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Partners Across the Globe and NATO's Strategic Concept

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NATO's history is one of continuous adaptation in the aftermath of critical junctures both during and after the Cold War.¹ The most recent push to transform the Alliance is embodied in laying out the groundworks towards the new Strategic Concept and the institutional campaign "NATO 2030" which calls for the Alliance to become more politically active and global in reach, along with strengthening its military power.² Among the issues this effort has spotlighted are NATO's global partnerships which at the moment include Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan, i.e. NATO's Partners Across the Globe (PAG).

This *Policy Brief* assesses the value of NATO's Partners Across the Globe in light of the new security challenges and argues that preserving the status quo *vis-à-vis* global partnerships is not advisable since it is incompatible with the changing strategic goals. In providing the recommendations moving forward, it argues the Alliance has two options. First, the Alliance could overhaul the PAG grouping and distinguish between the types of partners with whom it can establish deeper cooperation. Namely, this would involve elevating the Asia-Pacific Four into an institutionalised grouping, rather than having it remain an informal platform for cooperation. Alternatively, NATO could do away with

the existing PAG nomenclature and keep the partnerships flexible and issue specific. It could thus follow the "NATO 30+n" model, which would include working with a set group of partners on different issues.

PAG in the context of NATO's partnerships

Over the past decade, the push to make the Alliance more global stemmed mainly from operational imperatives. It was driven by the promise of gains such as greater contributions to NATO operations, interoperability, greater political legitimacy and commercial interests.³ As the number of global partners increased, some of these efforts have been deemed as a "haphazard strategy".⁴ After Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for the war in the Donbas region, as well as its assertiveness along the eastern border of the Alliance, the urgency of responding to security threats in the Euro-Atlantic area replaced the post-9/11 focus on out-of-area operations.⁵ All the while, the deteriorating

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1 S.A. Johnston, *How NATO adapts: strategy and organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.

2 J. Stoltenberg, "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on launching #NATO2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an increasingly competitive world", NATO, 8 June 2020.

3 T. Flockhart, *Cooperative security NATO's partnership policy in a changing world*, Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier, Copenhagen, 2014; and T. Tardy, "From NATO's partnerships to security networks", in T. Tardy (ed.), "NATO 2030: new technologies, new conflicts, new partnerships", NDC Research Paper 17, NATO Defense College, Rome, February 2021.

4 T. Flockhart, "NATO's global partnerships – A haphazard strategy?" in E. Hallams, L. Ratti and B. Zyla (eds.), *NATO beyond 9/11: the transformation of the Atlantic Alliance*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

5 G. Grgić, "NATO 2030 and out-of-area conundrum", NDC Policy

security environment in the Middle East and North Africa made it imperative not to lose focus of NATO's southern flank. Given these strategic priorities, many believed that the momentum for deepening cooperation with a number of global partners had greatly diminished.⁶

The NATO 2030 campaign and the groundwork on the new Strategic Concept challenge these assessments

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and signal a vision of a more active global partnerships agenda. So far, the NATO 2030 process has placed an emphasis on the political dimension of the Alliance as it has called for an increased cooperation with like-minded countries, signalling both the potential of deepening the existing partnerships and widening the scope of PAG. The 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué alluded to the same goals and it is expected they will be expressed in the forthcoming Strategic Concept.

At this point, NATO's PAG grouping occupies a middle ground between NATO member states and contact states, along with other initiatives which include Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) – as a forum for Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries, Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). These arrangements are a relic of the 1990s enlargement and 2000s operational imperatives, with some being largely defunct and sometimes referred to as “zombie” groupings (such as the EAPC).⁷

Adding an additional layer of complexity, in 2014, NATO launched the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII) to improve the quality of partners' contributions to NATO-led operations, missions, and exercises. Within this framework, the Enhanced Opportunities Partnerships (EOP) programme offers additional pathways for cooperation to six countries: Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden, and Ukraine.

NATO officials maintain there is no hierarchy among partners.⁸ At the moment, PAG operates as a catch-all category rather than a comprehensive platform of cooperation for partner states that do not fit into the partnership groupings in NATO's immediate

neighbourhood. Apart from the nascent coordination among the Asia-Pacific Four (Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea), it is indeed an eclectic mix of states spanning three continents and offering vastly different capabilities and levels of compatibility with NATO's goals.

