership and with it the resilience of the liberal order so as to construct a security architecture that could meet the challenges of the 21st century—challenges that no single nation is likely to be able to meet alone, but which also probably cannot be met without some degree of American involvement."²⁹ Flockhart described NATO partnerships as a means of preserving the liberal order while trying to ensure it could become more inclusive of a wider circle of partners than had been the case in the 1990s.

NATO's renewed strategic focus on Europe after 2014 came as somewhat of a shock for the Allies and upended allied thinking about the purpose of its global partnerships. Scholar Rebecca Moore argues that Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea raised questions about NATO's role outside its borders. In the early days after Crimea, NATO reassured its member states in the northeast flank but made it clear that Ukraine, a partner state, warranted no such protection

or reassurance. This, she argues, raised an important question: What did NATO owe its partner states, especially those that shared NATO values, made contributions to nearly all NATO operations, and were promised a place in the Alliance? Also, what functions might NATO partnerships serve in Europe marked by a Russian threat and instability in the south? And how could partnerships serve NATO in sustaining the wider liberal security order to which NATO committed itself in the wake of the Cold War?³⁰

Moore has also written on the costs and benefits of engaging partners in missions and operations. In Afghanistan and Libya, for example, she argues that NATO relied heavily on partner support, but partner involvement also came with some cost. In Libya, for instance, only 14 of NATO's then 28 member states contributed to the operation, and the Arab partner state contributions were seen as critical for operational success. In neither operation did the Allies and their partners agree on a common set of political objectives or a plan for eventual withdrawal. While this ambiguity enabled cooperation that might not otherwise have been possible, it also allowed Allies and partners to pursue independent objectives. For the Allies, the Libya operation was driven primarily by the "Responsibility to Protect" principle,³¹ but for Arab partners it offered an opportunity to depose Muammar Qadhafi. Partners could work bilaterally toward objectives that were at odds with NATO's mandate as defined by the UN resolutions.³²

After 2014, NATO partnerships were reshaped by the Alliance's focus on Europe. After Crimea, NATO suspended all cooperation with Russia, and the Allies began rebuilding their capacity for collective defense and deterrence. They set up new platforms to address hybrid challenges from Russia, including energy, cyber, information operations, and other activities designed to stay below the threshold of war.³³ NATO also worked to preserve hard-earned interoperability with partners, including through new initiatives such as the Partnership Interoperability Initiative, which brought 24 partners together to reinforce interoperability and selected 5 initial partners for enhanced opportunities partnerships: Australia, Finland, Georgia, Sweden, and Ukraine.³⁴ At the Wales Summit, NATO introduced another initiative, the Defense and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative, to expand support for partners to Europe's east and south. These initiatives effectively drew Finland and Sweden closer to NATO.³⁵

Recent literature focuses on NATO's bureaucratic hurdles for cooperation. German Marshall Fund scholars Sophie Arts and Steven Keil see partnerships as "hampered by increasingly outdated frameworks, political barriers, and decreased institutional bandwidth," just as Europe became less secure.³⁶ As a result, Allies and partners sought smaller, more flexible groups to work through, including outside NATO in what they call "minilateral" formats that bypass NATO's consensus decisionmaking and offer swifter responses to fill gaps or boost readiness in the event

of a fast-moving crisis. A NATO Parliamentary Assembly Report revealed that NATO has been at times completely unaware of what Allies and partners do bilaterally.³⁷ In Ukraine, transparency between the Allies' bilateral support for Ukraine and NATO's broad portfolio of cooperation activities has been lacking.³⁸ As a result, NATO consolidated partnerships into the Operations Division and has since adopted the motto, "One Partner, One Plan."³⁹

Other scholars have focused on how partnerships should adapt given changes in the international system. Henrik Larsen, a scholar at the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, argues that given the "illiberal turn" in the system, NATO should reorganize its partners into new categories: "advanced partnerships" with Western Europe and the EU, "enhanced partnerships" with aspiring members, and "worldwide partners" to focus on combating the threats from Russia and China.⁴⁰ Katherine Elgin and Anna Wieslander argue that NATO partnerships with Sweden and Finland offer a model for others, driven by the degree of converging interests and mutual benefit for NATO and for the partner.⁴¹ Others recommend strengthening partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region by offering Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships to Japan and the Republic of Korea, formalizing an "Asia Pacific 4" grouping, or opening a Center of Excellence in the region.⁴² The U.S. Army War College's John Deni argues that NATO should make collective defense its *only* core task, relegating the others to a subordinate position.⁴³

What is missing from this literature is an attempt to understand the "demand side" or partner views about the value of cooperating with NATO and how their views are changing as NATO adapts to competition with Russia and China. Some scholars, including Douglas Fry and Benjamin Schreer, assumed that NATO's operations in Afghanistan were the catalyst for stronger cooperation between NATO and its global partners, especially those in the Indo-Pacific. They predicted that between the end of operations in Afghanistan, Europe's renewed focus on Russia, and Indo-Pacific partners' focus on China, there would be reduced interests and incentives on both sides for NATO and its global partners to cooperate. Fry expected Australia would focus on China's regional influence and its claims in the South China Sea and argued Canberra might keep just a "pilot light setting" at NATO with an "odd person or two plugged into the NATO system."⁴⁴ Schreer believed that absent a clear military role for NATO in Asia, NATO's partnerships forged during operations in Afghanistan would "probably revert back to lower levels of interactions."⁴⁵

