



# Cooperation in an Era of Strategic Competition

## EU-NATO Relations in the Context of War and Rivalry

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This Policy Brief looks at the growing relations and cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It does so in the context of a return to war in Europe and growing strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and China. Europeans have long been called to take on more responsibility for their own defence and there is a window of opportunity to build these relations sooner rather than later. To this end, this Policy Brief makes three broad points about the state and future of EU-NATO cooperation.

- Russia's brutal war on Ukraine has served to push European governments politically closer together. There can be no question that the main priority today is the defence of Europe. Yet, the EU and NATO still need to re-tool for an

era of great power rivalry but not all European governments agree on the nature and response to this rivalry.

- Although the EU and NATO are “learning by doing” as organisations in essential policy fields such as outer space, resilience and critical infrastructure protection, the two bodies need to build on and move beyond political dialogue as the main symbol and basis of cooperation.
- With the US signalling that it wants to focus more on the Indo-Pacific and China in the future, there is a need for the EU and NATO to work together in strategic areas that will enhance the defence of Europe.

## Cooperation by decree?

On 10 January 2023, in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, the EU and NATO signed yet another Joint Declaration – it was the third of its kind, with two others released in 2016 and 2018. These Joint Declarations have become an important element of the EU and NATO's symbolic and declaratory stance towards each other: the aim is, on paper at least, to dispel any sense of competition between the organisations and lay out specific domains of cooperation. In the first declaration, the EU and NATO underlined the importance of joint efforts on defence capabilities, exercises, operations, capacity building and other issues. In the second declaration, the focus was on military mobility, cyber security, hybrid threats, counter-terrorism and women and security. In the most recent declaration, the two organisations pledge to work closer on critical infrastructure protection, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, climate change and foreign interference.

With the exception of nuclear issues, there is very little that the EU and NATO do not speak directly about today. Yet, for genuine cooperation to take hold success cannot be measured simply in terms of common policy interests – the depth of cooperation in each of these areas is of greater importance. For example, in its regular progress reports on the 74 common proposals set out in the joint declarations, the EU and NATO celebrate the frequency of political dialogues, consultations and staff-to-staff meetings. Without denigrating the political and bureaucratic importance of this type of engagement, it does raise questions about the depth of EU-NATO cooperation. For cynics, focusing on ad hoc meetings between the EU and NATO's political bodies can be seen as a cosmetic way to avoid addressing the deep-seated political issues barring enhanced cooperation between the EU and NATO.

We know that the long-standing issue of Turkey-Cyprus-Greece relations has a direct impact on the degree to which the two organisations can share information and enhance cooperation. Brexit and the Trump Presidency also raised serious questions about the space for meaningful EU-NATO cooperation. Long-standing issues related to defence industrial interests have also held sway over cooperation. So, while the joint declarations and staff-to-staff meetings go some way to developing inter-institutional understanding and more of a “common language” for the strategic

issues facing Europe, they do not do much to address structural challenges.

## Making cooperation count

There is a need for both organisations to demonstrate genuine cooperation. The accession of Finland into NATO and the future accession of Sweden into the alliance, not to mention Denmark's opt-in to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), are signs that the Union and NATO are becoming more politically aligned. Although the US has been responsible for the bulk of military support to Ukraine, European governments have started to take their defence more seriously and have also delivered weapons to Ukraine, while also increasing their defence spending. In fact, Russia's war on Ukraine has done more than any strategy or declaration to provide focus to the EU-NATO partnership. For example, while NATO reinforces the alliance with nuclear and conventional forces, the EU is procuring ammunition for Ukraine and its member states while also helping to militarily train Ukrainian armed forces.

The defence of Europe is today a core aim for the EU and NATO because of the war, but the anticipation of what might occur in future US elections is also driving European governments to enhance their own defence – even opponents of the idea of “strategic autonomy” nevertheless call for higher defence spending, the development of Europe's defence industry and the building up of military forces in Europe. As the Sino-American rivalry evolves, Europeans will need to take up more responsibility for the defence burden in Europe. This is particularly relevant in a context where Russia and China actively seek to challenge the West in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

Yet, even if the imperative for closer cooperation is plain to see, the fact that both the EU and NATO take political decisions by consensus and unanimity means that disagreement between governments can hamper cooperation. The fact that a single government in each organisation can block decisions on security and defence is a serious vulnerability in EU-NATO cooperation. It has also forced upon governments in each organisation to think creatively about cooperation: this can take the form of ad hoc coalitions outside the EU and NATO or the use of constructive abstention in the case of the EU to not block decisions while also flagging opposition to a decision (i.e. in the area of sanctions or military training missions).

Yet, even with this consensus-centric nature to each organisation there are ways for the EU and NATO to work closer together. For example, the EU's and NATO's flagship project on military mobility is a powerful indication of close cooperation. Here, the EU brings its financial and regulatory power to bear on enhancing military infrastructure that is of benefit to NATO allies and EU members. On cyber defence, the two organisations already exchange information on cyber incidents and NATO's and the EU's cyber response teams have a technical arrangement in place to information exchange. There are also indications that cooperation in areas such as missile defence may eventually form a basis for closer EU-NATO cooperation. While the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) sees 17 European states coordinate missile defence formally outside of the EU and NATO frameworks, there may be scope in the future to align missile defence efforts with NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence Network and nascent EU efforts to finance missile defence technologies under the European Defence Fund and potential future European Defence Investment Programme.

