

Understanding EU-NATO cooperation

Theory and practice

SUMMARY

The European Union and NATO have gone through the most acute strategic challenges of the Euro-Atlantic space together. Their history of cooperation is long and has seen both ups and downs. Already in 1949, the two defence players in western Europe, NATO and the Western Union (later the Western European Union), had begun to interact.

In the 1990s, as the shift from nuclear deterrence to crisis management took place, the EU and NATO began to cooperate on operations, particularly in the Balkans. In the early 2000s, the two cemented a strategic partnership based on mutually reinforcing cooperation, with crisis management at its heart. One concrete example is the EU's Operation Althea, still ongoing today, which the EU took over from NATO in 2004 and conducted while also making use of NATO assets.

The dynamic of cooperation has intensified in the face of new threats ranging from terrorism to climate change to hybrid warfare. Each of these challenges shares one feature: they are common to both the EU and NATO. This realisation has given political impetus to formalise the current level of cooperation, through a joint declaration and concrete follow-up actions. In practice, this means joint training and exercises on matters ranging from cyber defence to hybrid warfare. There is also close coordination on foreign policy issues, including on 5G and cooperation with China, with the aim of crafting a solid joint approach.

While the coronavirus pandemic has tested the resilience of EU-NATO cooperation, being met with coordination and a robust crisis response, questions nevertheless remain regarding the way forward for EU-NATO cooperation. For instance, the need to clarify the relationship between the EU and NATO's mutual defence clauses has become apparent. The materialisation of EU ambitions for strategic sovereignty, not least through multiple defence cooperation initiatives, will also present a test to the resilience of EU-NATO cooperation.



In this Briefing

- Geopolitics across the Atlantic
- History of EU-NATO cooperation
- From neighbours to partners
- From theory to practice
- Way forward for the EU-NATO partnership

Geopolitics across the Atlantic

It is generally agreed that 2014 opened a new geopolitical chapter. The illegal Russian annexation of Crimea marked a shift from largely, but not fully, peaceful post-Cold War years in Europe. This shift was equally fuelled by the rise in number and complexity of conflicts surrounding the European Union (EU). Deeply felt on both sides of the Atlantic, the fast-paced security environment rang alarm bells warning of the need for new approaches to guaranteeing transatlantic security and prosperity.

As challenges are no longer limited to the military sphere but spill over into the information, technological, economic and climate domains, they cannot be addressed with yesterday's tools. The broadening of the security spectrum and the persisting alarm bells have forged the political will to equip the EU and its Member States with adequate tools to adjust and react to the new environment. At the same time, NATO too has found itself needing to adapt and broaden the scope and tools it uses to fulfil its defence and deterrence duties. This has resulted into each expanding into the *traditional territory* of the other: the EU boosting its defence capabilities and NATO strengthening traditionally civilian instruments, such as responding to disinformation and terrorism. With more in common than not, the post-2014 security environment has seen the EU and NATO cooperating to unprecedented extents. This has not always been the case however.

