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Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

EXPLORING OPTIONS FOR ADVANCING KOSOVO-NATO RELATIONS



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Table of Contents

ABOUT THE AUTHORS	4
Acknowledgement	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	6
BACKGROUND	7
THE VISION OF THE 1995 NATO ENLARGEMENT STUDY	9
A Rationale for NATO–Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation in the Context of the Argument of the 1995 Study on The Broader Regional Perspective	11
The West in Serbia’s Security Doctrine	11
Opportunities for Enhanced Engagement with NATO for Kosovo	12
Potential Approaches and Mechanisms	14
KOSOVO ENHANCED COOPERATION INITIATIVE (KECI) PROPOSAL FOR NATO	16
WHAT KOSOVO NEEDS TO DO?	20
WHY SHOULD THE NATO SECRETARY GENERAL APPOINT A SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?	22
CONCLUSIONS	25
RECOMMENDATIONS	26

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Executive Summary

NATO's role in Kosovo has been vital since the 1999 intervention and KFOR remains integral for guaranteeing security and stability not only in Republic of Kosovo but also the wider Western Balkans. Public sentiment for full NATO membership is extremely high in Kosovo—over 90% support—reflecting Kosovars' enduring trust in the NATP alliance. However this overwhelming public support can be affected if Kosovo's aspirations for closer ties with NATO are not addressed. While, Kosovo's formal progress toward full membership is politically constrained by the fact that four NATO member states have yet to recognize its independence, there are other options that NATO can pursue to advance relations with Kosovo.

In this context, this paper explores options how can Kosovo and NATO advance relations and cooperation. The 1995 study provides core principles for options that are examined in this paper. These principles remain highly relevant for Kosovo. While formal membership is stalled by non-recognizing NATO member states, the paper argues that an inclusive, step-by-step approach can be adapted for a flexible, deeper engagement with Kosovo.

A central recommendation is the creation of a "Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative," a tailored version of NATO's partnership mechanisms (e.g., Partnership for Peace, Planning and Review Process, and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre). KECI would aim to strengthen Kosovo's defense institutions, enhance interoperability, support civil emergency preparedness, and develop broader crisis-management capabilities. Crucially, it would not force any change in the political stance on recognition among NATO member states.

The EU-facilitated normalization dialogue between Republic of Kosovo and Serbia is one of the essential elements especially for Kosovo to build the confidence of both skeptical NATO member states and international partners when it comes to Euro-Atlantic integration process of the country. Regular coordination with NATO and the EU, particularly concerning sensitive actions in the north, would affirm that Kosovo's leaders prioritize strategic partnerships and diplomacy over moves that risks and undermine support for Kosovo. Nevertheless, without any concrete carrots such as anything close to a guarantee that Kosovo gains an open perspective

for NATO's PfP, it is rather difficult for Kosovo to be encouraged to deliver on either an agreement with Serbia or any other agreement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS PAPER ARE:

- 1. NATO should Create a Kosovo-Specific Partnership Track (KECI).** NATO should adopt a Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative that expands training, joint exercises, and capacity-building under NATO oversight, something that NATO can do in the current context when four NATO member do not recognize Kosovo's independence. This would align Kosovo's defense reforms with NATO standards and deliver practical gains for both sides.
- 2. Maintain a Robust KFOR Presence;** Keep KFOR well-resourced and present on the ground. Incidents like the Banjska terrorist attack show the region's fragility and underscore the need for NATO's continued deterrent role to reassure communities and deter destabilizing actions.
- 3. Leverage NATO's Civil Emergency Tools:** Use the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and similar programs to train and coordinate on crisis management. By focusing on real-world needs—earthquakes, floods, public health threats—Kosovo can gain trust while delivering tangible benefits to its citizens.
- 4. Engage in Wider Euro-Atlantic Synergies;** Kosovo's path toward deeper NATO ties works best when it aligns with existing EU-led initiatives. Consistent messaging and coordinated projects—especially in the north—show that Kosovo is committed to regional stability and open to multilateral solutions.
- 5. NATO should Appoint a Special Representative for the Western Balkans;** A dedicated representative would strengthen political engagement, counter malign influences, and align crisis prevention efforts with the EU and local actors. This role would underscore NATO's commitment to the region and give Kosovo a direct channel for advancing partnership goals.

Introduction

Over the past three years, the geopolitical landscape has faced significant changes. The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine posed a security threat with implications inside and outside of Europe, but particularly in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, this unjustified event led to a change in the pace of NATO enlargement dynamics. While NATO membership was previously an incremental and carefully led process, since 2022 it has become a geopolitical security and defense necessity. This shift is evident as countries like Sweden and Finland, which were previously hesitant about joining the alliance, have now become its newest members.

The threat of conflict expansion due to malign Russian influence also exists in the Western Balkans, particularly given Russia's deep influence in Serbian political and para-political factors throughout the region. Specifically, the Serbian factor in the region continues to maintain strong ties with Russia by serving as a foothold for Kremlin presence and destabilizing tactics, while still harboring their grudges against NATO. This significantly increases the national security threat to Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina, both of which are yet to become NATO members despite consistent high pro-NATO sentiments among their populations. An instance of for this fragile security situation in Kosovo is the Banjska terrorist attack in September 2023, orchestrated by Serbian governmental structures, which, as some sources claim, was most probably connected also with Russian intelligence structures present in Serbia.

With the emerging shifts in foreign policy, particularly that of a new US Administration, Kosovo cannot afford to be excluded from security structures such as NATO. However, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, theoretically cannot become a NATO member due to the veto of the Serbian Republic, Kosovo does not face such obstacles. Kosovo's institutions have no technical barriers to NATO membership (other than the four non-recognizers) and roughly 95 percent of the Kosovo

population would vote in favor of joining NATO today.

The main obstacle for NATO in accepting Kosovo as its 32nd member is the fact that four of its members do not recognize Kosovo's statehood. However, as Sweden's membership has shown, the need for unity for peace and stability within NATO's geopolitical sphere can easily prevail over existing differences within the alliance. It is essential for the alliance that conflicts are not imported into the European continent. As this paper will argue, there are alternative indirect ways through which Kosovo can make its case for a closer and accelerated way to becoming a NATO member.

Initiatives such as KECI would be helpful for Kosovo amid the global uncertainty the European continent is currently faced with. In January of this year, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte stated that the situation in Bosnia and between Kosovo and Serbia is concerning, and that the region is of crucial importance to the Alliance. While this indicates that the region remains under the NATO radar, a few tangible measures to endorse this attention would mark a significant turn for the region. Alongside these measures, appointing a NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Western Balkans would help tackle broader regional instability. This official could coordinate with the EU's envoy, counter malign foreign influence, and engage local leaders to defuse potential crises before they escalate. Such an appointment would underscore NATO's commitment to the region's long-term stability, reinforcing KFOR's mission and aligning closely with the EU's diplomatic efforts. This measure would indicate another positive signal and a message of prospect for the Western Balkans – as was the appointment of Radmila Sekerinska, Former Defense Minister of North Macedonia, as Deputy Secretary General of NATO – which in the region was perceived as a significant development.