In the journal *Asian Security*, scholars Natalia Chaban, Paul Bacon, Joe Burton, and Vlad Vernygora argue that NATO's analysis of partner perceptions has been "impressionistic and under-addressed" at best, especially for partners in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁶ They argue that NATO has treated partner views as factors affecting expectations or as a "cultural filter" that shapes outsiders' reactions to NATO initiatives. Few have tracked partner strategic narratives

about NATO or sought to understand what drives partner interests in NATO's cooperation programs, how those interests may be changing, or where opportunities exist to deepen cooperation and adapt it for a new era of strategic competition. This study aims to fill that gap by assessing NATO's appeal for like-minded partners in the two regions considered priorities in the U.S. NDS and fundamental for Euro-Atlantic security: Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Methodology and Structure

The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept presents the Allies' assessment of the most pressing security challenges and adapts NATO for an environment defined by strategic competition with Russia and China and a multitude of transnational challenges.⁴⁷ Defense and deterrence vis-à-vis Russia's are the chief priorities, but NATO must continue to address instability in the south and the fact that Euro-Atlantic security is affected by other factors, especially China's rise and the U.S. focus on the Indo-Pacific theater. Luis Simon argued recently that NATO is "affected by broader geostrategic dynamics to a degree and in ways that are unfamiliar" to the Allies and that the Euro-Atlantic is becoming a "secondary theater" not only for the United States but also, eventually, in global politics more generally.⁴⁸ So long as the United States guarantees security in Europe and in the Pacific, the security architectures of these regions will be intertwined, exerting pressure on U.S. resources.⁴⁹

NATO partnerships offer a means of generating political and military coordination between participants. Partnerships have proved resilient and adaptable; the end of operations in Afghanistan did not spell the end of allied cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners. NATO partnerships—the consultations, practical cooperation activities, education, training, and exercises—continued to offer opportunities to forge a shared understanding of the threat environments, to consider the challenges posed by Russia and China, and to ensure they can work together when their interests overlap. By prioritizing NATO interests, the literature has paid less attention to understanding the demand side, or partner views, about the relevance of NATO. For that reason, this study focuses on understanding how partners in the two regions see NATO's adaptation and the value of cooperation at this critical juncture. The study also evaluates how partners in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific region see the value of NATO partnerships programs and their evolving role in a new era of strategic competition.

Case Study Selection

For the purposes of the study, 12 non-NATO partner states were selected from across the two regions (table 1). The list includes aspiring members and Enhanced Opportunities Partners

Table 1. NATO Partner Countries Studied

State	NATO Partnership Framework	Special Status	Category
Finland	EAPC	EOP	NATO-Aspirant
Georgia	EAPC	EOP	NATO-Aspirant
Sweden	EAPC	EOP	NATO-Aspirant
Ukraine	EAPC	EOP	NATO-Aspirant
Switzerland	EAPC		Europe-Non-NATO
Austria	EAPC		Europe-Non-NATO
Ireland	EAPC		Europe-Non-NATO
Serbia	EAPC		Europe-Non-NATO
Australia	PAG	EOP	Indo-Pacific
Japan	PAG		Indo-Pacific
Republic of Korea	PAG		Indo-Pacific
New Zealand	PAG		Indo-Pacific

Key: EAPC: Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council; EOP: Enhanced Opportunity Partner; NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; PAG: Partners Across the Globe.

in Europe (Finland, Georgia, Sweden, and Ukraine), a longstanding neutral, a nonaligned, an EU, and an aspiring EU country (Switzerland, Austria, Ireland, and Serbia, respectively), and what some NATO officials call the Asia-Pacific Four (Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Japan). This is by no means a homogenous group, but it includes partners judged to be on the frontlines of competition with Russia and China. They are either the site of direct or indirect conflict (Ukraine and Georgia), increasing major power competition (Serbia), and/or they are highly capable and share NATO values and interests in safeguarding the rules-based order. Understanding this group’s diverse perspectives can help NATO set priorities for cooperation while implementing its 2022 Strategic Concept.

There are, of course, significant differences between European and Indo-Pacific partners’ relationships with NATO. First, the path to membership is an option for some European partners, and this dynamic has profoundly shaped cooperation between countries in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Georgia and Ukraine have focused on achieving membership for the purposes of deterring Russia, while the Indo-Pacific partners are skeptical that NATO can play a meaningful deterrence role in their region. Second, despite some convergence on the challenges of Russia and China, there are still differences among Europeans and across the two regions over the nature of the threats.⁵⁰ European partners are more likely to focus on human rights and values in opposition to China’s abuses, though some fear this could push illiberal states closer to

China out of fear of Western intervention in their own affairs.⁵¹ In the Indo-Pacific region, ties with China could limit the degree to which partners might engage NATO in ways that could be seen as antagonistic toward China.⁵²

The 2022 U.S. NDS identifies China's challenge in the Indo-Pacific as the priority, followed by Russia's "acute" threat in Europe.⁵³ Security in these regions, though, is increasingly linked not only for the United States but also for its NATO Allies and partners.⁵⁴ The war in Ukraine has at least temporarily united Europeans over the threat from Russia, and their positions on China have hardened over the last 2 years. These developments are largely the result of Russia's brutality in Ukraine and China's coercion, specifically, its "wolf warrior" diplomacy, the dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy, and human rights abuses inflicted on Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁵⁵ Russia and China also converge in their attempts to undermine what they see as the U.S.-dominated liberal order.⁵⁶ This study aims to locate areas of commonality between these two regional groups of partners and identify opportunities for NATO to enhance military and political coordination between them.

These case studies can help set priorities for both regions and enhance coordination between them. To gather data and assess partner perspectives, the authors conducted more than 30 semi-structured virtual interviews during 2021 with partner government officials from the 12 countries mentioned above, including at the level of ambassador to NATO, deputy chief of mission to NATO, and/or Europe or NATO strategy and policy teams at partner ministries of defense and foreign affairs. Those government subjects' perspectives have been rendered anonymous. The authors also convened a focus group discussion that included the five deputy chiefs of mission to NATO from European states that have traditions of military neutrality and conducted interviews with academics and analysts in partner capitals. They reviewed documents and literature covering the evolution of partnerships since the end of the Cold War. Interviews were conducted during Russia's military buildup along its Ukraine border but before the full-scale invasion, which started on February 24, 2022.