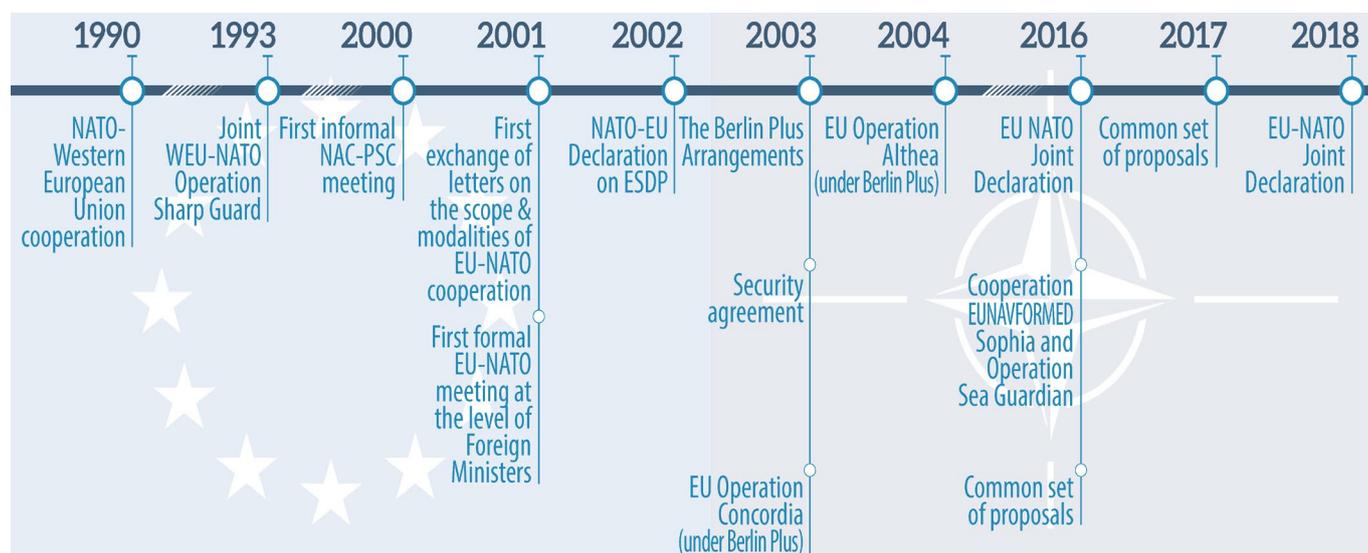
History of EU-NATO cooperation

Western European Union and NATO

Whereas the anniversary of NATO's establishment on 4 April 1949 is celebrated every year, the fact that a defence cooperation treaty was signed by several European countries predating NATO is often overlooked. The 1948 Treaty of Brussels founded the [Western Union](#) – an alliance between Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK). The Treaty was [modified](#) in 1954 to form the [Western European Union](#) (WEU).

Composed of Western Union members and over the years joined by Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, the WEU was a defensive alliance aimed at providing collective defence and mutual military assistance.¹ Given the de facto prioritisation of NATO as the main security provider on the continent, the WEU earned itself the nickname of the 'sleeping beauty' as it remained largely [dormant](#) (not to be confused with permanent structured cooperation, another more recent 'sleeping beauty'). The predominance of NATO was indirectly recognised in the WEU Treaty, which highlighted the 'the undesirability of duplicating the military staffs of NATO'.

Figure 1 – Timeline of EU-NATO cooperation



Source: EPRS, 2020.

As the end of the Cold War drew near, a new strategic chapter in transatlantic relations and the international world order was emerging. As such, steps towards [greater cooperation](#) between the WEU and NATO were taken in 1990. However it became increasingly obvious that NATO's core mission had to adapt. In lieu of nuclear deterrence and preparation for conventional armed conflict against the Soviet threat in Europe, crisis management, humanitarian action and peacekeeping and enforcement gained new importance. Taking stock of a new era of European security, NATO's [1991 Strategic Concept](#) recognised the profound changes Europe was undergoing, including as regarded the integration process. It notably welcomed 'the enhancement of the role and responsibilities of European members of the Alliance', highlighting that 'the strengthening of the European pillar within the Alliance, will not only serve the interests of the European states but also reinforce the integrity and effectiveness of the Alliance as a whole'. This new impetus also led to the EU's adoption of the '[Petersberg tasks](#)'. In 1992, WEU ministers decided that within the WEU framework armed forces would be deployed to fulfil the following tasks: humanitarian and rescue operations; peacekeeping; and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking.

The intended [differentiation](#) between the two organisations at the time was supposed to be, in the words of WEU Secretary-General José Cutileiro, that the WEU would 'undertake the politico-military management of crises in which the Americans would not wish to become directly involved' but acting with 'political and military support from NATO'. After the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War petered out, political scientists in the late 1990s were imagining ways to give new impetus to transatlantic security cooperation and address burden-sharing concerns. One scholar [proposed](#) merging the crisis management missions of NATO and the WEU to instead be carried out by a new Euro-Atlantic organisation dedicated to this specific purpose. Another [envisioned](#) an 'Atlantic Union that would incorporate the EU, the WEU, and NATO'.

Acknowledging the shifts in the security environment, the UK and France took a landmark step for European defence at [Saint-Malo](#) in 1998. The resulting declaration saw Europe's largest military powers agreeing on a vision for a common European defence in full respect of NATO. This step also began a gradual transfer of the WEU's responsibilities to the EU, starting in [2000](#) and fully completed in [2010](#).

The birth of a strategic partnership

Before the dissolution of the WEU, two key events paved the way for a strategic partnership between the EU and NATO: the joint declaration of 2002 and the 2003 **Berlin Plus Arrangements**.

Though previously in a [relationship](#) of 'structured separation and complex coexistence', in 2002 the EU and NATO announced the establishment of a [strategic partnership](#) based on mutually reinforcing cooperation with crisis management at its heart. Less than a year later, in March 2003, the two concluded the [Berlin Plus Arrangements](#), facilitating NATO support for EU crisis management operations by means of sharing assets, operational planning and command. The basis for this had already been laid down in the 1999 Washington Summit [communiqué](#) which had tasked NATO ministers with:

- providing the EU with access to NATO's planning capabilities for EU-led operations;
- granting the EU access to pre-identified NATO capabilities and assets for EU-led operations;
- developing the role of the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe and the range of European command options for EU-led operations; and
- adapting NATO's defence planning process to incorporate the available forces for EU-led operations.

