Katarina Djokic

DOES NATO FACILITATE REGIONAL DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE BALKANS?
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Executive summary

Despite the low-intensity conflict that is currently prevailing in the Western Balkans, shared political interests and common security threats will push the countries in the region towards enhanced cooperation in the long term. Considering NATO's strong presence in the region – not least because most countries are either its members or interested in membership – it is worthwhile assessing its contribution to stability through fostering regional cooperation. Hence, this paper examines to which extent NATO has acted as an ‘interface’ for regional defence and security cooperation and looks at the challenges and opportunities for the Alliance to play such role. This question is not only relevant from the ‘local’ perspective, but also from NATO’s one, especially since the current partnership policy emphasises regional cooperation as a way to boost cooperative security. Moreover, cooperative security is cheaper than crisis management and this notion should be vital in NATO's approach to the Western Balkans in the forthcoming years.

The analysis shows that NATO indeed offers mechanisms for strengthening cooperation, but their use has been significantly hampered by the fact that neither the countries in the region recognise them, nor is NATO willing to promote them as such. The paper identifies five major challenges to NATO's role as an ‘interface’ of regional cooperation. However, there are also arguments in favour of such role and opportunities to expand it.

Firstly, there is a widespread notion that NATO's partnership tools are designed for bilateral cooperation between the individual country and NATO. To be fair, this is mostly true, but practice has shown that at least several tools could contribute to networking the region. In fact, NATO not only brings the countries together at courses and exercises, but also helps them establish shared interests, develop unique standards and create interpersonal contacts.

Secondly, NATO's approach towards the region is rather fragmented. Even though NATO's political documents acknowledge the necessity of promoting regional security, this organisation is in practice prevailingly oriented towards working directly with individual countries. This may prevent broader situational awareness and understanding of what exactly shapes local policies and societies. At the same time, NATO has sufficient capacities to more comprehensively monitor the situation in the field and develop more coherent policies.
Thirdly, the track record in synergies between NATO/Partnership for Peace programmes and regional initiatives or bilateral cooperation activities has been quite modest so far. Nonetheless, some regional initiatives have found ways to benefit from NATO tools and mechanisms, especially when it comes to adopting NATO standards and developing interoperability.

Fourthly, countries in the region have not duly switched from donor-recipients to equal allies or partners to NATO, who would be ready to propose and co-fund their own capability development projects. Regional cooperation will increasingly have to be initiated bottom-up rather than appear as a reaction to donors’ incentives, as was the case in the previous decade. Nonetheless, the countries do recognise shared security policy interests. This particularly refers to strengthening civil disaster response.

Fifthly, when talking about NATO’s role in the Western Balkans, the problem of its legitimacy in some countries cannot be disregarded. This is an important point for decision-makers in NATO dealing with the region to understand, but no justification for national leaders to succumb to populism. Instead, an open and honest debate about future political priorities is needed.
## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANP</td>
<td>Annual National Programme</td>
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<td>BiH</td>
<td>Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
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<td>BMTF</td>
<td>Balkan Medical Task Force</td>
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<td>BRAAD</td>
<td>Balkan Regional Approach to Air Defence</td>
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<td>CBRN</td>
<td>Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (defence)</td>
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<td>COMEDS</td>
<td>Chiefs of Military Medical Services</td>
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<td>COE</td>
<td>Centre of Excellence</td>
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<td>EADRCC</td>
<td>Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>HQ</td>
<td>Headquarters</td>
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<td>IP</td>
<td>Interoperability Platform</td>
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<td>IPAP</td>
<td>Individual Partnership Action Plan</td>
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<td>JFC</td>
<td>Allied Joint Force Command</td>
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<td>KFOR</td>
<td>Kosovo Force</td>
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<td>MAP</td>
<td>Membership Action Plan</td>
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<td>MLO</td>
<td>Military Liaison Office</td>
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<td>NALT</td>
<td>NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT)</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NATINAMDS</td>
<td>NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System</td>
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<td>NCIA</td>
<td>NATO Communications and Information Agency</td>
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<td>NHQSa</td>
<td>NATO Headquarters Sarajevo</td>
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<td>NLO</td>
<td>NATO Liaison Office</td>
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<td>NSPA</td>
<td>NATO Support and Procurement Agency</td>
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<td>PfP</td>
<td>Partnership for Peace</td>
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<td>PSOTC</td>
<td>Peace Support Operations Training Centre</td>
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<td>PTEC</td>
<td>Partnership Training and Education Centre</td>
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<td>RASR</td>
<td>Regional Approach to Stockpile Reduction</td>
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<td>REGEX</td>
<td>Regional Exercise</td>
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<td>SEEBRIG</td>
<td>South-Eastern Europe Brigade</td>
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<td>SEEGROUP</td>
<td>South East Europe Security Steering Group</td>
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<td>SPS</td>
<td>Science for Peace and Security</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>The United States of America</td>
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<td>USEUCOM</td>
<td>The United States European Command</td>
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NATO and regional cooperation in the Balkans – why does it matter?*