Interviews were designed to capture official and academic perspectives on why partners cooperate with NATO, how they see NATO's preparedness for strategic competition with Russia and China, and where they see opportunities to expand cooperation to address systemic challenges that affect both regions. The interview subjects were asked about specific topics:

- their current policy toward NATO
- expectations of NATO partnerships after the adoption of the 2022 Strategic Concept

- the relevance of NATO's cooperation activities for their own security and for their cooperation with their neighbors
- impressions of NATO's response to Russian aggression
- the Alliance's post-2019 incorporation of China into its strategic calculus
- their priorities for cooperation.

They were asked to be forward-looking and to consider new areas where cooperation with NATO might be valuable, and how to strengthen partnerships to ensure they remain effective and meaningful.

The findings cannot be considered comprehensive or representative of NATO's entire network of partners. Central Asian partners, for example, are also affected by strategic competition but were excluded from this study to sharpen the focus on cooperation with those frontline partner states in Europe or the Indo-Pacific that are more capable, share NATO's values, or have especially close ties to NATO. Strategic competition with Russia and China is, increasingly, a global phenomenon on the rise in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and in the Arctic. But it is the European and Indo-Pacific theaters that are identified in the U.S. NDS and that compete and consume the lion's share of U.S. strategic attention and defense resources. Further research could look at NATO partnerships in the southern periphery, institutional partnership with the EU, UN, the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), or collaboration with civil society and/or the private sector.

NATO Partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific

Despite expectations that NATO partnerships would atrophy after 2014 because of NATO's focus on Europe or the end of operations in Afghanistan, incentives to cooperate persisted. In the Indo-Pacific region, rather than going separate ways after ISAF, NATO's partnerships continued to develop. Stephan Frühling noted that NATO's 2018 summit was "the one most closely watched" *ever* in Asia. It appealed to Indo-Pacific partners not because of the relevance of the formal agenda for the region but because of what it might reveal about U.S. defense priorities and, especially, President Donald Trump's foreign policy predilections.⁵⁷ Uncertainty about the United States at the time and a disconnect between Trump's disparaging tweets about NATO and growth in U.S. funding for the European Deterrence Initiative raised questions for partners.

Many are now keen to see how the United States will divide its attention and resources between theaters, and NATO helps provide that perspective.⁵⁸

NATO's partner states in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific also watched closely as the Alliance responded to the evolving Russian threat to Europe, from the 2014 annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Eastern Ukraine through the full-scale invasion that started in February 2022. Some partner states actively contributed to Western-led efforts to support Ukraine and to maximize pressure on Russian leadership. Sweden and Finland have been heavily engaged in consultations with NATO to coordinate their responses to the war in Ukraine.⁵⁹ Even a neutral Switzerland broke with past precedent by joining sanctions against Russia.⁶⁰ Australia provided approximately \$70 million in lethal aid, including missiles and ammunition,⁶¹ and Japan began to reverse a decade of efforts to strengthen good relations with Moscow. By sharing intelligence and consulting widely, the United States helped generate cohesion among a wide network of like-minded allies and NATO partners around the world.⁶²

There are still many states around the world, including within NATO and among partners, that are weary of confronting Russia or China. While some NATO partners engaged alongside the Alliance in support of Ukraine, others resisted. The *Economist* argued that those resisting were driven by a range of concerns including food prices, energy dependence, ideology, national strategic ambition, fear, or by a "history of Western hypocrisy and selfishness." The list of countries that rebuffed the U.S. call to impose sanctions on Russia included U.S. allies like India and NATO partners, such as Pakistan. Forty countries around the world opposed or abstained from the UN resolution condemning Russia. Many of these states are part of the "Global South," increasingly energized and coordinated in their criticism of the West for what they see as self-serving policies on climate change, uneven distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and the U.S.-led global war on terror. Russia and China have reinforced and amplified these grievances.⁶³

So what explains NATO's appeal for like-minded partners in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific region, and what should the Alliance prioritize as it implements the 2022 Strategic Concept? The study findings demonstrate that NATO's appeal is especially resilient among like-minded partner states in Europe and the Indo-Pacific despite NATO's inability to provide deterrence for Ukraine or play a meaningful military role in the Indo-Pacific. The reasons for this enduring appeal include the centrality of NATO in U.S. defense strategy and transatlantic relations, its role in setting international norms and standards for militaries, and its capacity-building programs, which include support for reforms, education, training, and exercises, all of which sustain people-to-people connections across generations. There are also opportunities for forward-looking

cooperation: NATO's platforms for S&T cooperation are ripe for reform, and partners are keen for more political consultations on topics of major international concern.

U.S. Leadership

The U.S. commitment to NATO and the status of the Alliance as the most institutionalized and advanced of all U.S. alliances are the most important and enduring drivers for NATO's partnerships with like-minded states. In 2019, Frühling argued that the topics discussed among the United States and its closest NATO Allies in the NAC, whether that be Afghanistan, arms control, Ukraine's security, the changing technology landscape, and increasingly, China, are as important for the Allies as they are for this group of partner states. Deliberations in the NAC reveal much about the U.S. and major Allied positions, and their decisions have direct consequences for partners.⁶⁴ In interviews, nearly all European NATO aspirants, neutral, and Indo-Pacific partners described the U.S. commitment to NATO and the importance of NATO as a locus of strategic political exchange between the United States and its closest allies on topics of international significance as the primary driver for cooperation.

