

NATO's New Force Model and Partner Engagement in an Evolving Security Landscape

Нова модель сил НАТО та взаємодія партнерів у умовах мінливого безпекового ландшафту

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Purpose: is to justify the importance of partner engagement in the new model against the backdrop of ever-changing security environment. The hypothesis of the paper is that partner engagement plays a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of NFM within the evolving security environment. The paper tries to find answers to the following research questions: 1. What role do NATO's partners play in the New Force Model, and why is their engagement important? 2. What benefits and challenges do partner nations face when engaging with NATO under the NFM?

Method: Qualitative research methods, such as Comparative Analysis, Synthesis and Case Studies.

Theoretical implications: The theoretical implications of this paper lie in its contribution to the broader discourse on alliance dynamics, military interoperability, and cooperative security frameworks. By examining partner engagement within NATO's NFM, the study enhances our understanding of how non-member states contribute to and benefit from NATO's partnership initiatives. The paper bridges gaps in the literature by addressing the underexplored aspects of partner engagement within the NFM. It offers a foundation for future research on the role of partnerships in NATO's NFM in an increasingly complex and unpredictable global landscape.

Practical implications: The practical implications of this paper extend to policymaking, military strategy, and international security cooperation. By analyzing partner engagement within NATO's NFM, the study provides insights that can guide NATO and its partner nations in enhancing collaboration, interoperability, and strategic alignment. The study can serve as a reference for defense planners and decision-makers by identifying best practices for military cooperation and joint operational readiness.

Paper type: theoretical.

Мета дослідження: обґрунтувати важливість участі партнерів у новій моделі сил (NFM) на тлі постійно змінного безпекового середовища. Гіпотеза статті полягає в тому, що залучення партнерів відіграє вирішальну роль у забезпеченні ефективності NFM в умовах еволюції системи безпеки. У дослідженні поставлено такі запитання: 1. Яку роль відіграють партнери НАТО в Новій моделі сил і чому їхня участь є важливою? 2. Які вигоди та виклики постають перед країнами-партнерами у процесі взаємодії з НАТО в межах NFM?

Метод дослідження: якісні методи дослідження, зокрема порівняльний аналіз, синтез та кейс-стаді.

Теоретична цінність дослідження: полягає у внеску до ширшого наукового дискурсу щодо динаміки альянсів, військової взаємосумісності та рамок кооперативної безпеки. Дослідження участі партнерів у NFM НАТО сприяє кращому розумінню того, як держави-партнери, що не є членами Альянсу, роблять внесок у партнерські ініціативи НАТО та отримують з них користь. Робота заповнює прогалини в науковій літературі, аналізуючи маловивчені аспекти партнерської участі в межах NFM, і формує підґрунтя для подальших досліджень ролі партнерства в NFM НАТО в умовах дедалі складнішого та менш передбачуваного глобального середовища.

Практична цінність дослідження: значення статті поширюється на сфери вироблення політики, військової стратегії та міжнародної безпекової співпраці. Аналізуючи участь партнерів у NFM НАТО, дослідження надає висновки, які можуть бути корисними для НАТО та його партнерів у зміцненні співробітництва, взаємосумісності та стратегічної узгодженості. Результати дослідження можуть слугувати орієнтиром для військових планувальників і політичних керівників, визначаючи найкращі практики військової кооперації та спільної оперативної готовності.

Тип статті: теоретичний.

Key words: NATO, transformation, New Force Model, Old Force Model, NRF, ARF, PAF-N, partner.

Ключові слова: НАТО, трансформація, Нова модель сил, Стара модель сил, NRF, ARF, PAF-N, партнер.

Introduction

NATO has undergone significant transformations since the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe, particularly in integrating various partners into its structures. To adapt to the post-Cold War era and strengthen its crisis management capabilities, NATO prioritized the development of