The ongoing accession of North Macedonia to NATO\(^1\) and activation of the Membership Action Plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in late 2018\(^2\) pose an occasion to re-evaluate NATO’s role in the Balkans. NATO’s presence in the region dates from the 1990s\(^3\). In many ways, 1999 was a threshold year for NATO’s relations with the Balkans, marked not only by military intervention in Yugoslavia and the subsequent outset of NATO-led KFOR mission in Kosovo, but by acknowledgement at the Washington Summit that “international efforts to develop and stabilise the region must be comprehensive, coherent and well co-ordinated”\(^4\). Twenty years later, all countries in the region, except for Serbia, have either joined, or expressed interest in joining the Alliance. Serbia is actively using different tools of cooperation with NATO in the capacity of a partner nation. In the previous two decades, NATO enlargement was regarded as the guarantee of stability\(^5\). In fact, terms such as “pockets of instability”\(^6\) are often used to imply instability is correlated with non-membership of NATO.

At the same time, and despite the optimism brought about by the implementation of the Prespa Agreement\(^7\), low-intensity conflict seems to be a prominent trend in the region, with political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, uncertainty about the continuation of the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue and belligerent rhetoric from the political elites and media in various countries\(^8\). This notwithstanding, there are cogent arguments for seeking ways of strengthening regional defence and security cooperation in the long term. First, all countries have formally declared an interest in strengthening security cooperation\(^9\). They share some ‘external’ security threats, such as natural disasters, and policy goals, such as enhancing capacities for cyber security and participation in multinational operations. All the countries are either EU members or candidates/potential candidates for EU accession. With increased defence integrations within the EU, they will inevitably have to increase cooperation, not only with Brussels-based institutions, but on a mutual basis, too. Finally, financial constraints have already directed some countries towards joint capability development\(^10\) and are likely to do so in the future.

\(^*\)The author would like to thank all the interlocutors who contributed to this research with their insights and feedback to the draft paper, as well as her colleagues Vladimir Erceg, Marko Savkovic and Bojan Elek for for patiently reading previous versions and making useful suggestions. Any errors, however, are the sole responsibility of the author.
Considering that all the countries in the region are either NATO members or partners through Partnership for Peace (PfP)\textsuperscript{1}, it is worthwhile asking to which extent NATO has acted as an ‘interface’ for regional defence and security cooperation. This question is also very relevant from the NATO perspective, as it helps evaluate the implementation of its own policy objectives. Importantly, cooperative security is cheaper for NATO than crisis management and fostering regional cooperation should play a major part in that strategic notion.

In this analysis, the ‘region’ will primarily refer to the Western Balkans, with the inclusion of Croatia. As several regional initiatives cross these lines and encompass further South Eastern European countries, all of them NATO members (Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey) and there is rationale for all these countries to cooperate more intensely (geography, shared threats, or compatible equipment), the definition of the region will be taken flexibly to be able to include all of them when appropriate. It ought to be noted that this analysis will not deal with a major factor of regional (in)stability in 2019: Belgrade-Prishtina relations. The reasons for this are that 1) NATO’s role in this regard is crisis management rather than fostering cooperative security. Due to disputed statehood, Kosovo\(^*\) is not currently eligible for PfP and has not participated in initiatives under this framework; 2) the EU and the USA have a considerably higher political influence on (possible) conflict resolution in this case than NATO. That said, if and when a settlement between Belgrade and Prishtina is reached, findings of this analysis are expected to be relevant for forecasting further regional cooperation in a new setting.
Regional cooperation in NATO's political framework

The basis for NATO to take over a more substantial role in facilitating regional security cooperation was created in 2011 with the *Active Engagement in Cooperative Security: A More Efficient and Flexible Partnership Policy*. This document underlines the determination to ensure that “partners will play a fuller role than ever before in the development and implementation of cooperative activities and approaches with NATO and amongst partners”\(^{12}\). The current partnership policy specifically aims to promote regional cooperation. The priority areas range from political consultations with a view to crisis prevention and management, to several topics in which partnership tools and mechanisms have already been widely utilised in the Balkans (defence reform, interoperability and cooperation in NATO-led missions and operations), to topics for which there has been increasing interest in the region: emerging security challenges (cyber defence) and civilian emergency planning.

A reference to cooperative security approach can also be observed in the policy framework pertaining to the Western Balkans. The Brussels Summit Declaration (2018) reaffirms NATO’s political commitment to work “closely with the Western Balkans to maintain and promote regional and international peace and security”\(^{13}\). Some South Eastern European NATO member states have singled out strengthening regional cooperation as their national goals within the Alliance. Romania aims to support “NATO’s role as a stability provider, promoter of reforms and regional cooperation in Romania’s close neighbourhood (Balkans and the Black Sea region)”\(^{14}\), while Croatian priorities include strengthening cooperation between its neighbouring countries and NATO\(^{15}\).
NATO as an ‘interface’ for cooperation: formal and informal partnership mechanisms

Considering that by early 2019, three countries in the region were (still) partners, one of which is not interested in joining NATO, the analysis will mostly revolve around partnership tools and mechanisms. The analysed mechanisms are roughly divided along NATO’s typology of partnership tools and mechanisms into 1) political dialogue, 2) building capabilities and interoperability, 3) education and training, and 4) wider cooperation. However, these categories will be taken more flexibly to include other, especially informal, mechanisms for communication and cooperation.