Background

If a referendum on NATO membership were held in Kosovo today, 94% of the population would vote in favor, with support among Kosovo Albanians reaching 98%, a constant that has not declined over the past two decades.¹ Apart from the prospect of joining the European Union, no other issue commands such broad consensus within Kosovar society. This overwhelming approval reflects NATO's historical role in Kosovo, which many Kosovo Albanians view as key to their liberation and freedom. As a result, NATO is both respected and highly valued among the country's citizens.

NATO's involvement in Kosovo dates back to the 1990s, in the context of the Kosovo War. The deterioration of the situation culminated in NATO's 78-day air campaign against Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic, Operation Allied Force, launched in March 1999 to halt human rights abuses and prevent ethnic cleansing. This intervention, although seen by some as controversial due to the lack of explicit United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorization, was justified under humanitarian grounds under the international relations term known as R2P (Responsibility to Protect). Edward Newman and Gëzim Visoka hold that: "NATO's intervention brought into focus some of the defining international challenges of the post-Cold War era, and it continues to shape the geopolitical and normative friction and contestation which destabilize international politics."² Following the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia/Serbia, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which authorized an international security presence in Kosovo and established the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) on June 12, 1999. KFOR's initial mandate focused on providing security, supporting the return of displaced persons, demilitarizing the Kosovo Liberation Army, and facilitating the establishment of civil governance.

KFOR has been a key stabilizing force in Kosovo, adapting its role as the security situation evolved. Initially deploying 50,000 troops, KFOR gradually

downsized to approximately 4,500 troops by 2024. Its mandate continues to focus on maintaining a safe and secure environment and ensuring freedom of movement. KFOR also supports the protection of patrimonial sites and assists in establishing Kosovo's security institutions, however its cooperation with the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) in operational level is limited. Over the years, NATO adjusted KFOR's structure, introducing liaison and monitoring teams to engage with local authorities and communities. These adaptations allowed KFOR to shift from a peace enforcement operation to a deterrent presence, reflecting improved stability while retaining readiness to respond to any resurgence of violence.

Kosovo's significance to NATO lies in several key areas. First of all, Kosovo is important for NATO's efforts of promoting stability in the Western Balkans and preventing conflict. The continued presence of KFOR helps prevent escalations and acts as a stabilizing factor for peace and security. However, the Banjska Terrorist attack of September 2023³, and the second terrorist attack on water canal in Zubin Potok in 2024 against Kosovo's critical infrastructure⁴, have shown the fragility of peace and stability in Kosovo, despite the presence of KFOR. This showcases the urgency of maintaining a strong and well-equipped NATO mission in Kosovo in its deterrence role, as well as increasing Kosovo's defense capabilities.

Kosovo's importance to NATO also stems from its unique role as the first case in which the Alliance received a mandate from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to exercise overarching security authority in a country. This precedent not only reinforced NATO's credibility as an international security provider but also showcased its ability to lead post-conflict stabilization and peacekeeping operations. The Kosovo mission has served as a testing ground for NATO's crisis management capabilities, setting a framework for future interventions. However, what makes NATO's

1. International Republican Institute (IRI), National Survey of Kosovo, May 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-kosovo-may-2024/>

2. Edward Newman, Gëzim Visoka, NATO in Kosovo and the logic of successful security practices, *International Affairs*, Volume 100, Issue 2, March 2024, Pages 631–653, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae014>

3. Kosovo: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the attack against Kosovo Police, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovo-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-attack-against-kosovo-police_en

4. Kosovo: Statement by the High Representative on the water canal attack in Zubin Potok, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovo-statement-high-representative-water-canal-attack-zubin-potok_en

mission in Kosovo particularly interesting is the political complexity surrounding Kosovo's status. While NATO provides security and institutional support through KFOR, the Alliance itself does not officially recognize Kosovo's independence due to the lack of unanimous agreement among its member states, as four of its members have hesitated to recognize it. This creates a paradoxical dynamic where NATO remains deeply involved in Kosovo's stability and development while navigating the political sensitivities of non-recognition. This balance highlights NATO's adaptability and diplomatic finesse in addressing security challenges without compromising internal cohesion among its members.

Equally important is the reputational stake NATO has in Kosovo. If NATO is unable to ensure security and stability in a country where it has an explicit mandate to do so, it risks being perceived as ineffective by other international actors, including Russia. Such perceptions could embolden adversaries and weaken NATO's credibility as a security provider. Russia, in particular, seeks to exploit vulnerabilities in Kosovo by using Serbia as a platform to undermine NATO's success. Through promoting nationalism and ethno-radicalization among Serbs, Russia aims to foster resentment toward NATO and delegitimize its role in the region.⁵ These efforts not only destabilize Kosovo but also threaten the broader security architecture of the Western Balkans, making NATO's continued presence and effectiveness in Kosovo a strategic necessity.

NATO maintains a dual-track approach in Kosovo,

combining security guarantees through KFOR with advisory and capacity-building support via the NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT). Apart from NALT, in 2024, Kosovo's status was advanced from an observer to that of an associate member at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Established in 2016, NALT represents the most recent institutional advancement in NATO-Kosovo relations. Its primary mission is to enhance the professionalism of Kosovo's security institutions, strengthen democratic governance in the defense sector, and improve interoperability with NATO standards. However, not much is known whether and to what extent this office has contributed to enhancing the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) transformation and capacities. Therefore, it would be beneficial for KSF to seek to benefit from NALT's role in the country beyond the bilateral partnerships through which it has benefited to this point. Despite these efforts, Kosovo's NATO integration remains constrained by political realities, including the ongoing Kosovo-Serbia normalization dialogue facilitated by the EU. NATO has expressed strong support for this dialogue, viewing it as a prerequisite for Kosovo's deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. In the short and medium term, Kosovo is encouraged to continue implementing democratic reforms, enhancing interoperability with NATO standards, and building regional confidence through cooperative security initiatives. Simultaneously, NATO could deepen engagement under the enhanced cooperation framework to support Kosovo's institutional development and readiness for eventual membership.

5. <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/kosova-ne-diskur-sin-e-politikes-se-jashtme-ruse-nxitja-e-paqendrueshmerise-ne-kosove-dhe-kundershtimi-i-integrimet-euro-atlantik/>

The Vision of the 1995 NATO Enlargement Study

The 1995 “Study on NATO Enlargement” was a pivotal document that set the tone for the Alliance’s expansion after the Cold War, articulating why, how, and under what conditions new states could join NATO. By the mid-1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union had reordered the European security landscape, prompting states in Central and Eastern Europe to seek deeper ties with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Against this backdrop, NATO recognized the need to articulate a clear set of principles governing membership. The study emerged as the most authoritative statement of those principles, serving as both a conceptual guide and a practical roadmap for states wishing to join. Its significance resides in the way it tied expansion to the establishment of democratic norms, civilian control of the military, and adherence to collective defense obligations. It made clear that enlargement would not undermine the Alliance’s defensive nature but would, in fact, reinforce its core mission by extending stability to new member states that had previously been outside its protective umbrella.

