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**EU-NATO COOPERATION ON  
CYBER SECURITY, DEFENCE  
CAPABILITIES AND CAPACITY  
BUILDING: CHANGES AND  
CONTINUITIES BETWEEN THE 7TH  
AND 8TH PROGRESS REPORT**

**WRITTEN BY: JACOPO MARIA BOSICA**

**EDITED BY**

MICHELE PUGGIA

**WRITTEN BY**

JACOPO MARIA BOSICA

**SUPERVISED BY**

CANSU MACIT KARADUMAN

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## Abstract

On June 16th 2023, NATO and the EU released their 8th progress report on the implementation of the common set of proposals endorsed by the respective Councils on December 6th 2016 and December 5th 2017. This info flash aims at identifying elements of change and continuity in bilateral cooperation dynamics compared to the 7th progress report published on June 20th 2022.

After an introductory section with some background information on EU-NATO cooperation's progress vis-à-vis contemporary security trends, it tries to stress similarities and differences between the two reports in three areas: cyber security and defence (section I), defence capabilities (section II) and defence and security capacity building (section III). A final section with an overall assessment of the progress being made in such areas will follow.

## Background

The crux of EU-NATO cooperation resides in the need to create a solid strategic partnership in the Euro-Atlantic security environment and beyond. Over the last two decades, the two international organisations have developed different layers of cooperation, which were reiterated in the final declaration of the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit and in follow-up communiqués between 2016 and 2017: hybrid threats, coordinating out-of-area and peacekeeping operations, sharing information to counter cyber threats and terrorism, complementing defence planning processes, supporting states' security and defence capacity-building, facilitating military mobility across Europe and beyond.

During subsequent rounds of consultation, most notably the 2018 and 2021 NATO Brussels Summits, bilateral cooperation amounted to building coherent, complementary, and interoperable defence capabilities for transatlantic burden sharing, as well as the delivery of capabilities and an increase in defence spending. These constitute the premises to deal with contemporary challenges like disruptive technologies, the security implications of climate change, disinformation, and geostrategic competition. The unfolding of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022 acted as a wake-up call for NATO and the EU to revise their security and defence doctrines. The EU took the initiative by releasing the Strategic Compass on March 21st, advocating for making the Union a more reliable security provider by, inter alia, strengthening its resilience, enhancing military mobility, building defence capabilities, and bolstering cooperation with strategic partners like NATO (Council of the European Union, 2022a).

The latter followed suit with the adoption of a new Strategic Concept at the Madrid Summit in late June, where heads of state and government reaffirmed the alliance's collective defence values, regarded Russia as the "most significant and direct threat" to Euro-Atlantic security and defined climate change as a "defining challenge of our time" (NATO, 2022). Lastly, on January 9th, 2023, NATO and EU heads signed the 3rd EU-NATO Declaration on Cooperation, which stressed the importance of strengthening bilateral ties to face geostrategic competition, foster resilience, protect critical infrastructure, counter foreign interference, and information manipulation (NATO, 2023).

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In light of these developments, the latest progress report sets out the state of the art of EU-NATO cooperation in countering hybrid threats, out-of-area operations and exercises with special regard to the maritime domain, defence industry and research, political dialogue, cyber security and defence, defence capabilities and defence and security capacity building. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine unfolded in February 2022, the last three areas have grown relevant and will be discussed in the following sections.

## **I. Cyber Security and Defence**

To begin with, given Russia's perpetuation of the military aggression against Ukraine, both reports tackle the topic by stressing NATO and EU's efforts to frame a shared understanding of cyber threats and their implications over member states' national security, as well as a shared situational awareness of the challenges presented by the geostrategic environment. The only slight variation can be found in the 2023 report stressing the enhancement of "exchanges on strategic, policy and legislative cyber security and defence developments" to foster complementarities on the matter (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 5).