1) Political dialogue

1.1. Anchoring political commitments

Political documents asserting partnership or membership goals tend to encompass commitment to developing regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. It ought to be noted that such documents reflect the individual country’s priorities (rather than NATO’s policies) they wish to pursue through bilateral cooperation with NATO or membership of the Alliance. However, the documents did provide a useful tool to present a national view of the regional security and to systematise foreign, defence and security policy objectives related to the region.

The Serbian PfP presentation document16 (2007) appears particularly ambitious. Not only did Serbia aim to “maximally contribute to the peaceful development of the region, strengthening good neighbourly relations and resolution of all disputes through dialogue and cooperation”, but there was also an explicit interest for development of regional capabilities and interoperability at the regional level through PfP17. Serbian IPAP for the period 2015-2017 did not go on to operationalise this. Nevertheless, it did declare regional cooperation as a foreign policy priority and pledged to strengthen regional stability through contribution to regional security organisations and initiatives, in particular RACVIAC Centre for Security Cooperation, South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) and SEEGROUP18.

Membership Action Plans endow NATO with some leverage to actually request regional cooperation, since this is a criterium for accession19. Annual National Programmes prepared in the framework of MAP process tend to refer to ‘constructive participation in regional initiatives and cooperation’20.
However, political documents in some Western Balkan countries lack consistency: for instance, Serbian IPAP expired in 2017 and the new one is, in early 2019, still awaiting adoption. BiH is unlikely to prepare ANP despite green light for MAP from Brussels. All this indicates that political dialogue with NATO can only have impact on the region to the extent there is a genuine, consensus-built interest in partner countries to engage in such dialogue. That said, participation in PfP has created alternative mechanisms for dialogue with NATO and intraregional dialogue even when official documents are pending.

1.2. Partners – nations dialogue and consultations at NATO HQ level

Euro Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) meetings seem to have become rarer and less relevant over the years, but national representatives still gather at other meetings in different formats, depending on the topics. Meetings of nations participating in the Resolute Support mission have been singled out as relatively frequent. Another opportunity for political dialogue and consultations is the Interoperability Platform, launched at Wales Summit 2014 as a part of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative. At the moment, it acts as a forum for discussion, convening in different formats (for example, under the auspices of NATO summits or Military Committee meetings) and it is still unclear what kind of practical outputs it could or should bring about. In 2016, a road map for further interoperability enhancing was adopted, but this document is not publicly available, so it is difficult to ascertain the current IP ambitions.

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<tr>
<th>Country/political entity</th>
<th>Level of political dialogue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>NATO member</td>
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<tr>
<td>BiH</td>
<td>MAP activated, ANP not adopted as of 1 March 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kosovo*</td>
<td>No formal dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>NATO member</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>ANP (Accession Protocol signed in February 2019)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>IPAP (expired in 2017, new one announced for 2019)</td>
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Table 1: Status of countries/political entities in the Western Balkans in regard to NATO
Permanent representations/missions of allies and partner countries to NATO HQ in Brussels allow for regular interaction in less formalised ways. An informal group, gathering representatives of Balkan countries and other NATO nations and partners interested in the region, the South East Europe Security Steering Group (SEEGROUP), was set up upon proposal endorsed at the Washington Summit in 1999. SEEGROUP has been praised by different stakeholders as a useful setting to carry out discussions in a less formal manner. It has not served to initiate practical cooperation, but for partner nations it is useful as a forum to discuss security issues of common interest and promote themselves in the NATO community. Apart from an honest exchange of opinions, which would be less feasible through formal mechanisms, SEEGROUP is deemed to contribute to awareness raising of regional topics among participants from outside the region. However, it only met three times in 2018 (including one meeting at the level of ambassadors) and organised a field visit to Belgrade for its participants. Since SEEGROUP is chaired by a partner from the region, with annual rotation of chairmanship, North Macedonia's accession to NATO means that chairmanship is going to be permanently shared between BiH and Serbia. Thus, the stakeholders are informally considering the possibility of refreshing the concept so that it remains relevant in the future. In spite of the difficulties SEEGROUP is facing, there is a consensus that it still serves a purpose, which is exactly why it ought to undergo some changes.

NATO nations also participate in other informal groups, depending on their interest in particular topics, such as BiH accession to NATO. Different formats of official meetings facilitate daily communication among nations' permanent representations staff, whereas regularity of communication with partners depends on formats of the meetings they take part in. Still, physical proximity allows for arranging informal meetings (‘drinking coffee’).