Given the current strategic thinking seems to elevate the prominence of NATO's global approach and challenges, the analysis that follows proposes ways of interrogating whether NATO should reassess its global partnership arrangements.⁹

A case for assessment of PAG states ahead of the new Strategic Concept

While NATO remains a transatlantic Alliance with a focus in this geostrategic realm, there is no doubt the shifts in perception of challenges demand a deeper inspection of the relative value of partners. Based on the Alliance's professed security and political interests, it is safe to assume that the new Strategic Concept will continue to assess Russia as a threat to Euro-Atlantic security, while China will be portrayed as a strategic challenge given its growing power and influence.¹⁰

This said, there is an increasing recognition partner states have a greater role to play in building a more unified front in response to activities which often originate from realms outside the transatlantic space, but that have major negative implications on it. In order to ascertain the value of existing and potential partnerships, an assessment against a set of criteria that are derived from the statements and documents on NATO's strategic vision and challenges over the medium to long term is warranted.

Contemporary strategic and operational planning frameworks offer useful tools for analysing the value of partnerships.¹¹ This brief proceeds with a description of the criteria that were used in evaluating PAG states, before it weighs in on the global partners' standing. The said criteria include a) a partner state's *willingness* to subscribe to NATO's new Strategic Concept, particularly where it relates to its stance towards China; b) their potential *contribution* on issues NATO deems the highest priority; and c) their political *appropriateness*.

Brief 13, NATO Defense College, Rome, July 2021.

6 S. Frühling and B. Schreer, “The ‘natural ally’? The ‘natural partner’? – Australia and the Atlantic Alliance”, in H. Edström, J. H. Matlary and M. Petersson (eds.), *NATO: the power of partnerships*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011, pp.40-59; J. Burton, “NATO's ‘global partners’ in Asia: shifting strategic narratives”, *Asian Security*, Vol.14, Iss.1, 2018, pp.8-23.

7 Author's interviews with NATO policy staff, May 2021.

8 Author's interviews with NATO policy staff, May 2021.

9 There has been some analyses on this front. See, for instance, H. Larsen, “NATO's Strategic Concept should initiate a new partnership policy”, *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 10 May 2021.

10 NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels*, 14 June 2021.

11 See, for instance, M. Fowler, “Constructing effects: a strategic theory of security cooperation”, in R. Burke, M. Fowler, and K. McCaskey (eds.), *Military strategy, joint operations, and airpower: an introduction*, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2018.

Willingness

In a growingly competitive international system with the fault lines between status quo and revisionist powers being made clearer, partnering with NATO sends a clear signal. A country is more likely to be willing to become a partner state or maintain partnership with NATO if its security and political objectives are aligned with that of the Alliance.¹² If a partner state has different priorities, it might execute them in a manner that could have adverse secondary effects to NATO. Analysing willingness requires a deeper understanding of contextual factors – from history and culture, to present bilateral relations and domestic politics. In the context of PAG grouping, this would primarily be an assessment of the willingness of any given state to align itself more closely with the Alliance's stated position on China as a strategic challenge.

Contribution

NATO officials repeatedly communicate a partner's potential contribution extends well beyond its military capability.¹³ Equally, the estimates of a country's relative military power are increasingly assessed as not just the capability through the type, quantity and quality of military force, but also the ability and capacity to employ it.¹⁴ Overall, the assessments of potential contribution should include and combine the partner's diplomatic power, experience and "know-how" regarding emerging security issues, infrastructure, as well as their geographical location. In particular, partners with significant diplomatic power, as well as those with experience in dealing with and responding to the threats and challenges the Alliance is facing have been recognised as critical. In that vein, those that are resident and established powers in the Indo-Pacific have an obvious advantage to those that are not.

Appropriateness

The appropriateness of engaging with a partner is ultimately a risk-assessment exercise.¹⁵ A partnership entails risk for both the Alliance and the partner. From the Alliance's perspective, there are several types of risk: risk to forces, political risk, and regime risk. In the context of combat conditions, assessing the appropriateness of partners involves the potential risk to forces that could be expressed in tangible terms; for instance, the probability that personnel will be injured or killed, or that equipment will be damaged. On the other hand, calcu-

lating political risk is about perception – the domestic perception in allied states and the perception across the international community of being aligned with a particular state. Finally, regime risk that determines appropriateness is based on the probability of a regime change or major policy change. Disruptions due to government failures can create discontinuities in the partnership, where in the worst case, regime change results in a new government that is hostile to the Alliance. In this context, engaging with consolidated democracies is always preferable to dealing with other types of regimes.

Measuring up PAG states

Assuming a given state is *willing* to be NATO's partner, which is usually signalled with the signing of a partnership agreement, which is indeed the case for the nine existing PAG states, the analysis needs to shift on the *potential contribution* to the Alliance and *appropriateness* of such partnerships.

The scatterplot in Figure 1 offers a fine-grained visualisation of the results of analysis of the PAG states according to the expressed criteria. The analysis relies on indicators such as military capability, diplomatic power, experience and "know-how" regarding emerging security issues, infrastructure and location, ability and capacity to mobilise and employ these resources, as well as the political risk and regime risk associated with having such partners.