The arrangements also included the Security of Information [Agreement](#) of 2003, which allows the sharing of classified information – essential for crisis-management operational cooperation. In short, the arrangements put in place the practical pillars for cooperation, in particular for NATO to support the EU's operations without being directly involved itself.

From neighbours to partners

'A new European security architecture is taking shape before our very eyes', [said](#) former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana in 1997; a statement which remains valid in 2020.

Notwithstanding the significant steps taken to cooperate on crisis management in the early 2000s, the EU and NATO were still largely '[looking in different directions](#): one was responsible for collective defence and deterrence and the other for economic, social and regulatory development as well as softer areas of security'. As war seemed to have moved away from the European continent, this was logical. In Europe, the '[peace dividend](#)' and the 2008 financial crisis have seen [defence spending](#) go down and the focus placed on other policies. NATO's focus also shifted, as illustrated above, to crisis management and out-of-area expeditionary operations. Then came a series of shocks: the illegal annexation of [Crimea](#) in 2014 and an ongoing hybrid war in Ukraine, the 'new reality' of [terrorist](#) attacks, the British vote to exit the EU and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (US) in 2016, as well as serious challenges posed by [cyber](#) warfare, climate change, disruptive technologies, and pandemics, occurring against the backdrop of a global race to remilitarise and [growing](#) defence budgets.

This myriad of events shared at least one feature: the fact that they were common to both the EU and NATO. As the two currently have 21 members in common, it follows that an efficient approach to these challenges should also be common. What is more, the EU and NATO have been founded on and currently operate within the same values-based system. Just as [NATO](#) is 'committed to the principles of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law', the EU is also based on [fundamental values](#), 'such as democracy and the rule of law, which the Union aspires to promote, both internally and externally, and which guide all its policies'. This spirit is also reflected in the EU's 2016 [Global Strategy](#), aiming to build a stronger, values-based Union.

Providing an indication of closer EU-NATO cooperation, in June 2016 EU Heads of State or Government in the [European Council](#) called for 'further enhancement of the relationship in light of our common aims and values' in the form of 'accelerated practical cooperation'. The EU-NATO [joint declaration](#) of 8 July 2016 thus represented a key step towards consolidating this cooperation and showing awareness of the commonality of the challenges. The declaration recognises how the two organisations are 'essential partners' in providing Euro-Atlantic security. It was followed a few months later, in December 2016, by a list of [common proposals](#) aiming to operationalise the commitments made in the declaration. More specifically, the list covers 42 proposals in the following areas: hybrid threats, operational cooperation, cyber, defence capabilities, defence industry and research, exercises, and capacity-building. In December 2017, 32 [additional proposals](#) were added to the initial list, including counter-terrorism, women, peace and security, and military mobility.

The following year, in July 2018, the EU and NATO signed another [joint declaration](#), this time to confirm their commitment to implement the ambitions of the first declaration but also to recognise the efforts of the EU to bolster European security and defence, not least through permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). Finally, there have been five progress reports to date to assess and measure the way in which the two organisations have cooperated and implemented the commitments made.

Each of these aspects have been stepping stones for a change in mind-set, work culture and outlook for the future. The two organisations have begun to learn to work together and engender mutual trust through shared experiences, but how does EU-NATO cooperation work in practice?

From theory to practice

One of the key principles of EU-NATO cooperation is the **single set of forces**. This means that common members do not have one armed force for NATO and another for the EU. Therefore, efficiency must be ensured and duplication avoided. The EU and NATO are thus working to streamline priorities and converge defence planning processes. Synergies are also sought when it

comes to cooperation in civil and military operations, in military exercises and as regards defence industrial development. The highest levels of EU and NATO leadership also coordinate on political and diplomatic issues to ensure a coherent and common approach in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Operational cooperation

Already in the early 1990s, NATO and the WEU had begun to coordinate their operations. For example, the WEU's Operation Sharp Vigilance and NATO's Maritime Monitor were both [launched](#) in 1992 to enforce the United Nations embargo against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. They coordinated action to patrol the Adriatic with naval and air units. A year later, a [joint WEU-NATO operation](#) referred to as Sharp Guard was launched in 1993 to enforce the economic sanctions and arms embargo more effectively and under a single commander.