One of the defining elements of the study was the emphasis on avoiding new dividing lines on the continent. The authors envisioned a post-Cold War Europe in which NATO functioned alongside other organizations, including the European Union, the Western European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to foster stability through overlapping responsibilities and cooperative mechanisms. In the eyes of NATO’s members, enlargement would not be about isolating any particular country or reviving defunct bloc structures, but rather about consolidating a security community built on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. For that reason, the study explicitly reaffirmed NATO’s defensive posture, making clear that new members would not be admitted with the intention of provoking or threatening neighbors. Instead, enlargement was couched in terms of creating a “wider community” of states committed to collective defense. This was especially pertinent in light of anxieties from Moscow, which perceived an expanding NATO as a potential encroachment. While the study acknowledged Russian concerns and placed a high premium on

cultivating cooperative relations with Russia, it asserted that no external party could veto a sovereign state’s desire to join the Alliance, an important principle that underscored NATO’s status as a voluntary association of like-minded democracies.

Equally significant was the study’s detailed discussion of what NATO expected from prospective members in terms of military preparedness and political commitments. Countries that aspired to membership were encouraged to participate actively in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP), mechanisms designed to foster greater transparency and interoperability between NATO and non-member states. Through PfP exercises, workshops, and defense planning activities, aspirants could demonstrate both the sincerity of their interest in joining and their willingness to undertake the institutional reforms necessary to align with Alliance standards. These efforts included establishing civilian and democratic control over the armed forces, adopting NATO doctrines and procedures, and proving readiness to contribute to collective defense missions. By structuring the process in this way, the 1995 study aimed to ensure that any country transitioning from PfP activities to full membership did so with a foundational understanding of NATO’s operational culture and obligations. This not only prevented a rush to membership without appropriate reforms but also underscored that new members would be expected to carry their share of responsibilities, from financial contributions to troop deployments.

Importantly, the study made it clear that NATO’s strategic evolution would not end with the traditional tasks of collective defense; the Alliance was also adjusting to handle peacekeeping, crisis management, and support for UN- or OSCE-authorized operations. This shift reflected the changing nature of European security challenges after the Cold War, where large-scale conflicts between major powers were less likely than regional instabilities, ethnic conflicts, or humanitarian crises. An enlarged NATO was seen as having greater capacity to address these challenges, especially if new members brought specific regional expertise or contributed forces that could be deployed

for peace support operations. Yet, this expansion of tasks did not diminish the Alliance's essential mission under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which remained the bedrock of NATO's security guarantee. The study argued that more members would reinforce that guarantee, by demonstrating a broader commitment to mutual defense and by expanding the political consensus required to undertake collective responses to threats.

Another core message of the 1995 document was the belief that NATO's open-door policy—enshrined in Article 10 of the Washington Treaty—was integral to the Alliance's identity as a community of democracies. The study placed great weight on emphasizing that membership must remain accessible to any European democracy able to meet Alliance standards. This not only guided the initial wave of enlargement in the late 1990s but served as a template for subsequent rounds of expansion, ultimately bringing nations like Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, and others under NATO's collective defense umbrella. Even today, the open-door principle resonates as countries on Europe's periphery look to NATO for security and integration, demonstrating how the ideas first codified in 1995 have continued to shape the Alliance's strategic posture. In practice, the study's approach of gradual preparation, defense interoperability, and demonstration of democratic reforms remains the basis on which contemporary aspirant nations are evaluated.

The 1995 study also underscored how vital it would be for the Alliance to maintain cohesion while enlarging. Consensus-based decision-making in NATO is dependent on shared values and trust, and admitting new members without these attributes could, in theory, dilute its political solidarity. The study thus insisted that new members adopt existing Alliance principles and policies upon entry, including those pertaining to nuclear doctrine, integrated command structures, and the notion that any use of military force must remain consistent with the UN Charter. This principle of upholding all existing frameworks ensured that the Alliance continued to function smoothly even as it grew. By insisting that no "second tier" of membership emerge, NATO asserted that all Allies—whether founding members or new entrants—would shoulder equal responsibilities and enjoy the same security guarantees. Ultimately, this insistence on cohesion and unity in defense planning, financial contributions, and

political decision-making was fundamental to NATO's claim that enlargement would strengthen, rather than weaken, the Alliance.

Today, this 1995 roadmap continues to matter because it shaped not just the process of NATO enlargement but also the strategic mindset that guided it. The study crystallized a vision of the Alliance as both a guardian of established democracies and a beacon for states in transition. Decades later, the logic that enlargement should help "export stability" eastward—without creating new fault lines—remains relevant. In an era where tensions have resurged along the eastern edges of NATO territory and beyond, and where questions about the global defense of democratic values have grown more urgent, the foundational principles articulated in the study are frequently revisited. Indeed, the study's emphasis on mutual defense obligations, the role of the Alliance in crisis management, and the vital link between democracy and collective security resonates with contemporary challenges. It reminds member states that their shared commitments are the glue holding together a unique security community, and it provides a historical reference point whenever debates arise over whether and how to continue expanding NATO's reach.

The "Study on NATO Enlargement" remains a defining statement of the Alliance's post-Cold War transformation and a lasting guide for understanding why and how NATO can grow, particularly in today's context on Kosovo and the Western Balkans. By articulating a clear, value-based rationale, outlining the technical and political hurdles prospective members must clear, and ensuring that enlargement would reinforce rather than undermine the Alliance's cohesion, the study constructed a robust model for bringing new nations into NATO's defensive fold. That model has proven enduring, shaping multiple rounds of enlargement and offering clarity of purpose to an organization that continues to grapple with new security threats and political uncertainties. For anyone seeking to understand the strategic underpinnings of NATO's expansion and the expectations placed upon its new members, the 1995 study remains a vital reference point—one that continues to illuminate how an alliance forged in the early Cold War adapted itself to the demands of a changing Europe, and how it laid the groundwork for a broader conception of collective security that resonates to this day.

A Rationale for NATO–Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation in the Context of the Argument of the 1995 Study on Enlargement

The 1995 “Study on NATO Enlargement” identified broad principles for bringing new members into the Alliance. Chief among these principles are the importance of democratic governance, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the value of gradual integration through cooperation frameworks such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP). Although Kosovo faces a unique political challenge for closer association with NATO—given that four of its members do not recognize its statehood—the study’s vision of inclusivity, dialogue, and capacity-building offers a potential pathway for constructive engagement.