The so-called Asia-Pacific Four display both high level of alignment with NATO's political goals, as well as offer potential contribution given their high-income status and political power

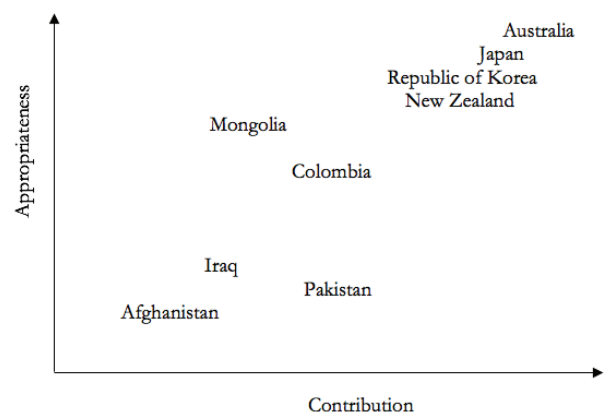


Figure 1. Scatterplot mapping of appropriateness and contribution from PAG states

From this analysis, it is clear each of the partners occupies a distinct position in terms of its value to the Alliance, with some obvious clustering. Given the in-

12 S. Biddle, "Building security forces and stabilizing nations: the problem of agency", *Daedalus*, Vol.146, No.4, 2017, pp.126-138.

13 Author's interviews with NATO policy staff, May 2021.

14 Author's interviews with NATO policy staff, May 2021.

15 P. Slovic, "Informing and educating the public about risk", *Risk analysis*, Vol.6, No.4, 1986, pp.403-415.

dicators for measuring potential contribution and appropriateness, the two countries that rank the lowest out of the grouping are Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, the so-called Asia-Pacific Four display both high level of alignment with NATO's political goals, as well as offer potential contribution given their high-income status and political power. Pakistan is increasingly growing less appropriate as a close partner, both due to domestic instability and increasingly closer ties with China. The remaining two partners are Mongolia and Colombia, which display moderate compatibility and appropriateness in the context of their partnership with the Alliance.

Paths towards PAG overhaul

The partnerships that were forged during the peak of missions in the Greater Middle East are not entirely appropriate for the systemic challenges NATO faces today. The above analysis demonstrates that not all PAG

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partners are made alike when assessed against the new set of strategic objectives that call for more coordination with partners in response to China's challenge, as well as their ability to contribute to the efforts that transcend conventional military cooperation. If the Alliance is serious about its commitment to becoming more political and global in its approach, it would be well advised to overhaul the PAG grouping and distinguish between the

types of partners that can aid in pursuing these goals.

While the temptation might be to engage solely in re-branding, the work on the new Strategic Concept is a prime opportunity to prioritise minilateral models of cooperation, such as those NATO has with the likes of Asia-Pacific Four. Namely, in leveraging the increasing alignment on part of the regional states in the Indo-Pacific, the Alliance can be more effective than in

relying only on the bilateral modes of cooperation. For instance, elevating the Asia-Pacific Four into a separate grouping rather than having it be a subset of PAG. This is the direction the Alliance has taken over the past two years and there is a case for further institutionalisation. Despite the contentions it created, the recent announcement of the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) security partnership, as well as the first formal leaders-level meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia offer further proof that minilateralism is the preferred mode of security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The analysis above also raises the question of willingness of those partners that are not in full alignment with NATO's strategic vision to continue cooperating with the Alliance, as well as NATO's inclination and ability to sway them towards greater cooperation. The power of bureaucratic inertia should not be underestimated, which means such partnerships might remain in place, albeit largely defunct. NATO should avoid such outcome for signalling and credibility purposes.

An alternative path is to completely do away with the existing PAG nomenclature and keep the partnerships flexible and issue specific. This is sometimes referred to as the "NATO 30+n" model, where "n" stands for "anyone who is interested".¹⁶ This type of cooperation is beneficial in building broad-based coalitions on select issues, but it can be laborious to execute from an institutional standpoint and would not reap the full benefits of more comprehensive and routinised interactions. At the same time, the framework laid out in the analysis section offers the assessment tools to determine the utility of potential new partnerships with states that are willing to cooperate more closely with NATO.

The exogenous and bureaucratic propellers for change in the way NATO interacts with its global partners are clearly present. However, it still remains to be seen whether individual Allies will recognise this as an agenda item worth pursuing in the context of the new Strategic Concept. Given their intransigence on keeping regional groupings from the 1990s, it seems status quo often presents itself as the preferred option, even if it would be to the detriment of the Alliance and its future relevance.

16 Author's interviews with NATO policy staff, May 2021.



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