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Adaptations Needed: NATO Partnership Programmes in the 21st century

by *Wolfgang Rudischhauser*

NATO Partnership Programmes have witnessed a constant growth in the past two decades. Today the system has become close to unmanageable in terms of administrative burden and oversight – not only with regard to the numbers of partner countries but also when it comes to the types of programmes, initiatives and frameworks, funding and review mechanisms. This Working Paper argues that the Partnership Programmes are in need of adaptation and proposes possible steps into that direction.

NATO should adapt its partnership programmes and activities to a changing world- and security environment by moving away from grouping together countries based on history of cooperation with NATO, or on a regional basis. Instead, two or three new overarching “matrix-type” framework programmes should be established to ensure maximum flexibility. NATO should enhance its cooperation with the EU and adopt a combination of existing instruments developed in other international organisations, but transformed to NATO’s needs and specifics. This would enable NATO to better assess how partnerships ultimately contribute to the security of the Alliance and its neighbourhood.

How NATO Partnerships came about and eventually got “out of hand”

NATO Partnership Programmes have witnessed a constant growth in the past two to three decades, in particular since the opening of NATO to new members and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.¹ It started in 1994 with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme based on the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). The programme had been established as a forum for security dialogue between NATO and its new then still partner countries in the East already in 1991. Other programmes followed in 1997 with the establishment of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) in 2004. Originally intended to bring potential new members closer to the alliance and ensure their interoperability, both the numbers and the intentions of partnerships have changed significantly.

EAPC, ICI, Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), Partners around the Globe or simply Global Partners (GP) are but a few acronyms that stand for the different partnerships. Given the number of partner countries (involving 50 plus Allies and Partners), but also the increased complexity due to the types of programmes, frameworks, funding mechanisms, runtime and review mechanisms, the system has become close to unmanageable. Instruments such as Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programmes (IPCPs), Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAPs), Annual Programmes (ANPs), Planning and Review Process (PARP) and Defence Capacity Building (DCB) programmes, to name but a few, differ in depth, the level of commitment on part of the partner country and on part of NATO, but also in terms of quality of oversight and review. Funding mechanisms often depend on voluntary national contributions, trust funds and other volatile resources.

¹ For a good overview on how NATO Partnerships developed over time, see for example Kamp/Reisinger (2013): *NATO’s Partnerships After 2014: Go West!* Research Paper No. 92 (Rome: NATO Defense College).

If that was not enough, numerous “29+N” (29 Allies and one partner nation) frameworks for consultation and cooperation have been established in addition, often to address immediate political or visibility needs, such as NATO-Russia, NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Councils. Some of the partnerships have turned out to be increasingly politically difficult. Within ICI, at least two of its members are isolating Qatar, while at the same time two important regional members of the Gulf Cooperation Council remain outside. EAPC countries sometimes have very contrasting views vis-à-vis NATO. And with regard to the Mediterranean Dialogue, ironically the political future Libya’s (a non-member) will be important when it comes to how addressing many key challenges such as illegal migration and terrorism in the Mediterranean area. The NATO Russia Council is one more explicit example, on how a partnership can substantially change over time from initial goals.

The plethora of programmes and mechanisms created over time, including through the global partnership (or Partners around the globe) grouping established with the 2010 Strategic concept, bear the advantage of allowing differentiation between countries for reasons of political visibility or opportunity. However, they come with heavy financial, human resources and managing overheads, straining NATO’s already over-stretched resources. In addition, the spreading of responsibilities to different NATO entities, ranging from the Partnership (PASP), Operations (OPS) and Emerging Security Challenges (ESC) Divisions to the Allied Command Transformation (ACT) comes with a heavy burden of coordination requirements

What does this mean for the effectiveness of NATO Partnerships?