A first step is to recognize that NATO cooperation with Kosovo need not hinge exclusively on formal membership or immediate accession talks. The 1995 study places emphasis on preparing aspiring states to become “security contributors” through enhanced transparency, democratic oversight of their armed forces, and interoperability with NATO procedures. In Kosovo’s case, this approach can translate into a structured partnership program that does not require

full diplomatic recognition from all NATO members, yet advances the Alliance’s objectives. Such a program could build on the existing KFOR mission and other informal contacts—focusing on joint exercises, defense reform, and institutional capacity-building without forcing political determinations on status.

In designing a partnership framework, NATO could draw from PfP-like mechanisms even if Kosovo is not formally part of the PfP itself. This would include technical workshops, shared training initiatives, and staff-level dialogue aimed at familiarizing Kosovo’s security personnel with Alliance doctrines and standards. Consistent with the “Study on Enlargement,” these activities would promote interoperability, highlight the role of civilian and democratic control of the military, and solidify a regional commitment to peace. While PfP originally required OSCE participation, NATO can tailor an equivalent process that prioritizes capacity-building, standardization, and transparency—elements that were core to the 1995 study’s roadmap for prospective Allies.

The Broader Regional Perspective

To address sensitivities over recognition, NATO can embed cooperation with Kosovo in a broader regional framework, ensuring that every initiative is consistent with ongoing EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and any relevant OSCE commitments. This would reinforce the study’s emphasis on resolving disputes through peaceful means while ensuring that the decision-making autonomy of member states (including those that do not recognize Kosovo) remains intact. By maintaining a transparent, step-by-step process anchored in existing NATO mechanisms, the Alliance can circumvent direct entanglement in status questions and still advance good governance, institutional reforms, and regional stability.

A tailored partnership arrangement would also bolster NATO’s overarching strategic interest in strengthening the security of South–East Europe. The 1995 study made clear that enlargement—or, by extension, closer collaboration—should serve the Alliance’s core purpose of preventing instability on its periphery.

Under this logic, helping Kosovo develop robust, democratically accountable security structures ultimately reduces the likelihood of regional crises and fosters constructive habits of consultation and cooperation. Over time, incremental successes—such as meeting NATO standards on force management, adopting transparency in defense budgeting, and deepening civil–military relations—would demonstrate Kosovo’s reliability as a partner and might gradually ease political obstacles in the longer term.

Crucially, the 1995 study underscores that NATO’s openness must be anchored in both inclusivity and rigorous adherence to Alliance values. While Kosovo’s current legal–political status remains contested among some members, the Alliance can still champion cooperative programs that uphold the principle that every European polity committed to democracy, peaceful dispute resolution, and regional stability should have a pathway to closer ties. Such an approach does not require an immediate consensus

on recognition; rather, it tests Kosovo's willingness and capacity to meet NATO standards while allowing Allies to assess whether deeper engagement aligns with their collective interests.

By following the study's blueprint—emphasizing mutual confidence-building, flexibility in cooperation, and incremental steps toward interoperability—NATO can maintain a constructive relationship with Kosovo without forcing any member to alter its stance on recognition. Over time, should political circumstances evolve, Kosovo's progress on defense reforms and responsible governance could also create conditions in which all Allies view enhanced ties as beneficial. From a broader regional perspective, advancing security cooperation with Kosovo in parallel to diplomatic efforts benefits the

region as a whole, reducing tensions, bridging divides, and supporting the long-standing post-Cold War goal of a stable, undivided Europe.

Thus, even in the face of the political complexities, the 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement" provides a framework for flexible yet meaningful engagement. Its core lessons—step-by-step integration, a commitment to collective standards, and respect for each Ally's views—can be adapted to Kosovo's context. Cooperative initiatives that focus on professionalizing Kosovo's security sector, fostering interoperability, and encouraging adherence to democratic norms would exemplify the study's spirit and further NATO's enduring objective of consolidating security, stability, and shared values across Europe.

Opportunities for Enhanced Engagement with NATO for Kosovo

The cooperative instruments and partnership programs developed by NATO over the decades reflect an evolving strategy that aims to enhance security and stability across the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has sought to extend dialogue, consultation, and practical cooperation to non-member countries, encouraging reforms in defense and security institutions, promoting interoperability among forces, and building democratic oversight of armed forces. These efforts have taken shape through frameworks such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). Together, they provide multiple avenues for collaboration, allowing countries to select the level and nature of engagement that best suits their aspirations, needs, and political realities. This section offers an overview of some of the most prominent NATO programs and the opportunities they present, followed by a rationale for how the Alliance could creatively apply these mechanisms to deepen cooperation with Kosovo in a manner that minimizes controversy.

NATO's overarching structure for dialogue and cooperation with non-member states in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia is known as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership. This overarching concept comprises two principal pillars: the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. The EAPC stands out as a

multilateral forum that brings together NATO Allies and partner countries to discuss security-related issues on a regular basis, providing the political framework in which more focused, bilateral or multilateral programs can unfold. The PfP, launched in 1994, is designed as a mechanism for practical cooperation tailored to each partner's specific ambitions and capabilities. It allows partners to engage with NATO in areas such as defense reform, policy planning, operational training, and interoperability, thereby ensuring that each partner's approach to cooperation remains flexible and adaptable over time.

The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) was established in 1997 to replace the earlier North Atlantic Cooperation Council. From its inception, the EAPC has served as a platform where NATO Allies and partner states can consult on pressing security issues, coordinate their approaches to regional concerns, and share lessons from past experiences. It also provides a venue for longer-term initiatives, including shared programs related to crisis management, nuclear safety, arms control, and combatting terrorism. Importantly, the EAPC meets in different formats and at various levels—ranging from ambassadorial sessions to ministerial and even summit-level gatherings—making it a versatile tool for building consensus and fostering transparency.

The Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, closely tied to the EAPC, has arguably been one of NATO's most influential frameworks for cooperation. Created to address the post-Cold War security challenges in

Central and Eastern Europe, the PfP has gradually broadened to encompass diverse partners who wish to strengthen their ties with the Alliance. In principle, the PfP opens nearly every facet of NATO's work—from defense planning and military-to-military cooperation, to civil emergency response and interoperability exercises—to partner countries willing and ready to partake. Because each country has its own goals and capacities, the PfP encourages a “self-differentiation” approach. Some participants might aspire to eventual Alliance membership and focus on meeting NATO standards, while others may see PfP as a mechanism for specialized training, expertise-sharing, and confidence-building with neighbors.

A key tool within PfP is the Planning and Review Process (PARP), a mechanism that helps partner countries develop and refine their defense capabilities, align with NATO interoperability standards, and address specific reform needs. While it was originally conceived for Euro-Atlantic partners, many of its core practices—such as setting capability targets and undertaking regular reviews—could be adapted to the needs of countries in different regions or in unique political circumstances. The PARP cycle spans two years, assessing progress and setting fresh partnership goals. For those partners that desire a deeper level of engagement, NATO can offer even more structured planning frameworks, now consolidated under what is called the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP).