1.3. Coordination of NATO's presence in the region

NATO's presence in the region includes the NATO Headquarters in Sarajevo (NHQSa), the Military Liaison Office in Belgrade (MLO), the NATO Liaison Office in Skopje (NLO), NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT) in Prishtina and KFOR. Field presence enables NATO a regular direct communication with all stakeholders in the field and situational awareness, but also a possibility to shape a more coherent approach towards the region. Since 2014, representatives of NHQSa, NALT and liaison offices in Belgrade and Skopje, along with representatives of JFC Naples, meet two-three times per year as the Balkan Liaison Working Group to share information, exchange situational awareness and look for potential synergies and ways to enhance mutual cooperation. However, there is an assessment that the relatively high turnover frequency of military staff in Naples, Sarajevo, Belgrade and Skopje significantly limits ability of this group to move forward with concrete plans.
2) Building capabilities and interoperability

The closest NATO has come to attaining interoperability and facilitating cooperation amongst partners is through the Regional Exercise (REGEX) Initiative, launched in 2014. The very idea behind REGEX is to create a network of partnerships among partners, and in this sense, it is quite unique in the plethora of partnership tools, which are prevailingly designed to foster partners' bilateral cooperation with NATO. The ownership of the exercise is assigned to partner countries: each year one partner hosts the exercise and invites others. It is a partners' exercise with the goal of fulfilling their training needs related to participation in multinational operations, but in line with NATO standards and with NATO mentorship and support. However, REGEX is continuously losing its “regional” dimension, as the number of participating countries is increasing. It now gathers together participants from PfP, Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Partners across the Globe, as well as the African Union. While this is useful for strengthening relations between armed forces which are likely to work side by side in peacekeeping missions and operations, it does not have to make a specific impact on intraregional cooperation in the Balkans, especially since REGEX does not include NATO members.

Review of other tools for building capabilities and interoperability suggests they are strongly bilateral in nature and do not provide a basis for regional cooperation. Contrary to Serbia’s vision stated in the Presentation Document, PfP does not offer mechanisms for regional capability building.

An interesting exception, i.e. a case when a bilateral tool was used to facilitate regional cooperation was a NATO Trust Fund project that supported cooperation in the demilitarisation of surplus ammunition between Montenegro and Albania. In 2014, a small amount of surplus ammunition from Montenegro was demilitarised at a facility in Albania under the framework of a pilot project brokered by NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) and financed by the USA under a broader NATO Trust Fund project. Through this effort, NSPA aimed to “demonstrate that movement across national borders is feasible” and encourage a regional demilitarisation market. Albeit limited, this effort suggests that there is the potential to use the NATO Trust Fund mechanism to support regional cooperation when countries in the region have a defined common interest.
3) Education and training

NATO offers to partners opportunities for education and training in different formats and institutions. What is particularly important for countries in the region is the concept of PfP Training and Education Centres (PTEC). Partners have an opportunity to certify their national training centres as PTEC. Certification is not only beneficial for international visibility, but it helps different centres exchange knowledge and discuss common concerns through PTEC Working Group. All three PTEC centres based in the Western Balkans (Peace Support Operations Training Centre in Sarajevo, Nuclear, Biological, Chemical Defence Centre in Kruševac and Public Affairs Regional Centre in Skopje) were declared regional centres in 2009 by Western Balkans ministers of defence. NATO certification of regional centres and the individual courses they offer means that members of armed forces from the region are educated and trained in line with unique standards, which improves interoperability. On a practical level, PTEC certification means that NATO financially supports mutual cooperation i.e. exchange of instructors among the regional centres.

4) Wider cooperation

Under wider cooperation, NATO understands civilian or dual-use oriented programmes, which seem most promising for fostering regional cooperation, as they are less politically sensitive than military programmes. Civil disaster response has emerged as the most ‘popular’ topic in these forms of cooperation.

The Science for Peace and Security (SPS) programme provides for cooperation between NATO nations and partners on security-related civilian science and technology projects. Moreover, it specifically takes account of promoting cooperation among countries in the Western Balkans with the aim of projecting stability. Seventeen projects approved in the period 2014-2017 involved at least two countries based in the Balkans. The programme has established grounds for very practical cooperation in the areas of common interest, such as environmental security and emergency management, CBRN defence, mine detection and cyber security.
Disaster response and preparedness is deemed to be one of the most important areas of cooperation. Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which acts as NATO’s civil response mechanism, regularly organises consequence management field exercises in cooperation with national authorities in partner countries. Exercises include responding to natural disasters and technological incidents. In 2018, such an exercise took place in Serbia, in 2017 it was held in BiH and in 2016 in Montenegro. Considering geographic proximity, countries in the region are directed to each other for assistance in emergencies. Hence, interoperability development in this field is vital – it means that responding teams will be able to smoothly coordinate and undertake their tasks no matter which country they come from, in a situation when every second is important. An overview of participation in the last three exercises suggests that countries in the wider region have taken this necessity seriously.