So long as the United States coordinates more closely with its NATO Allies, and so long as the European Allies have more visibility and access to U.S. defense strategy, policy planning, force posture, and guidance than do other partners around the world, then NATO partnerships will continue to appeal to those states that depend as much on the United States for their security as do the NATO Allies. Interlocutors in Japan explained that there is much to gain from cooperating with America's close European Allies because of their similarly sized economies and militaries, overlapping assessments of the international security environment (despite different priorities), and their shared interests in preserving interoperability with the United States and other regional states that are also NATO partners. NATO aspirants, neutrals, and Indo-Pacific NATO partners are also keen to understand how the United States and its NATO Allies will divide their attention between the challenges posed by Russia and China.

Partners are also watching to see how NATO responds when its interests are challenged outside its territory. Beyond Ukraine, some partners question the authenticity of NATO's attention to the Indo-Pacific region. Apart from the United States, France, and the UK, which have direct interests in the region and capabilities at hand, some partners wonder whether NATO's attention to challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific represented a genuine strategic concern or whether it marked a signaling exercise in transatlantic relations. A Japanese interlocutor mentioned a potential "America factor" in European interest and questioned whether European attention resulted from U.S. pressure, aspirations for European strategic autonomy,

or a genuine commitment to the region.⁶⁵ It remains unclear how the U.S. Government and Europe will cooperate in the Indo-Pacific, and, compounding this uncertainty, some voices are calling for a division of labor in which the United States focuses on China and NATO/Europe on Russia.⁶⁶

For NATO, EU aspirants, and European neutrals, the Alliance has become an integral part of a web of international organizations—the EU, UN, and OSCE—that provides for their security. The United States remains their primary defense partner and their most important outside investor. For Ukraine, the United States has provided the lion's share of military support since Russia's annexation of Crimea and continues to do so during the 2022 phase of the war, though NATO's partnership programs expanded significantly during that period and have tangibly increased Kyiv's resilience and its ability to field Western support. U.S. engagement also drives cooperation for European neutral or nonaligned partners, which reported that their commitments to NATO are strengthened by U.S. engagement and, especially, by the restoration of trust between the United States and its European allies after the Trump administration.⁶⁷ Equally, neutral states reported that enhanced NATO-EU cooperation leverages synergies between the two organizations and helps them allocate resources for cooperation, provided that trust in the U.S. commitment to NATO continues.⁶⁸

Non-NATO partners are also keen to see how the Alliance will define its role when its interests and values are threatened by Russia and/or by China outside its territory. They are curious about how the United States and the Allies will distinguish between and prioritize among these challenges and what role NATO will aspire to play in the Indo-Pacific region or in the global commons, which includes challenges to freedom of navigation at sea, cyber and information space, peaceful conduct in outer space, and in regions such as the Arctic and Antarctic. The individual NATO Allies are all independent sovereign states, but partners generally believe that the United States plays an outsized role in shaping NATO policy when it comes to prioritization among these challenges in the Alliance's strategy.⁶⁹ As one Indo-Pacific ambassador to NATO mentioned, "This may sound irresponsible, but we, partners, are waiting to hear from NATO [for a clear direction], even though we know it will be hard to achieve."⁷⁰

Interoperability and Standards

Achieving NATO interoperability is another enduring driver for partner states in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region, and it has persisted despite the winding down of NATO's out-of-area missions and operations. NATO interoperability is the "ability for Allies to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives."⁷¹ NATO has

striven to build and sustain interoperability among the Allies across four components: technical, procedural, human, and information interoperability, and it has not been easy. Building and sustaining interoperability with partner contributors to ISAF and other operations has also been important, especially given NATO's high operational tempo in the 2000s and early 2010s. For partner states in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific, achieving and strengthening NATO interoperability has proved a more important driver for cooperation than the operations themselves.

Achieving, preserving, and strengthening NATO interoperability is especially important for NATO-aspirant states and like-minded partners that are most likely to work with NATO in a collective defense contingency or crisis management operation in Europe or on its periphery. Interoperability is also important, however, for other partner states such as Serbia, which may never contribute directly to a NATO operation but aspires to join the EU, benefits from NATO partnership programs, and wants to be able to work with neighboring states. Partners repeatedly point to NATO as setting the international standard for modern and capable militaries. Achieving NATO interoperability helps partners plug into NATO operations when their interests overlap, and it also allows them to work together outside the NATO framework, including, for example, through the UN or in disaster management and humanitarian relief after earthquakes, such as in the Pacific.⁷² NATO interoperability facilitates cooperation with the United States, EU, UN, coalitions of the willing, and other flexible formats.

Since 2014, NATO has taken steps to preserve interoperability with partners. The Wales Summit Partnership Interoperability Initiative offered Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships to select states and the wider Interoperability Platform engaged a larger group of partners. NATO officials report there are currently more partners seeking interoperability assistance than there are allied staff and resources to evaluate and certify.⁷³ European partners and aspiring NATO members such as Ukraine and Georgia have been major contributors to nearly all NATO-led missions and operations, and Sweden and Finland expect to play a significant role in any collective defense contingency in northeast Europe. NATO partners in the Indo-Pacific are also looking to explore lessons learned about interoperability with NATO for their own regional cooperation. As scholars Luis Simón, Alexander Lanoszka, and Hugo Meijer point out, NATO may not offer a model for their region, but they are experimenting with new forms of cooperation, including through the QUAD, trilaterals (United States–Japan–Australia and United States–South Korea–Australia),⁷⁴ and now through AUKUS.⁷⁵