The ITPP is a relatively new initiative designed to harmonize all forms of cooperation and planning between NATO and a given partner under a single, coherent framework. It is built around a four-year cycle that starts with jointly defining strategic objectives, setting tangible goals, and determining the specific activities (exercises, policy dialogues, professional exchanges, capacity-building measures) that will help the partner achieve them. Over the course of the cycle, NATO and the partner conduct regular assessments—one in the mid-term and one at the end—to measure progress, adjust the plan if needed, and inform a new cycle of cooperation. This type of programming streamlines existing mechanisms, ensuring that different programs—such as the Partnership Cooperation Menu (the annual catalogue of roughly 1,400 activities), the PARP, and other specialized tools—operate under a unified set of objectives and timelines.

In parallel to these strategic and planning-focused programs, NATO has also developed practical,

operationally oriented structures that can play a crucial role in ensuring resilience and preparedness. One such mechanism is the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which exists to coordinate offers of support and requests for assistance among NATO Allies and partner nations in times of natural or human-made disasters. The EADRCC's role is not confined to classical humanitarian emergencies: it can be invoked in wider crises that involve civil protection needs, and it has proven vital in the Alliance's recent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and natural disasters such as earthquakes in Türkiye. The EADRCC can be an important entry point for countries looking to reinforce their civil preparedness, which forms part of NATO's broader focus on resilience. By working through or with the EADRCC, a partner can improve its own disaster management capabilities, cultivate interoperability with Allies and fellow partners in civil protection operations, and foster public trust by demonstrating capacity to manage crises effectively.

Also noteworthy are the Partnership Training and Education Centres (PTECs), which constitute a network of institutions in both Allied and partner countries that offer courses, seminars, workshops, and other capacity-building events. These centers can focus on various thematic areas, such as peacekeeping operations, protection of civilians, civil-military coordination, and specialized skills training for security personnel. This decentralized network allows countries that have advanced expertise in certain fields—like cyber defense, counter-terrorism, or border security—to share knowledge with both NATO members and other partners, thereby reinforcing a collective approach to security challenges. PTECs illustrate how partners are not merely recipients of NATO assistance but can also be providers of region-specific knowledge, lessons learned, and niche capabilities.

From a wider perspective, NATO's cooperation structures are designed to accommodate the remarkable diversity of partner countries—states that span different continents, with varying political systems, security dilemmas, and strategic cultures. Some partners, for instance, are already advanced in areas of defense modernization, making them potential contributors to Alliance missions and operations, while others primarily seek capacity-building support. In each case, transparency, trust, and shared commitment to peaceful dispute resolution and adherence to international norms are paramount. The 1995 “Study on NATO Enlargement,” which laid out the basic philosophy

of NATO's relationships with non-members, emphasized that partnership is as much about shared values as it is about practical collaboration.

This strategic and operational flexibility is especially relevant when considering Kosovo, whose unique political status has led to a situation in which four NATO member states do not recognize its independence.

Potential Approaches and Mechanisms

A possible approach draws on the innovative spirit of the Partnership for Peace and the adaptable structures of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership. NATO could craft a "Kosovo-tailored" version of PfP-like activities, focusing on defense reforms, transparency, and professional development of Kosovo's security institutions. This would not require formal recognition because it could be framed primarily as a set of technical and capacity-building engagements under the broader umbrella of Euro-Atlantic partnership, guided by a special set of "self-differentiated" priorities that Kosovo chooses to fulfill. In practice, Kosovo could be invited to attend select PfP exercises, observe relevant workshops, or participate in staff-level dialogues focused on interoperability, civil-military relations, and crisis response planning. The scope of these engagements would be calibrated so as not to cross the red lines of non-recognizing Allies, yet offer Kosovo enough meaningful content to enhance its security capabilities.

Given Kosovo's particular security environment, an even more specialized mechanism could be the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP). NATO could initiate a discussion with relevant authorities in Kosovo—alongside a political consensus within the Alliance—to craft a unique ITPP that respects existing constraints and avoids overt political statements about statehood. This ITPP could outline objectives such as strengthening the rule of law within Kosovo's security sector, advancing interoperability with KFOR, cooperating on disaster relief strategies, and continuing the development of civilian oversight of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). Over a four-year cycle, NATO and Kosovo's authorities could define clear metrics and targets, subject them to a mid-term review, and subsequently assess achievements in a final report to the North Atlantic Council. Such a process would allow Allies, including those that do not recognize Kosovo, to evaluate Kosovo's progress purely on the basis of shared security goals, rather than symbolic questions of

statehood. Despite this challenge, NATO maintains a robust presence in Kosovo through the KFOR mission, which has been instrumental in ensuring a secure environment and enabling peace. The question, therefore, becomes: how can NATO deepen its cooperation with Kosovo through existing mechanisms without compelling those member states to alter their position on recognition?

statehood.

In parallel, the EADRCC provides a tangible, low-controversy avenue for Kosovo to engage in a positive and unambiguously humanitarian agenda. Should Kosovo face natural disasters or public health emergencies, it could request assistance through the EADRCC. In turn, the EADRCC would coordinate Allied and partner offers of support. This kind of collaboration not only reinforces Kosovo's resilience but also underscores the central objective of NATO's cooperative security models—to foster mutual trust and capacity. EADRCC cooperation has historically proven effective in avoiding geopolitical sensitivities, instead focusing on immediate humanitarian needs and practical solutions. For Kosovo, forging stronger ties with the EADRCC could also serve as a key test of readiness and reliability in interfacing with Allied standards, procedures, and working cultures.

A further step might involve Kosovo engaging with one or more Partnership Training and Education Centres, either as a participant sending trainees or as a co-host for specialized modules where it has relevant expertise. The topics could be deliberately chosen for their broad appeal and low political sensitivity, such as search-and-rescue operations, crisis management, cybersecurity basics, or language training for defense personnel. In doing so, Kosovo's security officials would learn to operate with NATO doctrinal standards, thus steadily improving interoperability with the Alliance. In turn, a modest but consistent presence in a PTEC network could pave the way for more advanced forms of partnership down the line, in case political conditions regarding recognition evolve.

All these initiatives would require a carefully calibrated approach by NATO to avoid any misperception of endorsing a contested legal status. The Alliance has traditionally managed similar complexities by

compartmentalizing technical and political dimensions, focusing on the functional benefits of collaboration while leaving issues of diplomatic recognition in the hands of individual member states. This philosophy aligns with the principle from the 1995 “Study on NATO Enlargement” stating that no external party should have veto power over the cooperative arrangements a sovereign entity seeks. While Kosovo’s sovereignty itself remains a subject of disagreement within the Alliance, the premise that constructive engagement fosters regional stability and professionalizes security forces is consistent with NATO’s guiding ethos.