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<td>BiH</td>
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<td>host</td>
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<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>observers</td>
<td>ERT</td>
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<td>Croatia</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
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<td>observers</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
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<td>Montenegro</td>
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<td>North Macedonia</td>
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EADRCC exercises have to some extent achieved synergies with SPS programme, as they provided an opportunity to test technologies developed or deployed in the framework of SPS-funded ‘regional’ projects (i.e. projects involving at least two countries in the region). Exercises in BiH and Serbia were used to test a communications system used to coordinate dispersed responders.
All this notwithstanding, there may be a question to which extent these exercises have so far paved the way for a more formalised regional cooperation in the field of disaster response. There seems to be only so much NATO, through EADRCC, can contribute and it remains up to countries in the region themselves to pursue further initiatives. Despite a clear interest in this kind of cooperation, there is a view that it will not be furthered until one country takes the lead.

Beyond the defined partnership tools, NATO also offers partners the possibility to join armament programmes. Armament projects could be open to partners, as is the case with the land ammunition procurement formally agreed during the Brussels Summit. North Macedonia joined the project prior to signing the Accession Protocol; as did NATO partners Finland and Austria. These kinds of projects could help procure arms and military equipment at lower prices, but they may not necessarily benefit national defence industry, especially if it is not competitive enough at international level. Partners would also have to completely implement NATO standards in regard to equipment to be able to take part in such projects. Moreover, there is general scepticism about the effectiveness of joint procurement in a situation when several nations and partners are involved in the same operation and simultaneously require the same resources.
Cooperation and synergies with other regional initiatives

A number of regional defence and security initiatives have been set up in the last twenty years: many with the support of some NATO members.

The most successful one in attaining synergies with NATO is the US-Adriatic Charter (so-called A5), which gathers Albania, Croatia, BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia, with Serbia, Slovenia and Kosovo* having an observers' status. At the political level, A5 is unambiguously geared towards NATO membership by participating countries and using NATO as a platform for strengthening mutual cooperation. The participating countries have acknowledged that, due to challenges in reconciling capability planning with budgetary restraints, they aim to utilise NATO capability development initiatives to pursue joint projects. An example of this is the Balkan Regional Approach to Air Defence (BRAAD), which was first endorsed under the auspices of A5 and involves Croatia as the lead nation, BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The main idea was for the four countries to procure one radar each and establish a communications system to effectively share data. BRAAD basically complements integration of the region in NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defense System (NATINAMDS). However, an answer to the question if BRAAD has helped the countries to obtain capabilities at lower cost is ambiguous. On the one hand, integration in NATINAMDS spares countries from some expenses of developing and maintaining the entire air defence system completely on their own ("you only need one radar"). On the other hand, the countries still need to earmark funds to procure one radar each, as NATO has limited resources and does not tend to invest in the Allies' multilateral projects. In case of BRAAD, national defence planning documents suggest that the required radars still had not been procured by 2019. A further hindrance is the lack of political consensus in BiH about the project, which is why its participation has not moved beyond the feasibility study so far.

Cooperation within A5 initiative has also been used to send joint contributions to NATO-led “Resolute Support” mission in Afghanistan, as the Croatian contingent has entailed members of partner countries' armed forces. For instance, the 10th contingent, deployed in March 2019, encompasses 104 members of the Croatian Armed Forces and 41 members of the A5 partners' armed forces. Joint contributions to NATO-led peace support missions have been viewed by some practitioners as an opportunity to further strengthen mutual cooperation and understanding in the region.
A dynamic initiative from the previous decade with ostensible impact was the Western Balkans Defence Cooperation Forum – SEEC – launched at the proposal of Slovenia and the Armed Forces of the United States to Europe (USEUCOM), in order to improve donor coordination in defence. NATO representatives also took part in SEEC meetings. Although SEEC activities have waned in recent years, it was useful to identify capabilities which could also be developed through NATO-facilitated mechanisms, such as trust funds. Three PTEC centres in the Western Balkans were declared as regional at a SEEC meeting. Notably, further cooperation in the field of military medical capabilities was instigated in the framework of SEEC, resulting eventually in the establishment of the Balkan Medical Task Force (BMTF), whose members are Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia and whose partners are USEUCOM and the Norwegian Armed Forces.

BMTF is supported by NATO's Chiefs of Military Medical Services (COMEDS) and the NATO Center of Excellence for Military Medicine (MILMED COE). The former is a senior NATO body, while the latter is a NATO-accredited centre sponsored by eleven allies. Both are committed to improving interoperability in the medical field within NATO and between NATO and partner countries. To this end, MILMED COE biannually organises “Vigorous Warrior” exercises. BMTF is going to be part of “Vigorous Warrior 2019”. It underwent evaluation in accordance with NATO standards (MEDEVAL) during a multinational exercise “Saber Guardian 2017” as well as during the EADRCC “SRBIJA 2018” exercise, in which a BMTF medical team was involved along with emergency response teams sent by individual countries.

“SRBIJA 2018” was also an occasion to bring together activities under NATO/PfP and another regional mechanism, the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG), which sent its own delegation of evaluators to the exercise. SEEBRIG is a multinational brigade with contributions from Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania and Turkey available for conflict prevention and peace support operations – including NATO-led operations – under UN or OSCE mandate.

Another opportunity for synergies is the organisation of trainings for regional initiatives in PTEC centres. For instance, BMTF representatives were trained for communications by Public Affairs Regional Centre from Skopje.
Multilateral cooperation among NATO members

NATO integration is expected to open a whole new scope of opportunities to multilaterally develop and share capabilities countries are interested in. This section will briefly examine how Croatia has pursued this so far.