NATO's [first major crisis response](#) operation was in 1995 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Implementation Force led by NATO was tasked with implementing 'the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement' and was later replaced by a Stabilisation Force (SFOR). The EU had two missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a police mission and a military mission. The latter, [Operation Althea](#), replaced NATO's SFOR and took over in 2004. The mission is still ongoing and is a good example for understanding the 'single set of forces' principle: the mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina was first launched in 1992 by the UN, then taken over by NATO, and finally by the EU. This reflected changing political and military circumstances in the theatre and the suitability of different international actors and 'flags' under which to operate. Yet most of the staff deployed remained the same at each of those changeovers.

Figure 2 – EU-NATO cooperation agenda



Source: EPRS, 2020.

Althea was the second operation to be carried out in the framework of the Berlin Plus Arrangements (see below Operation Concordia), thereby making use of NATO assets and capabilities, and being commanded from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) – NATO's command for operations, based in Mons, Belgium. A 2007 [report](#) by the EU Military Committee outlined positive feedback from this arrangement as having been 'an efficient cost-effective' model. The [EU's police mission](#) in Bosnia was launched in 2003 and had also coordinated with NATO's SFOR before Althea took over.

In North Macedonia – previously known as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – a similar handover occurred. NATO had run several successful [missions](#) in the country between 2001 and 2003, when it handed over Operation Allied Harmony to the EU. In March 2003, this handover resulted in [Operation Concordia](#), thereby marking two novel experiences: the first EU military crisis management operation and the first operation under the Berlin Plus Arrangements. As a result of the increase in operational cooperation, [permanent military liaisons](#) have been established to facilitate future cooperation. As such, NATO has had a team operating at the EU Military Staff headquarters since 2005 while the EU has had a team at SHAPE since March 2006.

The EU and NATO have also cooperated in the area of **maritime security** and in combating illegal trafficking and piracy in the Mediterranean. The EU's [EUNAVFOR Med Sophia](#), launched in 2015, cooperated with NATO's [Sea Guardian](#) operation, launched in 2016. Though they have different geographical and legal mandates, the need for 'increased sharing of maritime situational awareness as well as better coordination and mutual reinforcement of our activities' was highlighted in the 2016 Joint Declaration. A [liaison](#) between NATO's Maritime Command (MARCOM) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) began in 2016 through a formal agreement and a Liaison Officer seconded to Sea Guardian. In May 2017, an arrangement between MARCOM and Sophia was agreed, facilitating [information exchange](#), and logistical and medical support. On 31 March 2020, the EU [launched](#) Operation IRINI, replacing Operation Sophia, to enforce the United Nations arms embargo on Libya. The potential and extent of NATO involvement and cooperation with IRINI is at the time of writing [unclear](#). The '[shared awareness and deconfliction mechanism in the Mediterranean](#)' remains the main forum through which the two organisations share best practice and information.

The EU and NATO also work together in the **Middle East**. For instance NATO has been [supporting](#) the Global Coalition against Daesh since 2016, while the EU is [engaged](#) as a non-military partner and all 27 Member States are involved as partners. Both EU and NATO are also active in Iraq. The EU's [advisory mission](#) on security sector reform, launched in 2017, has similar operational goals to NATO's [training mission](#), launched in 2018 to strengthen Iraqi security forces. The two heads of mission, for instance, met to identify 'favourable circumstances for [cooperation](#)' and the fifth progress [report](#) includes common areas such as capacity building of security forces, human resources management, governance, gender, human rights and crisis management.

Poster child: Military mobility

Military mobility has emerged as the flagship area of EU-NATO cooperation. After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, it became obvious that NATO lacked the necessary instruments to improve the ability to transport troops and equipment quickly across European territory i.e. military mobility. The EU's complex toolbox however is indispensable for improving military mobility.

Concrete examples of EU-NATO cooperation on military mobility include an agreement over 'military requirements' (key principles and aspects conditioning military movements) and the alignment of 'Form 302' between the EU and NATO to facilitate customs permissions. Regular mutual briefings, exchanges and dialogues have taken place since the European Commission and the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) launched a joint communication on improving military mobility on 10 November 2017. More specifically, a 'structured dialogue on military mobility' between the EU and NATO was launched in 2018, gathering key decision-makers from both organisations several times a year. The dialogue aims to 'ensure coherence and mutual reinforcement of efforts' as well as to avoid duplication.

Military mobility is therefore [considered](#) one of the most successful examples of information-sharing between the EU and NATO. Given existing legal limitations (see last section) on sharing classified information, NATO sharing its military infrastructure requirements could set an important precedent of trust and cooperation. Other coordination mechanisms include informal exchanges of views at staff-to-staff level, the importance of which for policy development should not be under-estimated.