In sum, the rich array of cooperative instruments—from broad political forums like the EAPC, to concrete capacity-building exercises under the PfP and ITPP programs, to specialized responses like the EADRCC—provides NATO with ample flexibility to tailor an approach for Kosovo. By focusing initially on technical,

educational, and civil-emergency collaboration, NATO could sidestep the political sensitivities associated with recognition, yet still deepen the transformative aspects of partnership. This synergy of capacity-building and strategic dialogue would benefit not only Kosovo and the Balkans region but also the Alliance’s overarching goal of ensuring a stable, secure, and democratic Euro-Atlantic area. Over time, as Kosovo advances in meeting NATO’s standards, it can adapt these same frameworks to develop more sophisticated forms of cooperation, possibly setting the foundation for a more formal partnership—should Alliance consensus on political questions eventually permit. Through steady engagement with minimal controversy, NATO would be reinforcing the essence of its post-Cold War identity: an alliance dedicated to spreading stability, democracy, and responsible defense governance wherever it can constructively do so.

Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative (KECI) proposal for NATO

A Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative (KECI) would offer a framework for deepening practical engagement between NATO and Kosovo. It would be rooted in the Alliance's post-Cold War commitment to cooperative security, as articulated in the 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement," while recognizing and accommodating the persistent challenge that four NATO member states do not recognize Kosovo's independence. By emphasizing functional, incremental cooperation rather than formal membership or immediate accession negotiations, KECI could deliver tangible benefits for both Kosovo and the wider Euro-Atlantic community, all the while respecting the political constraints that currently block a consensus on Kosovo's status.

A central dilemma in shaping NATO's engagement with Kosovo is the need to reconcile Kosovo's clearly expressed goal of deepening integration with the fact that not all Allies view Kosovo as a sovereign state. This incongruity has limited Kosovo's participation in key NATO programs such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) or the Planning and Review Process (PARP), both of which typically presuppose a universally recognized state actor. Yet, the 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement" conveyed a flexible ethos: it noted that NATO would remain open to European states that share its democratic values and contribute to shared security objectives, and it acknowledged that the process of engagement need not be identical for every partner. KECI would build on that principle of flexibility. In effect, it would provide a structured path for Kosovo to align with NATO standards in areas like defense reform, interoperability, and crisis management—without crossing the political red lines set by those Allies that do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

The logic behind KECI is straightforward. First, Kosovo's history and geostrategic location in the Western Balkans make it an essential piece of the region's overall stability. Kosovo, as a recipient of extensive NATO engagement through the Kosovo Force (KFOR), has benefited from the Alliance's presence and has expressed substantial interest in further alignment with Euro-Atlantic values and procedures. By offering Kosovo a vehicle to deepen cooperation on practical matters—ranging from defense sector professionalism to disaster readiness—NATO can enhance stability

at Europe's periphery. Second, an initiative such as KECI can be crafted in a way that is acceptable to all NATO member states by situating cooperation squarely in the realm of capacity-building and civil-military collaboration. Recognition would remain outside the scope of the project, and the language of any formal agreement or memorandum of understanding (MoU) would be drafted carefully to avoid contentious assertions of statehood. In this way, KECI could sidestep diplomatically fraught territory while concentrating on the down-to-earth goals that serve everyone's interests.

A key component of KECI would be a new memorandum of understanding—or a similarly formalized but still an agreement—between NATO and Kosovo's government. This document would outline a tailored cooperation agenda that tracks closely with Kosovo's security and governance realities. From the outset, it would clarify that neither side is compelled to make judgments about political recognition. Instead, both NATO and Kosovo would commit to a portfolio of initiatives designed to enhance security governance, foster greater interoperability with NATO structures, and strengthen Kosovo's capacity for crisis management and civil emergency response.

The agreement could propose a multi-year roadmap, structured around carefully chosen objectives that reflect NATO's overarching security agenda and Kosovo's areas of greatest need. Among these objectives might be establishing transparent defense budgeting and procurement processes, improving parliamentary or executive oversight of Kosovo's security forces, bolstering capacity for humanitarian missions, and progressively adopting specific NATO standards in training, logistics, and operational planning. Such a plan would reflect the "self-differentiation" principle set out in the 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement"—the idea that each partner's journey is distinct, guided by that partner's unique circumstances and ambitions, yet validated by NATO's experience in building professional, accountable forces.

One immediate area of collaboration under KECI could revolve around civil emergency preparedness,

an arena where the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) has proven essential for both Allies and partners. By forging clear procedures for Kosovo to request and coordinate disaster assistance through the EADRCC, the proposed initiative would embed Kosovo more deeply in NATO's emergency management networks. For instance, KECI could call for joint civil-military training exercises in Kosovo focusing on natural disaster scenarios—earthquakes, floods, or major fires—and large-scale humanitarian crises such as mass displacement. These exercises would allow Kosovo's institutions to become more proficient in NATO-style coordination and planning, demonstrating tangible benefits to both local populations and neighboring regions. Equally, they would showcase to all Allies that closer engagement with Kosovo need not entail political recognition but instead serve universal humanitarian and security interests.

Professional military education and capacity-building present another clear opportunity. NATO's network of Partnership Training and Education Centres (PTECs) and institutions like the NATO School Oberammergau offer specialized courses in operational planning, logistics, leadership, civil-military cooperation, and a host of other key military and security competencies. A KECI memorandum could outline terms under which Kosovo's officers participate in select courses, ensuring they train side by side with their counterparts from NATO and other partner nations. Under current circumstances, Kosovo's inclusion in such programs has often relied on ad hoc decisions or bilateral arrangements with supportive Allies. KECI would formalize this process, preserving status neutrality but providing predictable pathways for Kosovo's defense personnel to access critical professional development.

Once trust and working relationships strengthen, KECI could evolve to introduce Kosovo's security forces gradually to NATO's broader exercises. At the beginning, Kosovo might participate in observer status for certain drills focusing on peacekeeping, crisis management, or humanitarian assistance. Over time, should a political climate of trust build, Kosovo might begin to take on marginal but increasing roles in these exercises—coordinating scenario planning, for instance, or contributing medical or logistical elements. Each engagement would be carefully calibrated to remain within the scope of a status-neutral cooperation framework, allowing Allies who do not recognize Kosovo to maintain their positions. In this way, the practical cooperation between Kosovo's forces and

those of NATO would incrementally expand, all under the umbrella of KECI. This stepping-stone approach reflects the broader logic of the Partnership for Peace mechanism, adapted to Kosovo's atypical situation.

An equally significant pillar of KECI could be what one might label "defense institution building"—that is, assistance in areas such as budgeting, legislative oversight, public transparency, and anti-corruption measures in defense procurement. NATO has long facilitated structured dialogue and peer review on these topics through tools like the Building Integrity initiative, the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), and the Planning and Review Process. Although Kosovo's partial non-recognition has complicated the use of these existing mechanisms, KECI could borrow best practices and adapt them into a Kosovo-specific track. If aligned with the country's internal reforms, these efforts would help Kosovo's institutions mature toward Euro-Atlantic standards, address local governance challenges, and reassure partners that cooperation benefits the broader region.

