

DELIVERING TOGETHER

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Targeted partnerships for a secure world

by

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Global peace and security are built on cooperation. At a time of increasing fragmentation and contestation, we need stronger partnerships in the security and defence realm. The EU has always sought partners around the world to support the rules-based multilateral order, but current grave challenges to our common security require increased efforts, new forms of cooperation and targeted partnerships that focus on delivering results.

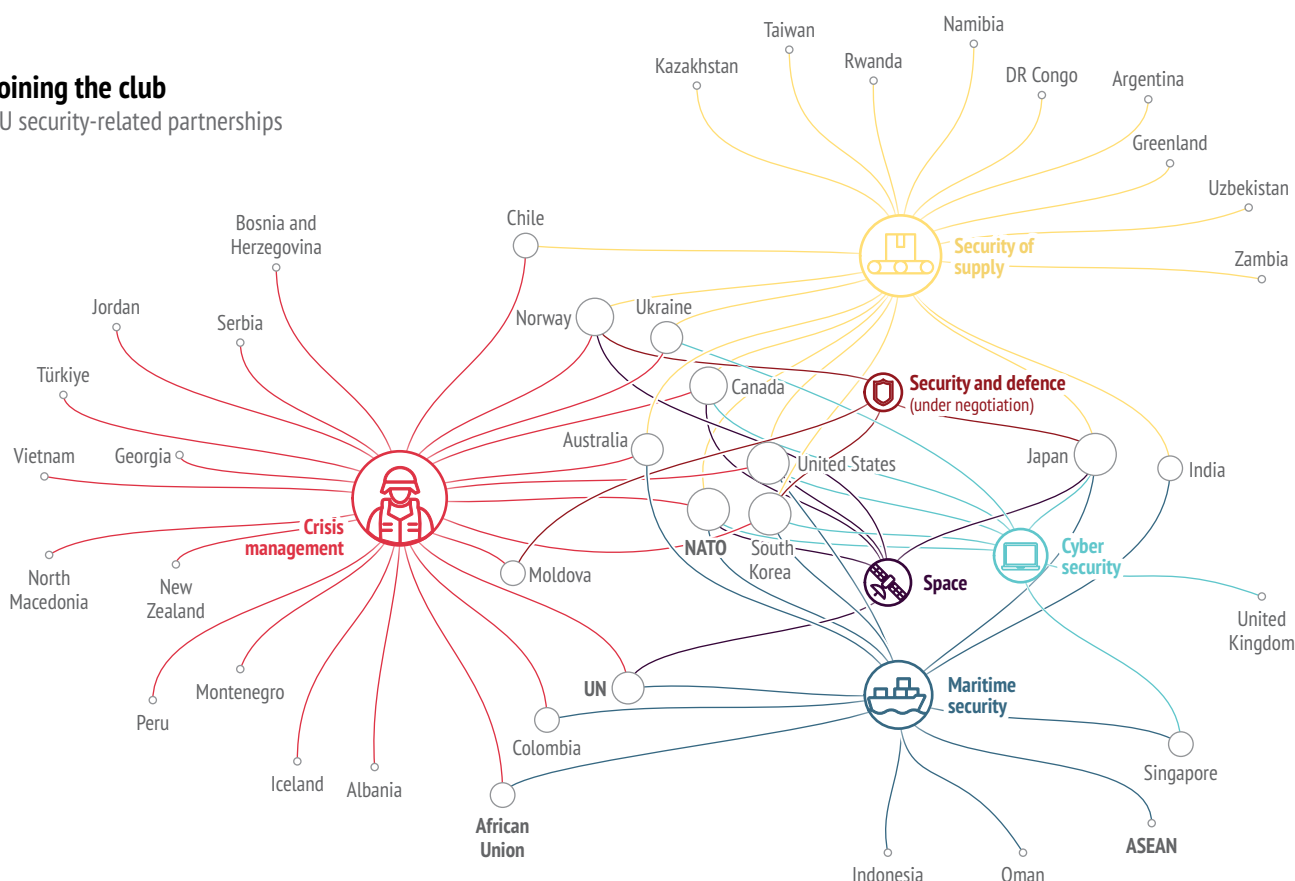
This Brief proposes that to further enhance the ability of the EU and its partners to deliver on security together, the EU could offer its closest partners a 'Partnership Plus' format. Such a format would enable deeper engagement in decision-shaping and capability development initiatives. Given the many global security challenges, there is also a need for more tailored partnerships around the world on key issues of common concern such as: crisis management; protecting the global commons; and safeguarding critical resources and capabilities. The Brief concludes with reflections on how targeted partnerships in these key areas can empower the EU and its partners to work together for peace and security.