Croatia became a full member of NATO in 2009. Its engagement in multilateral projects under NATO auspices has not primarily been driven by geographic proximity, but by common interests, especially those related to the use of the same type of equipment. A good example for this is the cooperation with other nations using Mi-type helicopters. In the framework of the initiative which facilitated deployment of transport helicopters to ISAF, a pre-deployment training course programme was created, with simulator training carried out in the Czech Republic and flight training in Croatia. Drawing upon this, the Multinational Aviation Training Centre (MATC) project was developed and endorsed through NATO Smart Defense initiative. The MATC project, gathering Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and USA, aims to provide comprehensive training for flying and maintenance personnel from allied and partner nations on Mi-type helicopters, with Afghanistan as a priority among partners. At the time MATC was launched, NATO had already identified a lack of helicopter special operations capability and it was anticipated that MATC could be used to organise training for a special operations force. In October 2018, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia signed a memorandum of understanding to create the Multinational Special Aviation Program, to train helicopter crews to bring and extract Special Operations Forces from operations zones. The training centre is to be situated in Zemunik (Croatia) and is due to become operational by the end of 2019.

Further examples of Croatian participation in multinational projects under NATO auspices include the establishment of Regional Special Operations Component Command along with Hungary, Slovakia Slovenia and NATO partner Austria. Croatia is also a Sponsoring Nation of NATO Mountain Warfare Centre of Excellence hosted by Slovenia.

Overall, although Croatia has not viewed NATO as a platform to pursue regional cooperation, it has mostly worked with the allies in its neighbourhood. Moreover, projects initiated in the framework of the A5 initiative suggest that such multilateral efforts are not unimaginable. Their future will develop on the countries' ability to define shared interests and, according to some analyses of national strategic documents and plans, there are quite a few overlaps in capabilities desired by NATO members in the region. At the same time, these allies will have to show initiative and be able to finance their own projects. In a situation where they are coping with limited finances and looking for bilateral donations to support their NATO commitments, this could be a major obstacle to strengthening regional cooperation in the Balkans within NATO.
NATO's role in fostering regional cooperation: challenges and opportunities