Military standards are an important component of interoperability. Historically, NATO dictated the design of ships, aircraft, and equipment as well as civilian infrastructure, such as bridges, railways, and ports. During the Cold War, some even displayed placards indicating

they met NATO standards and specifications.⁷⁶ Over time, NATO's standards-setting capacity has been reduced, even as this role has become more important. In a recent study for the NATO Defense College, Paul Beckley argues that NATO has neglected its role in this area. Of nearly 6,000 standards documents in the Alliance's database, fewer than 200 were developed between 2010 and 2020.⁷⁷ The risk, as he sees it, is that China's state-led investment and standards could be allowed to achieve dominance in some infrastructure and industries as a result. Performance is now predicated on "system design and rule-making" and not just innovation, technology, and production. NATO standards are likely to grow more important in an internationally competitive environment.⁷⁸

Reviving NATO's centrality in international standards-setting can sustain NATO's relevance for Allies and for its partners. This would require achieving transatlantic consensus and a strategy to preserve NATO's relevance for standardization with increased speed, flexibility, discipline, and cohesion.⁷⁹ It also requires ensuring emerging and disruptive technologies are incorporated into militaries in ways that are consistent with international law and the Alliance's values. This was especially important for partners with traditions of nonalignment or neutrality and for partners like New Zealand, where there is skepticism of allied efforts in disarmament and arms control.⁸⁰ NATO's high-innovation partners shared an ambition to leverage NATO as a horizon-scanning instrument for EDTs and a clearinghouse for lessons learned and best practices.⁸¹

Partners also want to track NATO discussions on ethical use and codes of conduct for emerging technologies, including in the new domains of cyber and space. This is important for partners already fielding advanced technologies and for those that remain cautious, including, for example, New Zealand. NATO norms in other areas are also important, especially human security, and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, military medicine, and disaster response.⁸² It is the collective ability of the Allies to project force through interoperability and norms that is appealing. Beyond equipment, interoperability requires the Allies and partners to be able to share doctrine, procedures, infrastructure, bases, and communications. They must be able to work from common facilities and communicate with others effectively. NATO norms and standards are appealing to potential new partners as well, such as South Africa, Singapore, Brazil, and India.⁸³

Capacity-Building and Reforms

NATO has decades of experience with capacity-building programs, which offer partners support with defense and security sector reforms, capabilities development, and strengthening resilience. Some of the work takes place in joint crisis management missions or operations, but

much of it takes place in the context of NATO's partnerships and wider cooperative security programs. Partnership programs are designed to be driven by partners' specific needs, but the decisions about NATO's overall priorities for defense and related security-building packages are taken in the NAC and allow the Alliance to prioritize its vulnerable and strategically important partners. Since 2014, for example, NATO expanded cooperation with Ukraine significantly. The Comprehensive Assistance Package supported reforms, capabilities development, education, training, and Ukraine's ability to address hybrid threats. The war's outcome is still uncertain, but these programs have strengthened Ukraine's ability to resist Russia's aggression.

Interviews with partners in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific region both indicate that capacity-building programs work well, are in demand, and are still underfunded. The DCB builds on a track record in education, training, and mentoring, and provides substantial packages for Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Moldova, Tunisia, and for UN peacekeeping. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly recommended extending this work in the Western Balkans.⁸⁴ Partners also value NATO Trust Fund projects that enable Allies and partners to support other partners' projects on topics such as demilitarization, defense transformation, or capacity-building. Sixteen countries are currently benefiting from Trust Fund support through the Building Integrity Program.⁸⁵ The Trust Fund structure encourages bilateral cooperation among Allies and partners as well as helping to bridge political gaps, but its voluntary nature can result in inconsistent funding for long-term initiatives. The Allies recognize the importance of capacity-building work and pledged to "substantially strengthen NATO's ability to provide training and capacity building to help partners."⁸⁶

The scale of NATO capacity-building activities and the fact that they are "partner driven" make it difficult for Brussels to maintain visibility over the full range of activities and over partners' development over time. NATO officials described overlapping programs within the Alliance, opaque bilateral contributions from Allies to partners, and, on occasion, gaps in the Allies' willingness to resource NATO capacity-building projects through partnership programs.⁸⁷ This lack of visibility and understanding of the level of partner capacity has become problematic in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, where allied intelligence agencies underestimated Ukrainians' capacity and will to resist Russian aggression. Given that NATO members are sovereign states with their own interests and bilateral relationships with partners, including with Ukraine, it is difficult for Brussels to have visibility over cooperation conducted both through NATO's programs and through informal cooperation that takes place between individual Allies and partner states such as Ukraine.⁸⁸

Finally, interviews indicate that both European and Indo-Pacific partners see value in adapting capacity-building programs for more complex emerging challenges. They are interested in working to thwart the targeting of their state institutions' including critical democratic and societal infrastructure. Prior to the invasion and throughout the ensuing conflict, Ukraine has been subjected to heightened cyber, information, economic pressure, and below-the-threshold campaigns designed to weaken Kyiv's capacity and render it unable to leverage what Western military support. Other states are facing increasing attempts to undermine state institutions, infrastructure, and shape public opinion, too. NATO's capacity-building efforts might adapt as a result to incorporate more nonmilitary capacity and efforts to foster whole-of-government and whole-of-society resilience to these challenges. NATO official, Marcin Kozieł, has argued that the Alliance could improve its toolbox by developing and sharing a holistic approach to capacity-building through efforts that go beyond defense institutions.⁸⁹