multinational force projection by adopting a New Strategic Concept in 1991. Achieving future strategic objectives required NATO to expand its cooperation beyond traditional borders, underscoring the urgent need to engage with partners. This approach made collaboration between partner and member forces essential for out-of-area operations (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017). Partnership frameworks such as the Partnership for Peace and the Mediterranean Dialogue emerged as key initiatives, fostering cooperation with neighboring countries and supporting their efforts to enhance national capabilities. Over the ensuing years, the Alliance initiated new partnership frameworks (such as the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and Partners Across the Globe) in order to expand its geographical reach and engage with different partners to build cooperative security together. Subsequently, NATO introduced new programs and mechanisms (Operational Capabilities Concept, Membership Action Plan, DEEP, Individual Partnership Action Plan, etc.) for closer and deeper cooperation with its partners (Iskandarov et al., 2023). To adapt to the evolving security environment, NATO has successfully implemented its transformation process by adopting new Strategic Concepts approximately every ten years. This evolution, along with its support for various regions, has enabled the Alliance to benefit from the financial and military capabilities of its partner countries in efforts to combat terrorism, promote stability beyond Europe, and engage in operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Numerous academic studies examine NATO's transformation and partnership policies, tracing its shift from a Cold War alliance to a global security actor. Throughout history, many prominent figures have both supported and opposed NATO enlargement, underscoring the continued relevance of this issue. John S. Duffield (1994) explores the factors contributing to NATO's resilience and continued relevance in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. Jamie Shea (2012) examines NATO's role in a vastly different geopolitical landscape following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Ruiz Palmer (2019) discusses NATO's post-Cold War transformation, outlining its objectives, achievements, and challenges. Andrea Gilli et al. (2020) focus on the Alliance's technological advancements.

Several studies on NATO's transformation and partnerships highlight the competition for power and influence across different regions. In particular, Khayal Iskandarov and Piotr Gawliczek analyze Russia's security interests in relation to NATO's enlargement policy and assess how NATO's partnership mechanisms enhance cooperation in education and force interoperability (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017; Sadiyev & Iskandarov, 2018; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2018; Hasanov et al., 2019; Iskandarov, 2019a; Iskandarov, 2019b; Iskandarov et al., 2019b; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2019; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021; Iskandarov et al., 2023).

Additionally, the book *NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, edited by Jason Blessing et al. (2021), offers fresh perspectives on NATO's evolving threat landscape, shifting internal dynamics, and the transformation of warfare, providing insights into the Alliance's future strategic direction.

A number of studies focus on NATO's New Force Model (NFM), analyzing its impact on the Alliance's defense posture in response to emerging security threats. For example, Zoltan Szenes (2023) analyzes NATO's evolving approach to deterrence and defense, assessing planned measures and comparing the 2010 and 2022 Strategic Concepts. He argues that the latter has ushered NATO into a new era of great power competition. Similarly, a report by Sean Monaghan et al. (2024) evaluates allied efforts to reinforce collective defense in response to new threats. The report poses a crucial question: while NATO may be prepared for the onset of conflict, is it adequately equipped to endure and ultimately succeed in a prolonged war? Based on commitments made at the Madrid Summit, the report assesses NATO's readiness to sustain and prevail in extended conflicts.

John R. Deni (2024) explores the rationale behind the introduction of the NFM and outlines its core components, including force organization, management, and command-and-control structures. Meanwhile, Jacopo Maria Bosica (2024) examines the key features of the NFM,

highlighting its improvements and distinctions from the previous model. He argues that the NFM enhances the rapid deployment capabilities of European Allies, allowing them to defend themselves without having to wait for U.S. leadership.

Nicolò Fasola (2024) contends that NATO's evolving mission is not sufficiently addressed by its current partnership policies, processes, and mechanisms. Given the ongoing global competition, he suggests that NATO should rethink its approach to partner engagement to better align with its strategic objectives. Beyond offering a critical analysis of NATO's cooperative security policies, Fasola also proposes ways to modernize the Alliance's partnership mechanisms.

The literature review reveals that the prospects and challenges of partner engagement within the NFM have not yet been studied. The purpose of this paper is to justify the importance of partner engagement in the new model against the backdrop of an ever-changing security environment.

Results

Partner Engagement in the New Force Model: Current and Future Prospects

As expressed in all four of the post-Cold War Strategic Concepts, NATO's goal is to collectively safeguard security. The three core tasks of NATO, as stated in the present Strategic Concept (2022), are crisis prevention and management, cooperative security, and deterrence and defense. Among these, cooperative security primarily involves partnerships. Consequently, cooperative security encompasses several components: building partnerships, supporting non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control, and assisting prospective new NATO members in their accession process. Ensuring interoperability is a crucial aspect of building partnerships and preparing new nations for NATO membership (Nasirov & Iskandarov, 2017). In short, the new NATO missions and engagements in operational theatres have led to a dramatic shift from individual nations fighting alone to coalitions where multinational units—even down to the platoon level—work together. The current Strategic Concept also underscores the critical role that partners play in maintaining peace and stability across Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Indo-Pacific, as well as the importance of partner states in strengthening the Alliance's resilience against current and emerging security threats. Additionally, it reiterates that strengthening practical cooperation and political-military interaction with partners enables them to interoperate more effectively with Allied forces in pursuit of NATO's core tasks (Fasola, 2024).