“Partnership tools are primarily designed for bilateral cooperation.” This point is often raised by practitioners when talking about the potential to use NATO tools and mechanisms to foster regional cooperation\(^9\). It is a correct assessment, as each partner engages directly with NATO and decides for themselves what forms of cooperation they would like to pursue. Political dialogue is a bilateral process between an individual country and NATO (though there is a requirement for consensus within NATO on each partnership, i.e. NATO is not a single homogenous unit). Planning and Review Process (PARP) is a bilateral process and so is Operational Capabilities Concept (OCC). Partnership trust funds are set up for projects in individual countries and typically implemented through direct cooperation between the NSPA and the relevant institution in the partner country. The list goes on, but an overview of the practice presented so far suggests that quite a few tools could enhance regional cooperation, at least as a side effect. Political documents are useful to express commitment. Science for Peace and Security has prominently enabled joint regional projects and helped research institutions strengthen relationships they could use in the future to apply for other international projects and tenders. Courses, exercises and joint projects create social networks across borders. For instance, the exchange of course attendees and trainers in regional training centres or participation in REGEX helps high- and mid-level defence sector professionals to ‘get to know faces behind numbers’. Notably, interoperability requirements have led to the adoption of unique (NATO) standards which could make any future joint efforts much easier.
It remains disputable if NATO has a regional approach to the (Western) Balkans. NATO has clearly expressed commitment to stability and security and interest in working with partners in the region. Nevertheless, the “regional approach” is currently exhausted in applying the same partnership tools in different countries (BiH, North Macedonia, and Serbia), though these tools do not have to interact at all. REGEX and SPS show aspirations to enhance regional cooperation, but their impact is rather limited. This notwithstanding, NATO does have sufficient field presence and capacities to comprehensively monitor the situation and develop regional policies. Furthermore, there is an indication that NATO is setting up a new directorate under its Operations Division, which would facilitate political-military decision-making and programme implementation with partner nations. A job description for the new Director states that one of the key challenges facing the successful candidate in the next 3–5 years will be “unifying the development, planning, implementation and assessment of NATO’s partnership programmes”. Once the directorate has effectively been established, it could contribute to improved situational awareness and a more coordinated policy development towards the region. In addition, NATO’s new think-tank-like centre, Strategic Direction South HUB (Southern Hub) could have a role in shaping a more coherent regional approach. Southern Hub was declared fully operational at the 2018 Brussels Summit and its goals are to provide a better understanding of the areas in the South in which NATO operates and contribute to the coordination of the Alliance’s activities in these areas. Even though its current focus is on the NATO’s South (Middle East, North Africa, Sahel, and Sub-Saharan Africa), its area of interest could be extended to include the Western Balkans.
NATO will have to work out ways to achieve more synergies with the existing regional initiatives, individual nations' efforts and other international organisations. Countries engage in training and exercise under the auspices of different regional programmes or bilateral/multilateral cooperation. Some trust funds' beneficiaries have also worked closely with other international organisations and bilateral donors. Regional initiatives such as the Balkan Medical Task Force could significantly contribute to interoperability development supported by NATO. However, it does not appear that NATO has systematically monitored activities of regional initiatives or bilateral cooperation, not even when individual Allies acted as sponsors of particular initiatives or bilateral partners. What is more, previous research on international actors' coordination in peacebuilding and support to defence reform in the Western Balkans indicated a reluctance for information sharing, even among NATO nations. Nevertheless, regional initiatives have already found ways to benefit from NATO tools and mechanisms. BMTF takes part in exercises and undergoes evaluation in line with NATO standards. Adriatic Charter members have linked their mutual cooperation with their NATO-related interests. This suggests that there is a considerable potential to use NATO membership or partnership to pursue regional demands driven from the bottom up, as long as countries in the region themselves can reach a consensus on their ambitions. From a NATO perspective, close interaction with regional formats is also an efficient way to support cooperative security.
Diminishing enthusiasm for regional cooperation goes hand in hand with transition from donation-seeking post-conflict setting into the period when the region has to bear its fair share of capability funding. Regional cooperation cannot be imposed from outside and there has to be a sincere interest from all the parties to engage so that certain initiatives can really take off. In the 2000s, support for defence reform acted as a strong argument for individual countries to join regional initiatives. However, with advancing NATO enlargement, the region is less and less seen as a post-conflict environment in need of donations. NATO members are expected to contribute to the Alliance. Interoperability development at tactical level is well advanced, with a number of military units certified under OCC. Trust funds are becoming obsolete in their traditional fields such as demilitarisation, since demilitarisation is almost complete in the region. This means that the countries need to consider which policy goals bring them together and how they could jointly pursue them. They also have to be willing to finance or co-finance regional programmes themselves, considering that NATO’s resources are absolutely limited. That said, countries in the Balkans do recognise shared interests. Participation in peace support missions and operations as a shared policy objective has already brought them together through training and exercises. Civil emergency response and cyber security have emerged as fields where enhanced regional cooperation within PfP is desirable to all countries, including partners. Military medical capabilities have proved to be a significant field of cooperation and the Balkan Medical Task Force’s participation in Srbija 2018 shows that interoperability in this domain is not only relevant for participation in multinational operations, but also in managing emergencies at home. Air defence has also been recognised in most countries as a capability which requires cooperation, though Serbia is likely to remain out. In this view, an informal SEEGROUP could have an important role in the future, as a format to test ideas for joint projects and discuss what would be desirable or unacceptable for which country.
NATO’s role in the region could be undermined by the fact that NATO’s legitimacy is not equally high in all countries. According to a poll conducted in 2018, 66% of Serbian citizens oppose any cooperation with NATO. In BiH, attitude towards NATO is split along entity lines: while citizens of the Federation tend to have a mostly positive image of the Alliance, in Republika Srpska it is extremely negative. In Montenegro, accession to NATO was a highly polarising topic. There was no referendum on membership, but the voting results in parliament showed a narrow gap between supporters and opponents. A negative image of NATO among citizens makes cooperation more politically sensitive. Thus, officials may be reluctant to openly talk even about ongoing activities or prone to taking an negative stance towards NATO. What is also important, is that civil servants and members of the armed forces are also part of the public opinion and may share the same biases. However, public opinion survey results are not set in stone. In fact, in 2004, nearly 40% of Serbian citizens were in favour of NATO membership and support significantly dropped only after 2008, which could be linked to the Kosovo* declaration of independence and a National Assembly resolution which pledged Serbian military neutrality in response to NATO’s actions in regard to the former event. This is an additional argument for NATO to develop a comprehensive approach to the region, as a fragmented look at individual countries may hinder situational understanding. On the other hand, individual countries need an open, sincere, inclusive and informed public debate at national level about foreign and security policy priorities and transparent policy making which would reassure citizens about developments in the region and the character of cooperation with NATO.

Conclusion

NATO’s contribution to regional defence and security cooperation has been rather limited so far. Still, NATO does offer mechanisms with considerable potential to foster such cooperation. In fact, some of these mechanisms have already been utilised in practice, but they have not been duly recognised as such, either by countries in the region or by NATO. Importantly, NATO cannot impose regional cooperation from the topdown and neither can it stimulate it by providing financial incentives. What it can offer, are unique standards and channels streamlining communication between countries. How they will be used, depends on individual countries’ clarity about their defence and security policy goals and priorities for capability development. At the same time, it is important for NATO to operationalise more precisely its policies towards the Western Balkans and work towards having a comprehensive situational awareness in order to be able to foster cooperation and contribute to stability in the region.
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Conclusion


5. For instance, in his keynote speech at 2008 Bucharest Summit the then Secretary General noted: “I am hopeful that this will be a significant enlargement — significant enough to give the Balkans region the boost of stability and confidence that it needs.” (De Hoop Scheffer, J. “Keynote speech by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and Panel intervention at the Bucharest Conference (GMF),” NATO, 2 April 2018. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_7608.htm


The exception is Kosovo*, whose statehood remains disputed, but is interested in eventually joining NATO.  