First, the primary aim of all Partnership Programmes is that they should contribute to the enhancing security in the Euro-Atlantic area and of projecting stability in NATO’s immediate and larger neighbourhood. However, in the past 20 years, with the increasing number of countries involved, the agenda has become more heterogeneous and the goals pursued by NATO with the various partnership groups have become more diverse, as are the political systems of partner countries involved. New NATO members – at least in theory – should contribute to strengthening NATO and the values it represents, although with some of the latest additions, one might question whether other considerations have prevailed. Strengthening NATO should also be the first guiding principle for partnerships. Also, partnerships should assist the partner countries’ defence forces to become interoperable with NATO and Allied military forces.

Second, the proliferation of partnerships contrasts increasingly with the original aims of the programmes. Many partners will never become or do not want to be NATO members. NATO’s institutional partnership framework therefore needs to be a living instrument and adapt to a changing international security and political environment. One typical example is the suspension of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership (EAPC) activities with Russia following its illegal annexation of Crimea. A regular check of partnership effectiveness is increasingly necessary, and it should be based on NATO’s core interests and priorities (which in some cases might differ from the partner’s or partnering group’s interests). As an example, Finland and Sweden, while formally still EAPC partners, have been accorded Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP) status and also have strong overlapping security and defence interests with NATO. Others, like Armenia and Azerbaijan with their ongoing bilateral conflicts might hamper, rather than support, NATO’s security. Political objectives of some of the Partners Around the Globe (GPs) members or Mediterranean Dialogue countries (for example Egypt or Pakistan) might differ significantly from those of the Alliance in terms of ensuring regional stability, else they are in a strategic conflict with their neighbours.

In the past, partnerships have often been pursued based on a geographic approach, with the hope of strengthening regional security, rather than looking at which countries within a particular group can best contribute to Alliance security. The creation of so-called Individual Partnership Programmes, Action Plans and Annual National Programmes (supported by the establishment of “one-country teams” bringing together NATO International and military staff) have helped to reduce some of the problems outlined, but cannot resolve the underlying issues of overlap, duplication and administrative burden.

Adapting NATO partnerships to a rapidly changing world – more burden sharing with the EU

One way to modernize the partnership mechanisms could be to enhance the so-called “Berlin-package” approach, agreed in April 2011 at the NATO Foreign ministers meeting. This is a mechanism to allow partners to select from a menu of assistance options which NATO can provide those, that can best help them to strengthen their defence capacity and to work closer with NATO. A renewed attempt, undertaken in close coordination and cooperation with Allies and the Allied Commander of Transformation (ACT), responsible within the Allied Command structure, to “streamline” the number, substantive depth, planning cycles and review mechanisms of programmes, concentrating on one to a maximum of three overarching “matrix-type” framework partnership programmes could be pursued. Based on individual or group needs, those framework programmes could then allow for maximum flexibility in terms of substance, commitment levels, and depth of review.

Such an approach would allow for the necessary differentiation between partner countries and partner groups for political visibility purposes (advanced vs cooperation or mere consultation partners) while reducing the administrative burden and NATO committees/North Atlantic Council oversight time. At the same time it would allow the Alliance to overcome political paralysation, which is often an issue with regional settings. Geography should not any longer be the primary principle for NATO partnerships. Where countries of a particular region see benefit in continuing working together in the framework of NATO, this could be reflected and supported through the individual country programmes.

Tailor-made assistance programmes under a common framework would allow closer cooperation with some partners of particular value for NATO, such as, for example Finland and Sweden in the north, or Jordan in the South, which have strong overlapping security and defence interests with NATO. For other partners, not as close to NATO, basic assistance for security and defence sector reforms and training could then be organised, to the extent possible and financially viable, and wherever possible in cooperation with other relevant multilateral (EU) or regional actors like the African Union (AU). Thus, it would be possible to prioritise scarce resources for partners who can contribute most to the Alliance’s and regional security priorities, without exposing to others their lower priority status.