Newly aspiring NATO members Sweden and Finland have much to offer the Alliance and other partners in this area. In interviews, they discussed their Total Defense and Comprehensive Security concepts and implications for the Alliance's evolution toward these more holistic approaches that integrate civilian and military sectors to build greater national and shared resilience among Allies and partners.⁹⁰ The concepts are uniquely suited to challenges below the threshold of armed conflict and include close coordination between border control, law enforcement, and special forces as well as intragovernmental communications and new domains such as cyberspace.⁹¹ NATO education, training, exercises, and access to the accredited Centers of Excellence combined with Building Integrity Program, Trust Funds, and other NATO programs are important elements of capacity-building through the sharing of good practice on comprehensive security and strengthening resilience.⁹²

Science and Technology Cooperation

Partners in both regions spoke of the strategic value of S&T cooperation through NATO partnership programs and suggested priorities to adapt them. The Alliance's Science for Peace and Security Programme (SPS) has long been the primary platform for promoting S&T cooperation among Allies and partner states. The SPS offers funding, advice, and platforms for cooperation on a range of topics, which currently includes counterterrorism, cyber, energy, environmental security, and, increasingly, advanced technologies. In 2020, NATO's SPS Programme approved 17 new activities in Ukraine and in the Western Balkans, including some focused on next-generation command systems and surveillance.⁹³ Partners in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Republic of Korea, highlighted the SPS Programme's DEXTER Programme, which

links 11 laboratories from Allies and partners in both regions and works on sensor fusion technologies designed to detect explosives in public spaces.⁹⁴

The 2020 SPS Annual Report identifies more than 450 cooperation activities among Allies and partners that are still guided by the 2010 Strategic Concept and the 2011 Berlin partnership policies.⁹⁵ For the Allies, S&T cooperation is still often framed as an exercise in capacity-building rather than for two-way learning or part of a broader strategy to preserve NATO’s technological edge in a competitive environment. An SPS overhaul in the wake of the 2022 Strategic Concept could help the Alliance leverage its capable partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific as part of its wider strategy. Some of these partners have innovation hubs, advanced industries, and tech-savvy workforces of their own, and many are on the frontlines of competition with rivals and already fielding technologies while making critical decisions to safeguard their infrastructure. In fact, eight of the world’s most innovative economies, as ranked by the 2021 World Intellectual Property Organization index, are among NATO’s partner states in these two regions (table 2). NATO is committed to preserving its technological edge and ensuring adaptation and preparedness for future warfare, but it is not clear the Alliance has considered integrating its partnerships as part of that wider strategy. Allied efforts included increasing cooperation between Allied Command Transformation and the Office of the Chief Scientist, an updated military strategy, and a new Warfighting Capstone Concept.⁹⁶ NATO institutions are adapting; increasing cooperation with the EU, the private sector, and academic institutions; and have committed to bringing the Allies along, aligning national and NATO strategies. In 2022, NATO launched the Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA), a network of test centers and accelerator sites, and

Table 2. NATO Partners Ranked Among World’s Most Innovative Economies

Partner	Rank
Switzerland	1
Sweden	2
Republic of Korea	5
Finland	7
Japan	13
Austria	18
Ireland	19
New Zealand	26

Source: Soumitra Dutta et al., eds., *Global Innovation Index 2021: Tracking Innovation Through the COVID-19 Crisis*, 14th ed. (Geneva: World Intellectual Property Organization, 2021), available at <https://www.wipo.int/global_innovation_index/en/2021/>.

an Innovation Fund worth approximately \$1 billion.⁹⁷ It convened an advisory group and adopted an artificial intelligence strategy as part of a more comprehensive emerging and disruptive technologies strategy that aims at “identifying, developing, and adopting EDTs at the speed of relevance, guided by principles of responsive use, in accordance with international law, and taking into account discussions in relevant international fora.”⁹⁸

To be sure, it is challenging to work with states that are not Alliance members on sensitive technologies and standards for their development and use. In a competitive international environment, however, cooperation can inform NATO's transformation and enhance its competitive edge. Partners noted that some of this work has already begun. When NATO developed its artificial intelligence strategy, for example, Swedish and Finnish interlocutors shared they were plugged into these discussions alongside representatives from the EU as they discussed ways to address these challenges.⁹⁹ Other partners expressed an interest in tracking or learning from NATO's EDT strategies, as well as the new DIANA and Innovation Fund initiatives. Some are more cautious and focused on ethical and legal concerns around the fielding of EDTs, while others are looking for opportunities to advance cooperation and exchange views on future warfare operating environments. NATO's EDT Advisory Group emphasized the importance of expanding consultation with these partners, arguing that NATO “is exceptionally well placed to be a global driver of a values-based innovation agenda.”¹⁰⁰

NATO's most capable partners in these two priority regions are keen for NATO to update its SPS programs to reflect 2022 priorities, incorporate more work on EDTs, and for NATO to reduce the bureaucratic hurdles to cooperation and prioritize emerging challenges. The NATO 2030 report identifies a handful of specific and rapidly advancing technologies for attention.¹⁰¹ By strengthening NATO's platforms for S&T cooperation, updating the framework to emphasize mutual learning in a handful of specific technologies, and aligning that work with NATO's strategy for its own continuous adaptation, the Alliance can commit to not only bringing the allies along but also leveraging its most capable partners, including in different domains. By engaging select partners in these processes, the Alliance also stands a better chance of maintaining its technological edge and setting the international normative and legal framework for the military fielding of advanced and emerging technologies, ensuring consistency with NATO's values and international law.