A further safeguard for feasibility is that participation in KECI would be flexible. Allies who are more enthusiastic about Kosovo's potential for Euro-Atlantic integration would naturally play leading roles, for instance by hosting exercises, providing funding for training, or offering expertise to help refine Kosovo's security frameworks. Meanwhile, Allies that prefer a more cautious approach could limit their direct engagement. The principle of "coalitions of the willing" within the broader NATO context already has a history, as demonstrated in some past operations or partnership initiatives. KECI would thus reflect the reality that not all Allies will have identical priorities for the Western Balkans. Crucially, the entire enterprise would need sign-off from the North Atlantic Council (NAC), but that approval would simply indicate that no Ally objects to the arrangement on principle. The NAC would not be asked to recognize Kosovo, only to endorse a functional plan for deepening practical cooperation in a manner consistent with existing UN resolutions and NATO precedents.

Successfully establishing KECI could also yield dividends beyond Kosovo itself. It would signify that NATO retains the flexibility, creativity, and political finesse to adapt to unresolved disputes in Europe's evolving security environment. That message matters at a time when the Alliance faces new tests on its eastern flank and elsewhere. Diplomatic adaptability is critical for an organization that not only defends its

members but also aspires to project stability across neighboring regions. Furthermore, the Western Balkans remain a sensitive region where broader competitions for influence are playing out. Firmly anchoring Kosovo's defense sector under Euro-Atlantic norms and guidelines, absent any shift in recognition questions, would help prevent other actors, potentially with conflicting interests, from stepping in to fill the vacuum. In this sense, KECI would enhance NATO's comprehensive approach to building a secure and stable environment in Southeast Europe.

Moreover, for Kosovo itself, KECI would offer a practical roadmap for validating its progress on defense and security reforms. It would allow the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) to demonstrate readiness for more advanced forms of integration when and if a breakthrough on the recognition issue eventually occurs. By participating in structured exercises, training modules, and capacity-building initiatives, Kosovo could gradually acquire a track record of reliability, transparency, and competence in the eyes of the NATO community. That track record, in turn, could bolster the case for deeper ties under different legal or political circumstances.

Another function of KECI might be to expand civil society engagement and public diplomacy around Kosovo's security sector. In many post-conflict environments, it takes time to develop trust between state authorities and the population, and between ethnic communities within that population. NATO's emphasis on values such as the rule of law, human rights, and civilian control of the military can serve as a reinforcing mechanism for local reformers, especially if coupled with outreach efforts to local NGOs, university programs, and think tanks. KECI's structure could encourage involvement from civil society organizations (CSOs) in events focusing on governance, budgetary transparency, or inclusive recruitment policies in the security sector. This approach would be consistent with NATO's broader ethos, as exemplified by initiatives like the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, which many Allies actively promote.

The specifics of KECI's potential timetable could be divided into phases. In the initial phase—perhaps the first twelve to eighteen months—the initiative could prioritize “low-controversy, high-impact” activities. These could include short seminars on defense institution building, tabletop exercises on humanitarian emergencies in coordination with the EADRCC, and staff-level exchanges between Kosovo's Ministry of

Defense (or its equivalent) and relevant NATO bodies. Successful completion of these steps would help Kosovo demonstrate professionalism, while giving Allies time to evaluate the arrangement's effectiveness.

A second phase, which might span the subsequent two to three years, could involve more ambitious joint exercises and deeper integration of Kosovo's personnel into specialized training programs at institutions like the NATO School or select PTECs. Here, Kosovo could begin adopting specific NATO standards in communications or logistics. If everything proceeds smoothly, certain Allies might propose that Kosovo start participating in observer roles in broader NATO-led or regionally focused exercises. Throughout this period, the hallmark of KECI would remain: official documents or meeting records would consistently refrain from implying any shift in recognition. Such a carefully managed presentation would mitigate pushback from Allies who remain sensitive about endorsing Kosovo's sovereignty.

A final, optional phase would be long-term and conditional on evolving geopolitics. If a major diplomatic breakthrough were to occur—perhaps through the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia (despite the possibility that the latter may not be on board, particularly given the current internal situation in Serbian society and politics), or a shift in the positions of the four non-recognizing Allies—then KECI could serve as a foundation for Kosovo's gradual admission into standard NATO partnership programs like the Partnership for Peace, the Planning and Review Process, or the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme. Alternatively, if recognition remains gridlocked, KECI could nonetheless endure as a practical, indefinite arrangement that continues to deliver mutual benefits.

From the perspective of sustaining political will, it helps that there is public support for NATO in Kosovo, with many citizens seeing the Alliance's role in stabilizing their territory as indispensable. Over time, demonstrating that KECI produces improvements in disaster preparedness, military professionalism, and governance could deepen that positive sentiment, turning it into a durable political asset for both Kosovo and NATO. For the Allies who may still have doubts, each new evidence of practical success under KECI would help confirm that enhanced cooperation can proceed without upending their non-recognition stance.

A potential concern might be cost, especially since

new cooperative frameworks often demand additional budget lines and administrative resources. Yet KECI's cost profile could be relatively modest, given that it primarily involves existing NATO infrastructure—trainers, advisory teams, EADRCC, PTECs—and draws funding from standard mechanisms for partnership activities. Moreover, Allies that are strong advocates of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic trajectory could voluntarily shoulder a larger share of the financial burden, thus alleviating concerns among skeptics. Shared burdens are nothing new in NATO's partnership policy.

Ultimately, the Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative would illustrate NATO's capacity to craft innovative solutions in partnership-building, despite ongoing legal and political constraints. It draws heavily on the spirit of openness and flexibility from the 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement," reaffirming that NATO's doors remain ajar to those willing to uphold shared values, commit to a transparent defense sector, and maintain peaceful relations with neighbors. While KECI would not settle the question of Kosovo's international status, it would provide a workable blueprint for cooperation, reinforcing the credibility of NATO as an adaptive organization able to address multiple agendas

without sacrificing the consensus-based principle that undergirds its unity. It would also underscore to Kosovo's leaders and population that meaningful steps toward Euro-Atlantic integration are feasible, even in a context of partial non-recognition.

The Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative stands out as a path that merges the ideals and practical insights gleaned from decades of NATO partnerships with a nuanced appreciation of Kosovo's political landscape. By foregrounding practical cooperation in defense governance, civil emergency preparedness, professional military education, and interoperability, KECI would generate real gains for both Kosovo and the wider region. It would also sidestep the divisive issues surrounding recognition, ensuring that all Allies can find common ground in supporting a more stable, resilient Western Balkans. Through careful planning, consensus-driven implementation, and the flexibility to adapt as diplomatic conditions evolve, KECI could become a potent testament to NATO's enduring mission: fortifying peace, security, and shared values in a Europe that aspires to be whole, free, and at peace—even when confronting the complexities of partial recognition and historical conflict.