From a crisis management standpoint, the 2022 report mentioned NATO staff's participation in the Cyber Defence Policy Framework review workshop held by the European External Action Service in September 2021, together with the continuous exchange of training and education leading to NATO's release of the latest Comprehensive Cyber Defence Policy to EU personnel. In parallel, the latter shared its Military Vision and Strategy on Cyberspace as a Domain of Operations with their NATO counterparts (NATO & EU, 2022, pp. 5-6). The newly released progress report builds on these achievements to reiterate bilateral commitment to reciprocal updates and engagement in crisis management and response mechanisms (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 6). It also hints at ongoing consultations within the organisations' constituencies to support Ukraine in the cyber domain (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 5).

NATO and the EU are also known for cross-staffing during exercises and conferences. Both reports mention NATO personnel's participation in the annual Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox table-top exercise (CyDipTTX) in the EU Council's Horizontal Working Party on Cyber Issues. In return, EU staff joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCD CoE) in the Locked Shields international cyber defence exercise. By contrast, while the 2022 document hinted at CCD CoE's participation in the planning and operational phase of EU's CYBER PHALANX 21 exercise (NATO & EU, 2022, p. 5), such mention is not present in the 2023 update.

As for conferences and workshops, both reports underline the European Defence Agency's involvement in the NATO Annual Discipline Conference. While the 2022 document reported about two cross-staff workshops on Cyber Defence Education, Training and Exercises and on Cyber Defence Concepts Exchange (NATO & EU, 2022, p. 6), the 2023 one focuses instead on NATO's CCD CoE inviting EU personnel to the 2022 International Conference on Cyber Conflict (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 6).

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## II. Defence Capabilities

Both documents acknowledge the two organisations' efforts to guarantee output coherence between the EU's Capability Development Plan (CDP) and Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) on the one hand, and the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process (PARP) on the other. Close staff contacts, especially among military personnel, ensured reciprocal awareness-raising on the matter.

In the aviation domain, elements of continuity can be found in progress on the implementation of the Military Aviation Strategy, with special regard to the Single European Sky (SES) reform, the Single European Sky Air Traffic Management Research 3 (SESAR 3) and its development programme. Likewise, cooperation persists on security risks to aviation, but the 2023 report backs up the already existing NATO-EUROCONTROL Air Traffic Management with the European Aviation Safety Agency's "European Strategic Coordination Platform" (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 7). Furthermore, the 2023 document highlights that, in December 2022, the EEAS and EDA briefed the NATO Aviation Committee about the Development of a Strategic Reflection for "free, safe and secure European access to the airspace" (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 7).

Updates on cooperation in the maritime domain and ammunition mark two major additions compared to 2022. The former consisted of: staff exchanges on underwater unexploded munitions, critical undersea infrastructure protection, exploitation of disruptive technologies to enhance situational awareness, and the use of autonomous systems to deliver anti-submarine warfare. Cooperation on land and air ammunition is related to military support to Ukraine in the context of the war of attrition against Russia and to refurbish allies' stocks (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 7).

In conclusion, the relevance of military mobility for EU-NATO cooperation is underlined in both reports, with an evolution from mere cross-briefings between military staffs on organisations' efforts (NATO & EU, 2022, p. 8) to expert-level discussions to enhance cybersecurity and relevant transport infrastructure's resilience. These discussions provided the EU with a solid baseline to update its Military Requirements for, inter alia, the fuel supply chain, air traffic management and communication, and surveillance infrastructure after adopting a new Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0 last November (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 8).

## III. Defence and Security Capacity Building

In this domain, both reports illustrate cooperation's progress on a country or regional basis. Starting with Ukraine, the two reports highlight a distinction between a pre- and a post-invasion framework. NATO and the EU shifted from advancing security sector and intelligence reform alongside consultations on enhancing defence capacity-building support under the European Peace Facility (NATO & EU, 2022, p. 9), to suspending cooperation frameworks due to the escalation of military hostilities. The remaining interaction forums concerned staff dialogues on the response to the invasion, the security sector reform and donor coordination on cybersecurity (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 10).