Training and exercises

Joint exercises and training have been identified as important ways to build shared experiences and develop common working methods. Indeed exercises are an area that EU and NATO leaders [adopted](#) officially in 2016 as part of their cooperation framework. The aim is to enhance **staff-to-staff interaction** but also to increase resilience and mutual trust. Key EU-NATO exercises have occurred in the hybrid and cyber realms, a flagship example being the EU's 2017 Parallel and Coordinated Exercise ([PACE](#)) together with NATO's 2017 Crisis Management Exercise ([CMX](#)). This [entailed](#) NATO's participation in the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response arrangement and the EU's attendance at meetings of NATO's North Atlantic Council (NAC) and its Civil Emergency Planning Committee, as well as daily video-conferences.

While in the 2017 edition NATO took the lead in the exercises, in 2018, it was the EU's turn. The EU's [Hybrid Exercise Multilayer 18](#) in the framework of PACE was a 'comprehensive and combined exercise with a focus on crisis management and response in a hybrid threats environment', aimed at improving both the EU's response to complex hybrid crises and its cooperation with NATO. Additionally, NATO's [2019 CMX](#) accordingly included EU participation. Other exercises entailing either direct participation or observation included the CYBERSEC 2019 forum, [Cyber Coalition](#), [Cyber Europe](#), [Trident Juncture 18](#), Trident Jaguar 18, the [Coalition Warrior Interoperability Exercise 2018](#), and the 2018 EU crisis management military [exercise](#). The two have also concluded a [technical Arrangement on Cyber Defence](#) and participate in [joint activities](#) in the framework of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats – which functions under the auspices of both organisations. For instance, in May 2018, the centre organised a [scenario-based workshop](#) focused on capability development and force protection.

Finally, a practice that has proved its worth during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the European Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) [engaged](#) in field exercises with its NATO counterpart, the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) in 2018 and the two have boosted staff-to-staff interactions. This shared experience across the board helps to deepen the relationship but also to expose areas where improvement is needed, such as the exchange of classified information and the need to secure communications more effectively.

The eastern Mediterranean: Crisis mode

Since the discovery of gas reserves in the [eastern Mediterranean](#) in the 2000s, the geopolitical value and the volatility of the region has increased. The situation came close to escalating in the spring of 2020, when Turkey challenged international maritime boundaries by claiming de facto drilling rights in Greek and Cypriot territorial waters. On the EU's side, the EU27, as well as the [European Parliament](#), expressed firm solidarity with Greece and Cyprus while urging de-escalation. To this end, the 2 October 2020 [European Council](#) conclusions strongly condemn all violations of sovereignty and international law. In a carrot and stick approach, the European Council agreed to launch a positive political EU-Turkey agenda, conditional upon respect for key principles, while stressing the determination to make use of all EU instruments (including sanctions) to respond to further unilateral actions and provocations.

NATO meanwhile organised technical and exploratory [diplomatic](#) talks between the allies involved. While these talks did not have an easy [start](#), they did succeed in establishing a '[bilateral military de-confliction mechanism](#)' aimed at reducing the risk of conflict in the eastern Mediterranean.

As long as it remains unresolved, the Cyprus-Turkey problem will continue to limit the depth of EU-NATO cooperation. However, the two organisations' responses to the eastern Mediterranean escalation during the summer of 2020 demonstrated the value of their coherent approach. Although having fundamentally different instruments at their disposal, together the actions of the EU and NATO resulted in an effective toolbox that exerted enough pressure to bring all sides to the negotiating table.

Politico-strategic and diplomatic cooperation

EU-NATO engagements at the politico-strategic level have received a boost since the signing of the 2016 joint declaration. In addition to [regular interaction](#) at leadership level between the NATO Secretary General and usually the HR/VP (but also the presidents of the European Commission and of the European Council), the strategic bodies of the two organisations have also established new channels of communication. It has become a [habit](#) for the NATO Deputy Secretary General, Assistant Secretaries General and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe to brief the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the European Defence Agency Steering Board on NATO's agenda and priorities. At the same time, NATO's highest body, the NAC, and the PSC also meet in both formal and informal constellations.

The EU's Military Staff often hold [dialogues](#) with their NATO counterpart, the International Military Staff, and their heads co-chair the **biannual meetings** between the two. For instance, during their meeting in May 2020, the two bodies discussed the EU-NATO military staff-to-staff informal coordination plan and the update of the list of common areas of cooperation. The highest military bodies in the two organisations – NATO's Military Committee and the EU's Military Committee – also [meet](#) regularly to discuss topical issues of common interest.