### **Deepening the strategic relevance of EU-NATO cooperation**

Beyond the steps taken in areas such as military mobility, there are other areas ripe for closer EU-NATO cooperation. In particular, it is of vital importance that the EU and NATO work closer together on outer space and critical infrastructure protection. On space, the EU has now broken a taboo with its new space and defence strategy that outerspace and defence are intertwined. Recognising that space assets such as Galileo, Copernicus and eventually IRIS<sup>2</sup> are and will be of indispensable importance for the defence of Europe, it is right that the Union develops a strategic reading of space that is closer to NATO's own understanding. Closer working arrangements between the EU's space-related institutional bodies (e.g. EU Satellite Centre and the EU Space Programme Agency) and NATO's Space Centre and Centre of Excellence on Space is a relatively easy way to initiate cooperation. However, the EU and NATO should also plan joint exercises for space-based threats, not least because it remains unclear how either organisation would respond to an attack on space assets in concrete terms. Without necessarily making such a response strategy public, both organisations have a vested interest in developing credible deterrence against malign actions against Europe's space assets.

This same logic extends to critical infrastructure protection more broadly, although the protection of energy, transportation and communications infrastructure is in many respects more multifaceted. For example, the protection of subsea communications cables and at-sea energy infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines and electricity cables requires a mix of surveillance, standardisation, early warning, information sharing and crisis response measures. Sharing information for such critical infrastructure may fall hostage to traditional EU-NATO differences, especially if critical infrastructure in the Eastern Mediterranean is included in early initiatives. It might be more beneficial to focus on a pilot project of EU-NATO cooperation in the North Sea where states like the United Kingdom and Norway can bring to bear their extensive expertise and geographical presence. It could be worth building on the 2023 Ostend Declaration signed by 9 European governments by complementing the goal of turning the North Sea into a renewable energy hub with security and resilience measures. This could include the EU and NATO facilitating maritime data and information sharing, surveillance and monitoring and a more continuous at-sea naval presence to dissuade actors such as Russia from engaging in hostile actions.

### **Getting the politics right**

Despite the clear areas for closer EU-NATO cooperation, it would be naïve to overlook the politics that mark each organisation. Certainly, having Finland and (eventually) Sweden within both the EU and NATO will be of great benefit. A possible positive evolution of relations between Cyprus, Greece and Turkey may also benefit the relationship. Even a calmer tone and constructive attitude in EU-UK post-Brexit relations may pave the way for enhanced EU-NATO ties. Ultimately, however, much rests on the shoulders of the US. Although European governments recognise that they need to do more for their own defence, since the war on Ukraine Europe's dependence on the US may have grown – or, at least, there is a reinforced recognition that Europe's efforts towards Ukraine would not have been enough on its own. Turbulence in the transatlantic relationship may be around the corner yet again, however. Forthcoming US elections may see a swing back to an impatient government eager to focus squarely on China, even if it means drawing down the US presence in Europe. As Europeans do not get a vote in American elections, it is up to EU and NATO states to put

political differences behind them with one single goal in mind: the defence of Europe.

Although countries such as Norway are not members of the EU, they play an increasingly important role in fostering closer EU-NATO relations. For example, via the EEA Agreement Norway is an associate country of the European Defence Fund and it is part of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation. Such participation has been largely preconditioned on the potential defence-industrial benefits to be had by working with the EU, but this offers a political opportunity to inform the direction of EU policy in the area of security and defence. Let us not forget that Norway has in the past participated in EU crisis management missions and operations too. Although there has been historical scepticism in Norway towards the Union as a security and defence actor, it is also true that a political dynamic has been unleashed within the EU that Norway has an interest in being close to and informing. There is also a need for a shift in the political logic: those states that favour a more Atlantic focus on defence nevertheless have a strong incentive to set in motion effective EU-NATO cooperation.

Norway can play its role in stimulating EU-NATO cooperation. Part of this role is contributing to EU-NATO cohesion by being fully active in common projects and initiatives, which it is doing. Another part of the role is taking more of a lead in European and NATO approaches to resilience and defence. Countries such as Norway, Finland and Sweden are extremely well-placed to lead the alliance's efforts on "total defence", which encapsulates the need

to bring together civilian and defence efforts to the protection of territory, infrastructure, government and citizens. This is precisely the philosophy towards defence that is in high demand in both NATO and the EU. More precisely, countries such as Norway can share their own national lessons on how to bring the private and public sectors closer together to address societal resilience. This would not just take on a conceptual contribution, but help NATO and the EU become clearer about the capabilities and investments they need to produce and make. The war on Ukraine has only redoubled the need for "total defence" in Europe.

Since the first-ever EU-NATO Joint Declaration in 2016, the two organisations have come some way in developing political relations and practical cooperation. Clearly, over the three declarations signed by the two organisations the scope of cooperation is much wider, but there is a need to ensure the quality of this cooperation. This need has undoubtedly been reinforced since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Notwithstanding potential future shocks to the transatlantic relationship, and given the urgent need to defend Europe, future cooperation should build on initiatives such as military mobility with cooperation in missile defence, outer space, cyber and critical infrastructure protection. Regardless of the known political barriers, there is no need to be sceptical about the potential for EU-NATO cooperation. Continued EU-NATO political dialogue will surely help, but actions always speak louder than words.

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