Political Consultations

NATO partners are calling for more frequent political consultations in flexible formats on topics of global interest, such as China's rise and relationship with Russia, emerging technologies,

climate change, the global commons, and shocks to the international system such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Trends and shocks such as these make the Alliance's cooperative security agenda not only more complex but also more important. This is especially true in a competitive environment in which partners are not entirely clear whether or what role NATO aspires to play when its security interests and values are challenged outside NATO territory and when its partners are attacked or rendered vulnerable by China's actions, wider climate or food insecurity, or other developments.¹⁰²

It has become clear NATO's regional groupings for political consultations are outdated. A Ukrainian interlocutor mentioned that the EAPC continues to meet, for example, but that "concrete deliverables have been fewer and fewer since 2014."¹⁰³ There is no equivalent format for the Indo-Pacific, but findings suggest that formalizing a similar structure for the Asia-Pacific Four, for example, which some in the West have recommended, could be counterproductive.¹⁰⁴ A New Zealand official noted that the "AP-4" is not a structure those partners would have come up with on their own,¹⁰⁵ and academics generally agree that more flexible formats and dialogue with existing regional groupings, whether the QUAD, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), or with emerging trilaterals, would be more appropriate.¹⁰⁶ They argued that bilateral consultations still offer value in steering the region toward a more unified regional threat assessment. NATO might invite Japan and South Korea for Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships, as Dan Hamilton recommends,¹⁰⁷ or set up a Center of Excellence in the region,¹⁰⁸ but should engage existing structures in the region.

NATO partner states are eager for more robust and reciprocal discussions, too, especially on topics such as China's rise and its regional and global implications, and the Alliance's aspirations when it comes to competing with China. China's rise in Asia renders NATO's partnerships more complicated in some ways, both because some partners may not be willing to engage in cooperation that could be understood as antagonistic toward China and because some will not want to be pushed into a position of having to choose a side. This is particularly true of Indo-Pacific partners, but it is also true of European partners like Serbia and, potentially, of other NATO partners that maintain a neutral or nonaligned political and/or military tradition. That said, partners like Japan are still looking for a broader "chorus of voices" that offers alternative models and narratives to what China presents for the region.¹⁰⁹ Of course, Indo-Pacific partners appreciate that European allies are limited in what they can bring to the Pacific in terms of capabilities, but their voices in international forums, combined with symbolic efforts such as sailing naval vessels through the region, strengthen this chorus.

NATO and partners in both the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific share concerns about China's military modernization, regional maritime claims, investments and theft of technology and infrastructure, and cooperation with Russia. They also have specific national dependencies, political circumstances, and sensitivities that must be understood and managed in political consultations. This is especially true as allied positions on China have hardened since 2020. Initially hopeful that NATO could pursue common interests with China in counterpiracy or climate change, the 2021 NATO summit communiqué described China as a “destabilizing force and systemic challenge, whose actions threaten the rules-based international order.”¹¹⁰ Equipping NATO for strategic competition with China (and Russia) requires more than shoring up its military capabilities and technological edge. Like-minded partners engaged in this study are requesting that NATO consult more frequently, better understand regional and geopolitical sensitivities, and prepare to engage in a supporting role.

Political consultations help manage expectations on both sides, clarify European strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region that are distinct from those of the United States, and establish “rules of the game” for cooperating with China while protecting strategic assets and infrastructure.¹¹¹ Both sides are juggling a need for outside investment with a list of concerns arising from China's investments in infrastructure, digital information, and communications systems. They are also dealing with cyber attacks, espionage, and concerns about China's cooperation with Russia. This nascent but growing cooperation takes place in the Indo-Pacific and in Europe, where China's military engagement remains limited to exercises in the Mediterranean and port calls to Kaliningrad, but where their cooperation on Arctic raw materials or dual-use technologies could have more important strategic consequences.¹¹²

Policy Recommendations

The 2022 U.S. NDS commits the Department of Defense to advancing U.S. objectives through integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages. *Integrated deterrence* refers to the combining of U.S. strengths across multiple domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of power, and “our unmatched network of alliances and partnerships.”¹¹³ The defense strategy also recognizes that

mutually-beneficial alliances and partnerships are an enduring strength for the United States, and are critical to achieving our objectives, as the unified response to Russia's further invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated. Answering this “call

to action,” the Department will incorporate ally and partner perspectives, competencies, and advantages at every stage of defense planning.¹¹⁴

NATO, the most capable and institutionalized of U.S. alliances, can play a role in bolstering integrated deterrence not only vis-à-vis Russia in Europe but also by helping shape the environment in areas where competition with China plays out. NATO’s new strategy adapts the Alliance for this environment. By prioritizing defense and deterrence, it will concentrate the Allies on deterring Russia’s aggression against NATO member states and supporting partners in Eastern Europe. By updating its other core tasks, including partnerships and cooperative security, NATO can maximize coordination and deepen the sinews of cooperation among U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and in Europe. Success will depend on not only NATO’s pursuit of its own interests but also NATO understanding of partner perspectives and interests. This study captures their perspectives at a critical juncture in alliance history.

To strengthen and adapt NATO partnerships for strategic competition and integrated deterrence, the United States should consider the following recommendations.

Preserve U.S. Commitment to and Leadership Within NATO. NATO’s centrality in transatlantic defense and its status as the most advanced and institutionalized of U.S. alliances are the primary drivers for cooperation among European and Indo-Pacific partners. By recommitting to NATO and reinvigorating U.S. leadership, the United States can maximize NATO’s appeal to existing and potential new partners. U.S. leadership ensures partnerships remain a valuable instrument for political and military coordination on topics of major international concern, including Russia, China, and climate and technology, among others. To be sure, the United States will continue to seek new formats for cooperation, but it should not lose sight of NATO partnerships as a tool for adapting the Alliance and building integrated deterrence.

Strengthen NATO Capacity-Building and Standard-Setting Initiatives. The United States should advocate for stronger and more codified set of NATO capacity-building programs for partner states and to increase common funding for these efforts. Partners rely on these programs’ ability to target their vulnerabilities and strengthen institutions and capacity to provide for their own regional security. NATO interoperability is an important objective for these partners. The United States should advocate for a stronger role for NATO in setting international norms and standards, including in newer areas such as military medicine, disaster relief, human security, and Women, Peace, and Security. NATO’s role as the international gold standard for modern militaries allows it to get ahead of competitors and shape the environment, strengthening its competitive advantages.