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Within the Southern Caucasus, bilateral cooperation in Georgia has maintained a business-as-usual pattern, with programmes such as EU's SAFE (Security, Accountability and Fight against Crime) and NATO's SNGP (Substantial NATO-Georgia Package). As for Moldova, considering the granting of EU candidate status in June 2022, more tangible progress could be witnessed, as cooperation shifted from preparing projects under EPF's assistance measures (NATO & EU, 2022, p. 9) to practical support on resilience and hybrid threats through NATO's Resilience Advisory Support Team (RAST) and EU's Partnership Mission (EUPM) (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 10).

The Western Balkans security landscape did not require any changes to EU-NATO cooperation, which mainly revolved around defusing endemic hostilities between Serbia and Kosovo through strategic messaging, as well as continuing security roundtables and coordinating cybersecurity activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the EU Special Representative/OSCE-led working group.

The MENA region gained more prominence in the 2023 progress report. For instance, the EU South StratCom Task Force updated NATO's Informal Mediterranean Dialogue Policy Advisory Group in Alicante last October about potential communication synergies and courses of action. In January 2023, the EEAS held two working sessions on counter-terrorism, where it addressed capacity-building efforts in the two focus states: Jordan and Tunisia (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 11). In particular, in November 2022, the EU Delegation in Amman joined NATO's capacity-building exercise with the national armed forces and took it as an opportunity to present the Union's CT strategy. Mauritania is the latest addition in virtue of the G5 Sahel's presidency and the willingness to explore cooperation avenues through, inter alia, the NATO Defence and Capacity Building package (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 11.). Conversely, the latest report does not refer to cooperation between the EU Advisory Mission and the NATO Mission in Iraq, whose robust coordination for the Security Sector Reform was emphasised in 2022 (NATO & EU, p. 11).

The recommendations coming out of the annual staff-to-staff talks on cooperation areas to be explored sum up the evolution of EU-NATO cooperation in the contexts just discussed. The 2022 report highlighted: the need to deepen dialogue and undertake initiatives in Ukraine; the opportunity of having the EU Delegation in Jordan brief at NATO CT events; cooperation on areas like hybrid threats, cyber defence, women, peace and security in Moldova; fostering information-sharing in security and defence in Georgia; strengthening Tunisia's building integrity capacities (NATO & EU, 2022, pp. 10-11). The 2023 one, instead, takes note of the following areas of cooperation recommended by the May 2023 talks: bolstering strategic communications in Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Jordan; promoting CT, good governance and border security in Jordan; military medicine for Georgia and Mauritania, the latter also requiring education and training support; cyber security and defence reform in Moldova; deepening dialogue and boosting capacity building in Ukraine through EU-NATO Staff Coordination (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 12).

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## Assesment and Conclusion

Overall, the 2023 progress report remains faithful to the cooperation framework built by its previous version, especially because the security landscape in the Euro-Atlantic area and its neighbourhood have not experienced any drastic developments. Both reports have tried to address the widest range of geographical contexts and to encapsulate as many crisis management exercises as possible under the 2022-2023 Plan for Implementation of Parallel and Coordinated Exercises (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 2); however, it goes without saying that most of the cooperation efforts might be diverted to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, whose end is unlikely to be in sight.

Concerning the cooperation fields being touched upon, cyber security, while not experiencing significant changes except for a “reshuffling” of the relevant exercises, acts as a fil rouge across the other two domains due to its compelling nature in the contemporary world. For both defence capabilities and defence and security capacity building, NATO and the EU have stepped up their commitment by widening the spectrum of issues and geographical contexts to address. This is very indicative of how the two organisations are trying to assert themselves as leading actors beyond the Euro-Atlantic region from a military interoperability viewpoint. Lastly, in its introductory statements, the 2023 report hints at the need to explore new avenues for further collaboration in areas like climate and defence, space and new technologies (NATO & EU, 2023, p. 2). Interestingly, although these act as cross-cutting issues among all the areas dealt with by the reports, the latter do not mention any cooperation forums or courses of action to address them.

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