The NFM, unveiled at the Madrid Summit in June 2022, marks a key transformation in NATO's military framework to address emerging security challenges, particularly following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. This model significantly strengthens the Alliance's defense strategy, emphasizing rapid deployment and scalable forces across member nations. The NFM prioritizes integrated operations across multiple domains—including land, air, sea, cyber, and space—ensuring NATO can address threats across different regions and operational environments simultaneously. This framework combines national forces maintained at high readiness with multinational NATO forces capable of deploying together. Experts such as Sven Biscop (2022) and Jacopo Maria Bosica (2024) suggest that the NFM will grant the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) greater discretion in contingency operational planning, thereby enhancing NATO's overall agility and effectiveness.

Some may argue that NATO's adoption of a new force model was unnecessary, considering Russia's declining power since its engagement in a large-scale war with Ukraine. However, an important reality remains: regardless of how well-prepared an army might be, forces with real combat experience are invariably more formidable than those without. The Russian military applied lessons learned from its operations in Syria to further its objectives in Ukraine. Without this prior experience, Russia would likely have faced greater difficulty sustaining its momentum against

Ukraine's determined resistance (Hasan et al., 2024). Thus, despite its losses, it would be unwise to assume that Russia will remain weak in the near or long term. According to Global Firepower 2024, Russia continues to possess the world's second most powerful military (globalfirepower.com, 2024). The simple answer to this issue is that NATO now faces a higher risk of direct conflict with Russia than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse. The perceived threat is especially acute for allies bordering Russia, prompting major changes in force structure, defense spending, operational planning, and overall foreign and security policies (Hooker, 2024). Additionally, Russia has managed to double its military budget despite experiencing only modest economic growth (Hooker, 2024).

NATO's NFM represents a significant evolution in the Alliance's approach to collective defense and deterrence. It aims to provide a more robust and scalable force structure, thereby enhancing NATO's ability to respond swiftly to emerging threats. The NFM also allows partner nations to augment NATO forces in specific regions or roles, further enhancing flexibility. The NFM ensures deeper integration of partner nations' forces into NATO's operational plans. Partners contribute considerably to NATO by providing extensive regional and cultural knowledge, specialized skills and capabilities, and access to staging locations, which enhance the Alliance (Andrews, 2024). NATO, in turn, has much to offer its partners. Partner forces are now viewed as a critical component of NATO's overall capacity, especially in augmenting high-readiness forces. These changes ensure that NATO is better prepared to respond quickly and effectively to modern security challenges, with a larger and more agile force structure capable of addressing both conventional and unconventional threats. NATO can achieve its strategic objectives by fostering partnerships driven by a proactive, long-term vision backed by committed resources, sustained engagement, and resilience. Ensuring flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptability is essential, with measurable activities aligned to clear benefits and metrics. To maintain relevance and agility, NATO should reassess legacy arrangements, strengthen ongoing cooperation, and establish clear baselines for long-term partnerships. Additionally, granting NATO authorities greater autonomy in collaborating with partners and non-NATO entities could enhance the effectiveness of these engagements (Andrews, 2024).

Partner countries, in turn, will continue to support the Alliance in the future at the aforementioned tiers and in all three tasks. The participation of partner countries in NATO operations will remain one of the fundamental principles of the Alliance. However, partner engagement in NATO activities has faced challenges and inconsistencies over the past decades, largely influenced by the geostrategic location of each partner. According to Nicolò Fasola (2024), the lack of progress between NATO and its partners can generally be attributed to several key factors:

1. A lack of enthusiasm among partners for deeper cooperation;
2. Limited domestic funding to support NATO-related engagement;
3. Insufficient capacities to fully benefit from NATO training opportunities and
4. Challenges in identifying qualified personnel for essential cooperation activities and bilateral discussions.

We could introduce the sensitivity of geostrategic locations of partner nations as a fifth factor, since security challenges vary significantly among regions. For instance, the South Caucasus countries face entirely different security concerns compared to Austria and Switzerland. Furthermore, NATO's expanding membership and evolving responsibilities have created significant challenges in allocating adequate resources to help partners address regional security issues effectively.