It has also become well-established practice for each to attend the other's ministerial-level meetings. For example, the HR/VP participated in the [gathering](#) of NATO Ministers of Defence in February 2020 and the NATO Secretary General attended the EU Foreign Ministers' [meeting](#) in January 2020. The EU and NATO also coordinate positions on broader issues of foreign policy. For example, in 2003, the two agreed on a '[concerted approach for the Western Balkans](#)' ensuring joint strategic action in the region. They also [coordinate efforts](#) in support of the peace process in Afghanistan and have notably increased cooperation as regards Ukraine. As disinformation and malicious influence campaigns are increasingly affecting both the EU and NATO, they have also boosted cooperation in this area. For instance, the EU's Strategic Communications task force in the European External Action Service (EEAS) liaises regularly with NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Lastly, matters relating to China's role in the international rules-based system and security issues related to 5G have also emerged as topics of common interest.

NATO and the EU's post-2016 defence initiatives

The period of the most recent and most overarching EU-NATO rapprochement (2016-2018) coincided with deeper EU-level reflection about its role in the world and with the launch of key EU defence initiatives. Setting the tone was the [EU Global Strategy](#) of June 2016, which commits the EU to 'step up its contribution to Europe's collective security, working closely with its partners, beginning with NATO'. 2017 saw the launch of flagship initiatives such as the [European Defence Fund](#) (EDF), the [coordinated annual review on defence](#) (CARD) and [permanent structured cooperation](#) (PESCO), and 2018 additional proposals such as the [European Peace Facility](#) and the [Civilian CSDP Compact](#). While the EU's recent defence ambitions were at first met with reluctance by the transatlantic community, echoing fears of potential duplication, they ended up being welcomed as a contribution to collective security and burden-sharing. For instance, the 2018 [joint declaration](#) welcomes these efforts as contributing to 'peace and stability in the neighbourhood and beyond'.

There is a precedent for EU-NATO cooperation on **capability development**. One example is the [NATO-EU capability](#) group, set up in 2003 to 'ensure the coherence and mutual reinforcement' of each organisation's efforts to address capability shortfalls. In June 2020, NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană [wrote](#): 'With around four in every five people in the European Union also living in a NATO country, the stronger the EU, the stronger the Alliance'. This is where the aforementioned single set of forces principle becomes key. Each of the defence capabilities developed as a result of EU initiatives will belong to the Member States that invested in them and can therefore be available for NATO, UN or coalition operations, subject to sovereign political

decisions. As Member States have one single set of forces to deploy in each of the different contexts, all actors benefit if capability shortfalls are filled.

As regards PESCO, for example, the fifth EU-NATO [progress report](#) noted that '38 out of the current 47 PESCO projects also broadly respond to NATO priorities'. Plus, complementing EU-NATO cooperation on military mobility is the [PESCO project](#) with the same name, focusing on the simplification and standardisation of cross-border military transport. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has also expressed his support for EU defence initiatives on numerous occasions. He [noted](#) that since such efforts can help capability development, increase defence spending and address a fragmented defence industry, the 'European Defence Fund is good, the PESCO is good'. Stoltenberg also [highlighted](#) that the efforts 'can contribute to fairer burden-sharing' and 'can complement NATO'.

The EU's CARD aims to provide a complete overview of the EU defence capability-development landscape by aggregating the priorities and planning of Member States. Aspects of the mechanism overlap with the NATO defence-planning process (NDPP). Following the logic of complementarity and the avoidance of duplication, [efforts](#) have been made to ensure coherence between the two processes. Although the CARD and NDPP do not completely overlap in terms of membership, scope and responsibility, exchanges such as the invitations to EU staff to attend NDPP consultations and to NATO staff to attend CARD meetings have become the norm. Exchanging confidential information within the two planning processes however remains problematic, since Cyprus, a non-NATO EU Member State, does not have a security agreement on the sharing of classified documents with NATO.

A concrete example of complementarity between EU and NATO capability priorities is **air-to-air refuelling**. The process of transferring fuel from one military aircraft to another in mid-air, air-to-air refuelling, is a flagship of EU-NATO cooperation, since it is crucial in particular, but not only, for expeditionary operations. Since it is an area in which there are serious [shortfalls](#), the EU's efforts through the EDF (and its capability development precursor – the [European Defence Industrial Development Programme](#)) and PESCO feed into those of NATO. In October 2019, the European Defence Agency and NATO organised a joint air-to-air refuelling [conference](#) for the first time, bringing together relevant stakeholders.