Expand Partner Access to NATO Education, Training, and Exercises. NATO partnerships sustain people-to-people connectivity, improving coordination among Allies and partners and shaping the international environment. The United States should advocate for more partner access to NATO education, training, exercises, and to the Centers of Excellence. These programs build expertise and good practice in critical areas such as resilience, civil-military cooperation, maritime security, cyber defense, and others. By integrating partners into these programs, NATO can expand partner familiarity with its structures and processes and forge a sense of shared security and resilience. This connectivity creates a bench of defense personnel in partner states that readily interfaces with NATO and a better net assessment capability that relies on a broader spectrum of intelligence and diplomatic input.¹¹⁵

Update NATO Platforms for S&T Cooperation with Partners. Partners see NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme as an important platform for collaboration in a competitive environment. The United States should advocate for a greater SPS emphasis on EDTs and for reducing institutional and bureaucratic obstacles to S&T cooperation where possible. The United States should advocate for more alignment between NATO SPS and its overarching strategy for continuous adaptation and the preservation of the Alliance's technological edge. Both NATO and the United States would benefit from a mindset that emphasizes mutual learning with capable partners alongside its more traditional understanding of the SPS Programme as an exercise in partner capacity-building. NATO might consider improving transparency or engaging selected partners in its nascent DIANA or Innovation Fund initiatives.

Expand Political Consultations with European and Indo-Pacific Partners. NATO's regional groupings for partners have lost their strategic value. The United States should advocate for more regular but flexible consultations with partners in the "30+N" format as well as through smaller minilateral groups of Allies and partners on topics of mutual concern. In the Indo-Pacific region, NATO should expand engagement with existing and emerging groups in the region, especially ASEAN and the emerging trilaterals, and it should offer Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships to Japan and South Korea. For the first time, NATO invited its four most capable Indo-Pacific partners and close European partners to the Madrid Summit in June 2022. The United States should encourage the Alliance to bring these partners together more frequently for consultations on topics of major international concern, including on Russia, China, emerging technology, pandemics, or climate change.

Recommit NATO to Its Values Internally and in Its Partnerships. The United States recognizes its "vital national interests compel the deepest connection to the Indo-Pacific region, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. And we will be mindful of both our values and our interests

as we engage partner nations.”¹¹⁶ U.S. Congressman Gerry Connolly (D-VA), also President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, has argued it is time for the Alliance to renew its commitment to values. NATO must always maintain the option to work with a broad and diverse group of partners when necessary, but the United States should encourage NATO to prioritize and expand cooperation with those partners that share commitments to NATO values: democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law. This will help the Alliance confront systemic competition from a position of strength that is “firmly rooted in transatlantic solidarity.”¹¹⁷

Conclusion

The Biden administration has already begun to lay the groundwork for stronger NATO partnerships by recommitting to NATO and restoring U.S. leadership in the Alliance. President Biden’s effective diplomacy and intelligence-sharing in the weeks before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 generated a remarkable level of political cohesion and unity among NATO member states and between Allies and partners. By strengthening cooperation between NATO and its closest partners, especially in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific, the United States can strengthen political and military coordination among its network of allies and partners, enhancing integrated deterrence and adapting the wider U.S. system of alliances for strategic competition with China and Russia.

The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept marks an important milestone in Alliance history. Two partners, Sweden and Finland, have started down the path to membership, and Indo-Pacific leaders from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea met to discuss enhancing cooperation with NATO. In addition, the entire Alliance is now committed to bolstering the first core task, defense and deterrence, especially along its eastern flank. The Allies preserved and updated the core tasks of crisis prevention and management and cooperative security as well. This study has focused on the latter and contributes to policy debate over the reconceptualization of cooperative security and the priorities for partnerships during implementation. Because cooperation with NATO will always be voluntary for partners, it is essential that the United States and NATO understand partner perspectives and ensure that NATO’s cooperation programs continue to deliver for mutual and overlapping interests.

This study has focused on assessing European and Indo-Pacific partner perspectives on NATO’s partnerships programs and the Alliance’s overall adaptation for an environment characterized by strategic competition with Russia and China, and a growing list of transboundary challenges. The findings indicate that U.S. leadership in NATO, the Alliance’s capacity-building programs, and mechanisms for strengthening NATO interoperability are enduring drivers

for partner cooperation. In its NATO policy, the United States should encourage the Allies to strengthen and codify their capacity-building programs for partners, expand their S&T cooperation with partners in EDTs and on other emerging challenges, and expand more flexible political consultations on topics of international concern. It is especially important that NATO brings together its capable, frontline, and like-minded partners from Europe and the Indo-Pacific region for regular consultations.

These NATO partners share a similar assessment of the international environment with the United States and its NATO Allies. They appreciate the value of NATO, and they see opportunities to enhance collaboration through the Alliance's formal structures, which offer strategic benefits for both sides while enabling partners to work together among themselves and with individual Allies in other multilateral settings. Future conflicts will be shaped by competition with Russia and China, and they are more likely to be geographically unbound, expanding across multiple domains, or with global security implications. The United States will always pursue new and flexible structures for cooperation, but it should not lose sight of the value of NATO partnerships as an effective tool for implementing integrated deterrence, strengthening U.S. competitive advantages, and shaping the environment in ways that serve U.S. interests and values.

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³ *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 3, 2021), available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>>. The second priority outlined in the National Defense Strategy fact sheet is also “Deterring strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners.” See “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy.”

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