In the new force model, the mechanism ensuring partner engagement is called the Partner Augmentation Force-N (PAF-N). While participation in this concept does not impose any automatic obligations or commitments on a nation joining it, it offers extensive access to NATO programs, mechanisms, training, and exercises. During peacetime, PAF-N units will train with NATO, focusing on multidomain and multinational training to enhance interoperability and maintain operational flexibility. In crisis prevention or management scenarios, with North Atlantic Council (NAC) approval, PAF-N units may reinforce NATO forces deployed in a crisis area or contribute to any NATO-led

response operation during crises or conflicts. Additionally, PAF-N units can provide support to Allied forces engaged in ongoing NATO operations, missions, and activities.

In general, joining the PAF-N concept is a lengthy process that encompasses four stages:

1. Political acceptance and military assessment;
2. Political (NAC) approval;
3. PAF-N preparation (including caveats and conditions);
4. Force tailoring (according to NATO requirements).

Although the tasks of the NATO Response Force (NRF) were diverse and participation was determined on a case-by-case basis through agreements between NATO and partner countries, the PAF-N concept appears more attractive to partners—particularly those in politically sensitive regions—because it mitigates associated risks. The main tasks in the new force model will largely align with those of the NRF. However, while joining the NRF was a sensitive decision for countries not seeking NATO membership, participation in the PAF-N concept—or declaring a unit to the PAF-N Pool of Forces—provides a more flexible and less politically sensitive alternative. For instance, if a partner country expresses its intention to join the PAF-N concept and successfully completes the first three stages, it retains full discretion in phase four, as the PAF-N does not impose automatic obligations. A partner country may choose to contribute at a specific tier (e.g. Tier 3, 30–180 days), and even then, participation in any operation would still require a separate agreement between NATO and the partner country. Further augmentation of the ARF or any tier (1, 2, or 3) within the PAF-N concept will be implemented in close coordination with allies, Joint Force, and Single Service Commands through individual agreements with partners.

Units declared to the PAF-N Pool of Forces may be used for the following purposes:

1. Participation in selected NATO exercises in support of NATO's core task of Deterrence and Defense;
2. Supporting NATO efforts to respond to or manage an ongoing crisis, including crisis deployment, non-combatant evacuation operations, humanitarian assistance, and limited embargo operations;
3. Supporting a NATO operation or mission;
4. Increasing interoperability and developing cooperation with NATO forces through capacity building and military exercises;
5. Strengthening NATO forces in deterrence and defense;
6. Strengthening NATO response operations, missions, and activities (subject to NAC agreement) in support of the core tasks of crisis prevention and management and collective security.

As evident from the list, the range of tasks that a declared unit can undertake within the PAF-N Pool of Forces is extensive and diverse.

In an increasingly contested global environment, both NATO and its strategic competitors naturally seek prospective partners, often with differing objectives. This dynamic introduces the potential for conflict, making a deliberate and strategic approach essential. NATO must carefully assess the purpose of such partnerships, balancing their risks and benefits. A key decision lies in whether to cultivate beneficial yet non-exclusive partnerships to outmaneuver adversaries or insist on exclusivity, which could potentially restrict adversaries' access to the same partners (Andrews, 2024). The NRF concept used to be a source of irritation for NATO's rivals, as it underscored NATO's rapid deployment capabilities and its commitment to collective defense, thereby challenging the strategic ambitions of its adversaries. A quick review of the partners involved in the NRF Concept shows examples such as Georgia, Ukraine, Jordan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of these, Georgia and Ukraine are uniquely positioned between NATO and its prominent strategic rival, Russia. It is abundantly clear what transpired in Georgia in 2008 and what has been unfolding in Ukraine since 2014; consequently, it is not surprising that any other country situated in such a sensitive geographic region and joining the NRF Concept would likely face a similar fate. The NATO PAF-N Concept

effectively mitigates the risks posed by NATO's rivals to its partners. As evident from its title, the PAF-N Concept indicates that partner participation augments NATO missions and operations. Partners have been enhancing and contributing to NATO operations for decades, demonstrating the value of collaboration in achieving shared security objectives. The PAF-N Concept will formalize and provide a framework for this longstanding contribution and collaboration, ensuring its alignment with NATO's strategic objectives. This arrangement may appeal to certain prospective partners who have reservations about fully aligning with NATO while offering flexibility along the partnership spectrum, thereby allowing individual nations greater freedom in their level of engagement (Andrews, 2024).

What does joining the PAF-N concept promise for partners? Considering that NATO has a 30-year history of a successful partnership policy, and during this period, partners have contributed to NATO's operations and missions, most of them currently do not participate in any NATO operation. This will inevitably have a negative effect on active cooperation because every effective cooperation is developed on the principle of reciprocity. NATO has proved its dedication to partnerships for decades, which in turn facilitated the incorporation of new members after the end of the Cold War as many as 16 countries, which account for 50 percent of overall NATO membership today. The best example is the case of Finland and Sweden, which had the longest preparation for integration and the shortest incorporation process.