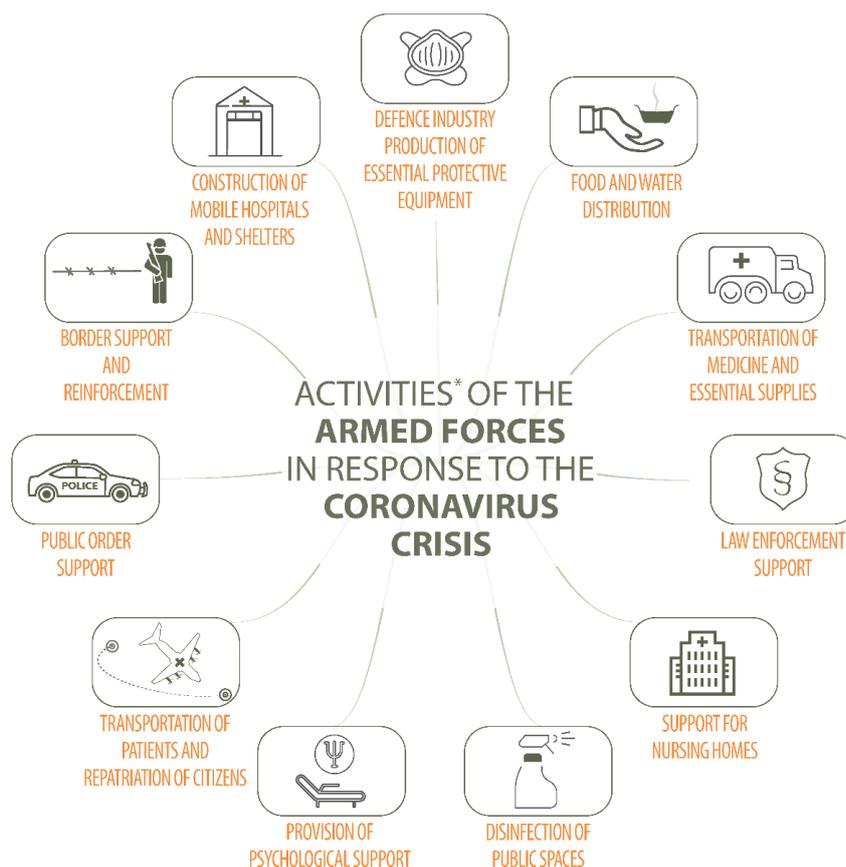
Cooperation during the coronavirus crisis

[Armed forces](#) in the Euro-Atlantic space have been instrumental in assisting civilian authorities in containing and stopping the spread of the novel coronavirus. The contributions range widely (Figure 3), from using military aircraft to repatriate and evacuate citizens, to assisting law enforcement, providing psychological support, and even contributing to research efforts to find a vaccine.

As 21 of the armed forces in question belong to countries with both EU and NATO membership, coordination was imperative. In April 2020, EU defence ministers mandated the creation of a [task force](#) at EEAS level to coordinate efforts and exchange information between EU Member States' defence ministries. NATO focused on maintaining a sound defence posture and [mobilising instruments](#) to help with crisis reaction, such as Rapid Air Mobility and the NATO Support and Procurement Agency.

The EU and NATO have coordinated closely since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and have engaged in [weekly coordination](#) calls addressing matters from global supply chains to economic effects and the repatriation of citizens. As the pandemic was unfolding, the taskforce coordinated with NATO, in particular with the EADRCC, and senior military staff [discussed](#) common responses to the crisis by video-conference on 19 May 2020. As the crisis provided very fertile breeding ground for online disinformation practices, the strategic communications teams in the EU and NATO have also [joined forces](#) to tackle and respond to them.

Figure 3 – Armed forces' contributions in response to the coronavirus pandemic



* These represent non-exhaustive examples of European armed forces' support to civilian authorities

Source: EPRS, 2020.

Way forward for the EU-NATO partnership

It is hard to dispute the extensive progress the EU and NATO have made in deepening their cooperation. Previously [likened](#) to Mars and Venus, owing to their distinct institutional personalities and responsibilities, the two are seeing their mandates (in the security and defence spheres) overlap and complement each other more and more.

However, the direction in which the relationship should head is far from being decided. Some authors [argue](#) that there is a need for NATO to 'Europeanise' as a result of the EU's increasing [strategic autonomy](#). The argument goes that if the EU were to progressively phase out its defence-related dependence on the US, NATO could become primarily European. In contrast, other authors [see](#) the feasibility of a division of labour between the two, one that could eventually be conducive to an EU-US alliance in lieu of NATO as such. Others meanwhile [argue](#) for a US withdrawal from NATO and for 'leaving European security to the Europeans'.