Summary

- > The European Union has always sought partners to uphold the rules-based multilateral order. But current challenges to our common security require increased efforts, new forms of cooperation and targeted partnerships that deliver concrete results.
- > The engagement of the EU's closest security and defence partners could be further enhanced through a so-called 'Partnership Plus' format.
- > Issue-specific cooperation on pressing common security issues such as crisis management, protecting global communications and trade routes, and security of supply should be encouraged.
- > By forging targeted partnerships in these key areas, the EU and its partners can strengthen their collective capacity to contribute significantly to peace and security.

Joining the club

EU security-related partnerships



Data: EUISS research based on EU documents, 2024

TAILORING PARTNERSHIPS FOR SECURITY AND DEFENCE

Strengthening cooperation is a priority for the EU and its Member States. Over the past 25 years, the EU has designated several countries and international organisations as ‘strategic partners’. These partnerships have, however, evolved significantly since their inception in the late 1990s. Today, the term ‘EU strategic partnership’ lacks a clear and consensual definition, leading to inconsistencies in policy and implementation⁽⁴⁾. In the diagram above, selected existing EU security-related partnerships are illustrated.

To strengthen security cooperation with selected partners, the EU is currently negotiating a newly-created ‘security and defence partnership instrument’ with several countries – Norway, Japan and South Korea⁽⁵⁾. Other countries will soon be added. These new partnerships are not binding treaties but are rather envisioned as umbrella frameworks based on political commitments under which deeper security and defence cooperation can take place. For example, the recently signed agreement with Moldova seeks to ‘consolidate’ its participation in EU missions and operations, including military exercises, and in defence industry initiatives such as joint procurement, but also to increase the exchange of intelligence⁽⁶⁾.

Partnership Plus

However, some partners like the United States, Norway, Canada, Ukraine, the UN and NATO already cooperate extensively with the EU on a broad range of security and defence issues⁽⁴⁾. Given today’s security situation, the EU could explore ways to deepen the engagement of its closest partners by offering greater access to relevant EU decision-shaping processes on security, defence and capability development. Such a format would need to be coherently designed, building upon these partners’ already significant contributions to European security and shared threat perceptions. One possibility would be for the EU to create a ‘Partnership Plus’ category for its closest partners in security and defence, inviting them to participate in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the Foreign Affairs Council, but without voting rights. To further strengthen common capabilities and resilience, cooperation arrangements with EU agencies such as the European Defence Agency (EDA) and/or the EU Agency for Cyber Security (ENISA) could be negotiated with those close partners lacking such arrangements⁽⁵⁾.

Targeted partnerships

However, today’s global security challenges also require targeted partnerships that can deliver concrete results on issue-specific areas. In this *à la carte* form of partnerships, the main driver for cooperation is shared interests on key security issues that no individual state

or organisation can manage on its own, but on which we all depend. Below, five areas are identified among others in which such targeted partnerships could be further developed: crisis management; maritime security; cybersecurity; outer space; and security of supply.

Crisis management. Maintaining peace and security is a global imperative which requires cooperation. The EU's integrated approach to crisis management draws on the Union's civilian and military assets but also on partnerships. Since 2003, more than 45 third countries have participated in EU missions and operations. To facilitate such cooperation, the EU has signed Framework Agreements with 21 countries as well as declarations on cooperation with the UN, NATO and the African Union⁽⁶⁾. These CSDP partners make key contributions and have at times provided up to 10 % of the total number of personnel deployed under the EU flag, and on occasions have even been among the largest contributors to specific missions⁽⁷⁾.

An increasingly paralysed UN Security Council means that others will have to play a larger role in conflict management. The EU's existing collaboration with CSDP partners alongside its security and defence dialogues with partners around the world provides a foundation for further cooperation. But more needs to be done to build and deliver real capabilities. This requires targeted and joint training as well as appropriate equipment. The European Peace Facility (EPF) is an important instrument in this context.

Maritime security. More than 80 % of global trade depends on maritime shipping and up to 99 % of the world's global data flow is transmitted via undersea cables⁽⁸⁾. The EU maintains a naval presence in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Northwest Indian Ocean, but also provides support to regional maritime security initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea and the Indo-Pacific. For more than ten years the EU has partnered with coastal countries and regional organisations to improve maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea and to counter illicit maritime activity in West Africa⁽⁹⁾. Similarly, the EU has for many years supported maritime domain awareness and capacity building along the critical maritime routes through the Indo-Pacific⁽¹⁰⁾.