Any new or adapted system for NATO partnership activities should also take into account the experience gained in other multilateral organisations, in particular the European Union. The latter is even more important, as security and defence is gradually gaining importance in EU partnership programmes as well. Aligning EU programmes and NATO programmes could, wherever possible, enhance effectiveness and impact. This would also contribute to the overarching aim of closer EU-NATO cooperation as outlined in the relevant joint political declarations and summit communiques of 2016 and 2018. It would also add impact and effectiveness if EU security programmes such as the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), funded with a budget of 2,3 billion Euro for 2014-2020 and NATO Defence and Related Security Capacity Building programmes (DCB) – with much smaller figures – could reinforce each other. Combined efforts should also be extended to integrity building and good governance support programmes of both organisations. Some of the 74 common actions agreed between the EU and NATO already contribute to that aim. In some areas, such as cyber, where Allies are not the only possible assistance provider for partners, partnerships could also help to bring to the table the resources of other advanced partner nations like Israel to support those partners lagging behind. This would not only reduce the burden for Alliance members. It would also create a dialogue among equals by recognising partners not only as recipients of Allied support, but also as providers.

How to increase and measure success of partnership activities?

Viable, effective and resilient defence institutions are essential to the long-term success of efforts to strengthen partner capacity. Rather than looking and reviewing by types of programmes, NATO should establish an overarching review and assessment process at a “country-by-country” level, based on benchmarks previously agreed with partners that would allow measuring overall progress in a country’s defence and security sector reform and its compliance with integrity and good governance goals. The experience gained by the EU with so-called progress reports for candidate countries could provide additional guidance in how to define, measure and assess progress of a particular country against targets (the “aquis communautaire” in the EU case).

NATO in this respect does not need to re-invent the wheel. An ample amount of methods, tools and mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of bilateral and multilateral cooperation have been developed and are in use in other international, regional and national organisations, such as the UN (with its subsidiary bodies), the EU Commission and national cooperation agencies. Examples include the USAID standardised Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA) or the World Bank Capacity Development Results Framework (CDRF). They include for example stringent financial reporting mechanisms, also ensuring the integrity of the funds used, peer-review processes and interview-based instruments to check results against quantitative and qualitative benchmarks. NATO should use a combination of existing instruments adapted to the needs and specifics in order to support an overarching review and assessment process on a country-by-country basis. This could assess how the different assistance components provided by NATO or individual Allies to a particular country have contributed to the achievement of overall Partnership- and/or Country targets. Common benchmarks could be employed across the partner system to identify what worked and what did not work in terms of instruments, but also to measure the extent to which a country has used NATO assistance to its own (and NATO’s) benefit, thus serving as a for prioritisation.

Again, EU experience gained through annual progress reports for candidate countries could provide additional guidance on how to define, measure and assess progress vis-à-vis targets and over time. Other examples include the methodology used by the UNDP Human Development Index or by national institutions such as the German GIZ’s Manual for Development Practitioners. When it comes to measure defence capacity building and interoperability, NATO has also gained ample experience with military certification exercises. Those exercises could be adapted to the broader security sector, including civil-military cooperation. Lessons learned in this respect could be shared in the framework of the NATO interoperability framework, which is open to many partners.

Conclusion

In essence, NATO should adapt its partnership programmes and activities to a changing world and security environment by moving away from grouping together countries based on a history of cooperation with NATO or on a regional basis. Instead, two or three new overarching “matrix-type” framework programmes should be established that would allow for maximum flexibility in terms of substance, commitment levels, as well as financing. Cooperation with the EU should be enhanced, tapping also into resources provided by the EU for security and good governance support programmes. In order for partnerships to work effectively, adequate provision of travel resources for both NATO staff and partners is imperative to ensure that dialogue and cooperation is not a one-way street but beneficial for both sides. Adapting instruments developed in other international organisations to NATO’s needs and specifics would allow to better assess how the different assistance components provided by NATO itself or individual Allies have helped to achieve respective country targets and ultimately contributed to the security of the Alliance and its neighbourhood.

Wolfgang Rudischhauser is Vice President of the German Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS). Prior to that, he served as director of the NATO WMD non-proliferation centre within the NATO international staff from 2014-2017. This article expresses solely his personal views, not those of NATO or BAKS.