As regards issue-specific cooperation in the short term, some authors [emphasise](#) the importance of a coordinated EU-NATO engagement strategy with Russia, while other outlets [discuss](#) the need for NATO to define its stance on China. NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geană [pleads](#) for deeper cooperation in the areas of space and disruptive technologies.

While topics of common interest abound, it is increasingly clear that there is more that brings the EU and NATO together than separates them. At the same time, the role of non-EU NATO Members, and respectively, EU non-NATO Members requires more discussion. For the former, recent tensions

in the eastern Mediterranean with Turkey are posing problems to the [cohesion](#) of the Alliance and testing [EU Member States' solidarity](#) with Greece and Cyprus. Additionally, such tensions also encumber prospects for cooperation not only between the EU's Operation IRINI and NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, but also on other key strategic and capability development issues. A key reason for this limitation, as indicated above, is the lack of a security agreement on the sharing of classified documents between Cyprus and NATO. While Cyprus can take part in joint EU-NATO meetings, formal exchange of classified information is consistently blocked by Turkey.

Non-NATO EU Member States, particularly the neutral countries, would, meanwhile, welcome reassurance, transparency and clarification from the EU and NATO through their cooperation framework, not least regarding the applicability of mutual defence clauses (see box).

Reflections about topics such as these have begun in 2020 in both the EU and NATO. The latter launched the NATO2030 [reflection process](#), aiming to develop a forward-looking global approach, while the EU began the [Strategic Compass](#) process, which should help EU Member States advance towards a common strategic culture. For political leaders in both organisations it has become undeniable that today's security challenges cannot be faced alone or in separation. As threats to transatlantic security do not keep track of countries' membership, neither should the responses to tackling them.

TEU Article 42(7), TFEU Article 222, or North Atlantic Treaty Article 5?

The collective defence principle upon which NATO is founded has started to become more nuanced as the EU's defence agenda and prerogatives grow. The cornerstone of NATO's collective defence principle lies in its famous [Article 5](#) which means that an attack against one ally is considered as an attack against all allies. The Lisbon Treaty however also provides a legal provision ([Article 42\(7\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union) obliging Member States to provide 'aid and assistance by all means in their power' if a Member State 'is the victim of armed aggression on its territory'. Furthermore, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides an additional solidarity clause ([Article 222](#)) allowing the EU to 'mobilise all the instruments at its disposal, including the military resources made available by the Member States' to aid a Member State that is the object of a terrorist attack or natural or man-made disaster.

A discussion has therefore [emerged](#) in the redefined security context of the Euro-Atlantic space regarding how to define the parameters of the three articles more clearly. Some analysts, for example, [explore](#) whether a 'division of labour', meaning clarification and/or classification, among the three articles is necessary to guide political leaders more clearly in times of crisis. It is expected that this discussion will become increasingly present on leaders' agendas.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament has been a consistent supporter of greater EU-NATO cooperation. One framework in which Parliament puts forward the EU position is through its [Delegation for relations with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly](#). Another way is through resolutions. For instance, a March 2003 [resolution](#) deemed Operation Concordia to be an important test for EU-NATO cooperation, and another from November 2003 [called for](#) increased transatlantic interoperability. In February 2009, Parliament [recommended](#) that the two improve their cooperation to 'allow for greater maximisation' of assets and to end 'institutional bickering'. In a resolution dedicated to '[EU-NATO relations](#)', Parliament highlighted the potential for more effective crisis management, by means of cooperation, and the need for increased openness and transparency. The resolution invited both organisations to strengthen cooperation on missions and operations, on strategic communication, and on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance efforts, among other areas. Lastly, in January 2020, Parliament stressed that 'a stronger Europe strengthens NATO' and that the EU-NATO strategic partnership should be mutual reinforcing.

MAIN REFERENCES

European Defence Agency, 'Enhancing interoperability. Train together, deploy together', *European defence matters*, Issue 9, June 2020.

European Union and NATO, Fifth progress report on the implementation of the common set of proposals, June 2020.

Laïci T., *The Wind in the Sails of EU-NATO Cooperation: How Strong and Where To?*, Centre international de formation européenne, 2019.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ In addition to its 10 full members, the WEU also brought together: Iceland, Norway and Turkey as associate members; Austria, Denmark, Finland, Ireland and Sweden as observers; and Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia as associate partners.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2020.

Photo credits: © promesaartstudio / Adobe Stock.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