The EU and its partners have a common interest and responsibility to step up cooperation on maritime security in strategically important waterways and choke-points around the world. Potential cooperation includes more European-flagged port calls and patrols but also information sharing and capacity building. Surveillance of critical maritime infrastructure, including undersea cables and pipelines, as well as ships and ports, should be prioritised. Joint maritime security exercises between the EU and selected partners to promote interoperability and operational readiness as well as for future capability development should also be intensified. The EU already cooperates on maritime

security with the UN, NATO, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as a growing number of third countries such as Australia, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Oman, Singapore and South Korea, but more countries can and need to join this endeavour on building and fielding concrete and deployable capabilities⁽¹¹⁾.

Cybersecurity. The world economy and our societies depend on secure and reliable digital connectivity. Cybersecurity is an essential global public good. For the EU, an open internet with strong safeguards is a key goal and it leverages regulatory, investment and policy initiatives to prevent and respond to cyberthreats⁽¹²⁾. To advance a global and open cyberspace, partnerships are essential. The EU already works with partners such as the United States, and has signed 'Digital Partnership agreements' with Canada, Japan, Singapore and South Korea to that effect⁽¹³⁾.

However, geopolitical tensions over the control of the internet and related key technologies have led countries to erect digital borders. A free and secure cyberspace requires responses to those seeking to undermine it. The EU therefore seeks capable and compatible partners⁽¹⁴⁾. A revised Cyber Diplomacy toolbox is already in place and initiatives like the EU Cyber Direct project support capacity building in partner countries and promote multistakeholder cooperation⁽¹⁵⁾. An example of a capability-focused partnership is the Working Arrangement between the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and its Ukrainian counterpart, focused on capacity-building, best practices and situational awareness⁽¹⁶⁾. Building on such examples, capability-focused partnerships can be further strengthened.

Outer space. Space-related services are increasingly necessary for our societies and economies, and for security and defence. Space infrastructure, providing these essential services, must be protected. The EU recognises outer space as a global commons and that strong partnerships are essential for responsible behaviour in space. The Union is addressing space security and defence in its political discussions with partners like the United States, Japan, Norway and NATO. These space security dialogues include discussions on space and security strategies, the exchange of information and best practices on how to increase the resilience of space infrastructure, and fostering coordination in multilateral forums⁽¹⁷⁾.

However, more cooperation is needed with capable partners to defend the common strategic interest of deterring hostile activities in and from space. While international cooperation and promoting responsible behaviour in space are important, the EU and its partners will also have to strengthen their capabilities and autonomy in the space domain. This will make their space systems and services more resilient, better able to respond to hostile activities or threats, and further

develop space-enabled services for security and defence. But this can only be done in cooperation with capable partners.

Security of supply and the defence industry. Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU's focus on security of supply (SoS) has intensified, particularly regarding energy and the delivery of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine but also replenishing the depleted stocks of EU Member States. While defence remains an issue that is primarily under Member State control, several EU initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). Companies from EU partner countries can participate in some of those programmes and further cooperation could be discussed with capable and compatible partners. One example is the recent EU-Ukraine defence industry forum that brought together 140 European and Ukrainian companies to identify concrete projects and joint ventures⁽¹⁸⁾.

Access to critical raw materials (CRMs) and components like semiconductors is another crucial aspect of SoS⁽¹⁹⁾. While demand has never been higher, their supply is increasingly threatened by geopolitical challenges. For the EU, engagement with partners to develop and diversify investment and promote stability in the global markets for these products is therefore key. For example, the Union has announced a Critical Raw Materials Club for like-minded countries willing to strengthen global supply chains. Given the importance of CRMs, the EU has signed strategic partnerships with key countries such as Canada, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Namibia, to integrate EU's raw materials value chains with those of the partner countries – but more countries can and should join this global effort⁽²⁰⁾.

CONCLUSION

An increasingly fragmented and contested world requires security and defence partnerships that deliver real capabilities—not more processes, summit declarations and photo opportunities. A major goal for the EU and its partners should therefore be to forge cooperation formats that deliver capabilities while reducing duplication and overlap. More output-oriented collaboration with a clear set of deliverables will strengthen the security that the EU and its partners seek. For partnerships to deliver on security and defence in this turbulent era, they must be targeted, squarely focused on the quality of output, and flexible.

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