Presentation documents are prepared by the governments of states joining Partnership for Peace and state political objectives from this participation.


Membership Action Plan sets an expectation for membership aspirants to “settle ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes including irredentist claims or internal jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles and to pursue good neighbourly relations”. (NATO. Membership Action Plan (MAP), approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 24 April 1999. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27444.htm)


This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/1999 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.


Interview 2.

Vershbow, A. Opening remarks by NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow at the meeting in Interoperability Platform format at the level of Defence Ministers. NATO, 9 July 2016. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_133306.htm?selectedLocale=en


“We will be meeting with colleagues from the countries of South-Eastern Europe tomorrow. We intend to build on that meeting by maintaining NATO’s consultations with the countries of the region. Accordingly, we will propose to them a consultative forum on security matters which brings together all NATO members and countries of the region at an appropriate level.” NATO. Washington Summit Communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C. on 24 April 1999. https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-064e.htm

Interview 1, Interview 2.

Interview 1, Interview 2.

Interview 2.


Interview 1.

Interview 1, Interview 2.

Interview 2.


Interview 1.


Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) homepage, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_117757.htm


Interview 3.


For instance, an overview of NSPA-awarded contracts for ammunition in 2018 indicates that 9% of the total value of contracts was awarded to suppliers from Central and Eastern European countries, while nearly a third of the total value of contracts (32.6%) was awarded to a single German-based company (Rheinmetall Waffe Munition GmbH). On the other hand, it is possible for companies based in partner countries to win NSPA tenders.

Interview 5.


Interview 3.

Interview 2, Interview 5.


Interview 2.


E.g. Serbia used the opportunity to promote Technical Overhaul Centre (TRZ) Krajevac (Ibida), which is currently involved in NATO Trust Fund supported demilitarization project.

Ibid.
Balkan Medical Task Force (n.d.)."Basic Communications Course." http://balkanmedicaltaskforce.com/event_details/43
Ibid.
For instance, Montenegro is hoping for donation of radar it is due to set up to integrate into NATHAMODS. (Ćetković, J. "Nabavka radara nacionalni prioritet". AntenaM, 14 February 2019. https://www.antenam.net/politika/110473-boskovic-nabavka-radara-nacionalni-prioritet.) Croatia received several donations of equipment from the United States since joining NATO. (Tabak, I. "SAD donira opremu za MRAP". Obris, 8 February 2019. https://obris.org/hrvatska/sad-donira-opremu-za-mrap/)
Interview 2, Interview 3.
Ibid: 2.
During the author's research in the framework of the project "EU-CIVCAP: Preventing and Responding to Conflict: Developing EU Civilian CAPabilities for a Sustainable Peace", one interlocutor complained that NHQSA's attempts to coordinate assistance to defence reform in BiH were foiled by the fact that many bilateral donors, including NATO members, were reluctant to share information. "We end up with NATO, EUFOR and 4 countries" (Interview 4). Issues in regard to information sharing and donor coordination are more elaborated in Dijkstra et al. "Partners in conflict prevention and peacebuilding: How the EU, UN and OSCE exchange civilian capabilities in Kosovo, Mali and Armenia," EU-CIVCAP DL 4.2, 2017. https://eucivcap.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/eu-civcap_deliverable_4-2.pdf; Zartsdahl, P. and K. Đokić."Report on Civil-Military Synergies on the Ground". EU-CIVCAP DL 5.3, 2018. https://eucivcap.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/eu-civcap_deliverable_5-3.pdf; and Algar-Faria et al. "International capacity building in the Western Balkans and the Horn of Africa: Lessons on coherence and coordination". EU-CIVCAP DL 6.2, 2018. https://eucivcap.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/eu-civcap_deliverable_6-2.pdf
With an exception of BiH, where Bosnian MoD and UNDP in cooperation with several international actors are currently leading a major demilitarisation project funded by the EU, ("UNDP BiH. European Union Assistance to Stockpile Management, Technical Support, and Ammunition Surplus Reduction (EU STAR project)", n.d. http://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/en/home/operations/projects/Justice%20and%20Security/EUSTAR.html).

Interview 1, Interview 2.

gradjani-srbije-misle-o-nato-i-saradnji-nakon-19-godina-od-bombardovanja/

An opinion poll conducted in August 2018 showed that 87% of respondents in Banja Luka had a negative attitude towards NATO, while 78% of respondents in Sarajevo had a positive opinion. (Centar za lobiranje. "Stav građana BiH: Vojna neutralnost ili NATO?", 25 August 2018. http://centarzalobiranje.com/index.php/ct-menu-item-5/ct-menu-item-9/49-ispitivanje-
vjnov-mnijenja-stav-gradana-bih-vojna-neutralnost-ili-nato-august-2018


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**List of interviews:**

- Interview 4. Representative of international governmental organisation. Phone interview, 7 March 2018.