As already mentioned, NATO's main focus should definitely be on collective security, defence, and deterrence. However, since security is indivisible, NATO is obliged to take stock of each and every security threat — both immediate and long-term — beyond its traditional or physical boundaries in order to project stability globally. This, in turn, highlights NATO's third core task: cooperative security. NATO's priorities for extensive partnerships are essential for strengthening its collective security and addressing global challenges. This policy promotes peace and stability in many areas by fostering interoperability, resilience, and capacity-building.

As already noted, interoperability between NATO and its partners is a cornerstone of the Alliance's ability to operate effectively in complex, multinational environments and to respond to security challenges with coordinated efforts. Therefore, the main focus of NATO's partnerships is on the improvement of interoperability with partners, which in turn encourages partner engagement in NATO-led activities.

In general, participation in NATO's activities is realized mainly on the basis of specific priorities. Currently, the following four (4) priorities apply:

Priority 1: In support of a NATO mission/operation;

Priority 2: In support of a High Readiness Force, e.g., NRF;

Priority 3: In support of a NATO (PSP) Position;

Priority 4: Professional Development / all other activities.

Having considered the first priority we may say that the number of partners participating in NATO missions has considerably decreased. There are three active operations and missions of NATO in which 9 partners are Operational partners – KFOR (Armenia, Austria, Ireland, Moldova, Switzerland), Operation Sea Guardian (Georgia) and NMI (Austria and Australia). However, the past operations, such as ISAF and Operation Unified Protector are the perfect examples where the interoperability of forces proved successful. Approximately 20 out of overall 51 nations in ISAF and 5 out of 18 nations in Operation Unified Protector were partners. It was Operation Unified Protector, where Sweden – the most recent member of NATO tested its capabilities at the technical, tactical and operational levels. Regarding the second priority alone, only four countries – Georgia, Ukraine, Jordan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were part of the NRF. Now, three of them, excluding Ukraine, have transitioned to the PAF-N Concept. Given that NATO has 35 partners, this number is relatively small in comparison. The third priority emphasizes partner contributions to NATO HQs. Several partners, such as Azerbaijan, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Georgia, Republic of Korea, Switzerland and Ukraine, contribute to various NATO HQs, with the number of officers ranging from

a minimum of one (Colombia, Georgia, Republic of Korea, Switzerland) to a maximum of seven (Azerbaijan). Apart from it some nations contribute to different entities, such as NATO Defence College (Azerbaijan, Kuwait), NATO School Oberammergau (Austria, Switzerland, Bosnia and Herzegovina), etc., which support NATO education and training. However, this priority also remains limited compared to the total number of NATO partners. All nations may apply the last priority and take part in NATO courses, including seminars, workshops, exercises, and similar activities. However, this priority is obviously less significant than the first.

NATO remains the most effective military organization for enhancing interoperability both with and among its partners, despite political bureaucracy and conflicting interests among member states. It provides highly efficient tools that deliver tangible results within a specific timeframe. However, the extent of every cooperation depends on mutual benefits, and while NATO actively supports its partners, it does so in alignment with its own strategic interests. Therefore, it is crucial for partners to recognize these priorities and integrate them into their foreign policy strategies.

Conclusion

The adoption of the NFM has significantly transformed NATO's strategy for crisis response, deterrence, and collective defense. The model reaffirms the Alliance's capacity to react swiftly to new threats. Additionally, expanding alliances with non-member nations will be essential to enhancing NATO's strategic influence. Increased cooperation in training and exercises, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building initiatives will guarantee that partner countries successfully support regional and international stability. In the end, NATO's New Force Model's effectiveness will rely on member states' shared political will and level of adaptation. Additionally, while the NRF Concept in the Old Force Model exposed the nations with close proximity to NATO's adversaries to heightened political pressure, economic sanctions, or other forms of coercion and included only three partner nations, the PAF-N concept will involve more, as its notion and framework reduce the risks for those particular nations. To ensure the stability and security of the Euro-Atlantic region, NATO must remain committed to partnerships while strengthening its defensive posture in response to the evolving security environment. The PAF-N concept is an indispensable tool in achieving this goal, as it enhances force integration, improves operational readiness, and strengthens interoperability among allied and partner nations, ensuring a more cohesive and effective military response to emerging security challenges.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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