What Kosovo Needs to Do?

One of the most significant ways Kosovo can improve its prospects for deeper cooperation with NATO is by demonstrating real progress in normalizing relations with Serbia with focus on mutual recognition parallel to guarantees that Kosovo will benefit a clearer path towards getting closer to NATO membership. It is important to note that the reason why Kosovo must insist on such guarantees is because it is uncertain whether Serbia will deliver on its part. This normalization has been a longstanding objective of both the EU-facilitated dialogue and the broader international community, primarily because of the impact it can have on regional stability, minority integration, and the overall security environment in the Western Balkans. By taking serious and demonstrable steps to implement the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations that was agreed in February of 2023 and the subsequent implementation annex agreed in Ohrid, North Macedonia in March of 2023, Kosovo would not only ease concerns among NATO member states—some of whom remain sensitive to signs of renewed tension—but would also enhance its credibility as a partner committed to upholding Euro-Atlantic values of consensus-building and peaceful dispute resolution. Both a more coordinated approach towards the north of Kosovo by the next Kosovo government and a reciprocal approach to relations with Serbia would reassure NATO that cooperation with Kosovo does not carry undue risk of political escalation or unilateral actions that undermine the Alliance's emphasis on coordinated, diplomatic solutions.

Progress on the normalization track would also help Kosovo in many of its other international objectives. A consistent and transparent effort to proceed the dialogue with Serbia through dialogue would signal political maturity to governments and international organizations across the world, some of which still harbor reservations about Kosovo's international status. Even among those that recognize its sovereignty, lingering questions about stability in northern Kosovo or the treatment of Serbian communities can create hesitancy about admitting Kosovo into forums that require a high degree of confidence in a member's governance and conflict-management capacity. Demonstrating genuine willingness to meet commitments—such as putting together a workable structure for the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities under Kosovo's constitutional

framework, that is, without jeopardizing Kosovo's sovereignty—would go a long way toward dispelling these concerns. In addition, showing consistency in cooperating with institutions like the EU, particularly in addressing the needs of the local Serb population, would reinforce the perception that the Kosovar government is ready for broader integration at the regional and international levels.

Renewed efforts to rehire and integrate Kosovo Serb police officers in northern municipalities illustrate how decisive, inclusion-oriented governance can positively influence security cooperation. NATO's partnerships, including the potential Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative (KECI), hinge on a partner's capacity to engage with local communities in ways that strengthen, rather than undermine, social cohesion. By finding sustainable solutions for minority representation in the security forces, Kosovo would be reinforcing its claim to act as a stabilizing presence in the area. Such action would help NATO view Kosovo's government as a responsible stakeholder that is both respectful of local contexts and open to consultation—qualities essential for any deeper collaboration with the Alliance.

Another critical dimension is the broader diplomatic landscape. Many countries and institutions take their cues from how well parties fulfill international agreements designed to maintain regional peace. Should Kosovo demonstrate that it can work constructively on implementing the parts under the roadmap agreement with the international partners on KECI, it may pave the way for wider acceptance in organizations such as the Council of Europe. Part of this could also have Kosovo commit to unilaterally implementing its' part even in the elements that are related to normalization of relations with Serbia in order to defuse the long-standing tensions. While NATO engagement primarily revolves around defense reform, interoperability, and crisis management, it still intersects with the political commitments that Kosovo makes under EU auspices. Successful normalization would thus help remove uncertainties that prevent some Allies from endorsing more advanced NATO programs for Kosovo, and it could also positively influence debates about Kosovo's further recognition and membership in various international bodies. In other words, every step that moves Kosovo closer to a sustainable normalization of relations with Serbia reduces the

reservations and caveats that have, to date, restricted Kosovo's participation in major security cooperation initiatives.

At the same time, demonstrating a consensus-driven style of leadership would be vital. NATO's senior officials and a number of Allied governments have signaled their wariness toward any partner whose internal policymaking seems to provoke local friction rather than resolve it. This concern is heightened in the Western Balkans, where memories of ethnic conflict linger and the region's overall stability is essential to the Euro-Atlantic community. If the Kosovar government and Acting Prime Minister Kurti's government appear reluctant to coordinate security actions in the north with international partners, apprehension among certain Allies will likely grow, not diminish. Rather than be drawn into day-to-day skirmishes, the government can seize the normalization process itself as a platform to showcase commitment to diplomacy, minority accommodation, and EU-brokered arrangements. Consistent adherence to these principles—and demonstrable implementation of key provisions in the normalization agreement—will validate the idea that Kosovo is a reliable partner aligned with the best practices of the Euro-Atlantic community.

That same spirit of responsible governance, when applied to the northern municipalities, would further reinforce the willingness to engage in routine consultations with NATO and the EU before taking

unilateral decisions. Civilian oversight, respect for due process, and a willingness to adapt policies in response to legitimate concerns would not only lower tensions on the ground but also serve as visible benchmarks of Kosovo's readiness to handle sensitive security matters. From NATO's perspective, engaging with a government that has proven its ability to manage crises calmly and cooperatively is far more appealing than working with an administration perceived to prioritize political grandstanding over well-coordinated action.

All of these considerations underscore the ways in which normalization efforts serve as a cornerstone of Kosovo's broader aspirations. While the Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative with NATO may highlight security and defense matters, its success also depends on Kosovo's capacity to demonstrate that it is a cooperative, forward-looking partner embedded in a stable regional environment. A renewed determination to fulfill obligations under the Agreement on the Path to Normalization of Relations, facilitate minority inclusion in public institutions, and align security actions with EU and NATO consultations would not only unlock deeper engagement with NATO but also open the door to improved standing in multiple international forums. Indeed, it is precisely the synergy between progress in the EU-led dialogue with Serbia and a pragmatic, inclusive approach to governance that will ensure Kosovo's credibility as it pursues the next stage of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Why Should the NATO Secretary General Appoint a Special Representative for the Western Balkans?

A strategic, well-coordinated approach to security and stability in the Western Balkans is increasingly essential for NATO and the broader Euro-Atlantic community. Despite progress made in the region over the past two decades, lingering tensions in places such as northern Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina underscore the vulnerabilities that can flare up with little warning. Local disputes—combined with malign foreign influence, disinformation campaigns, and political figures who sometimes reject the norms of constructive engagement—create conditions that can threaten not only the stability of individual countries but also the cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic space. In this context, the appointment by the NATO Secretary General of a Special Representative for the Western Balkans would serve as a concrete step to enhance the Alliance’s influence and coordination in an area that has historically been a flashpoint for conflicts with wider implications.

NATO has experience in leveraging special representatives to advance its strategic objectives. The office of the Secretary General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, established in 2004, offers a clear precedent. That role was created to address the unique security concerns of the Caucasus and Central Asian regions, carrying out high-level engagements, coordinating programs of assistance, and working closely with political and military stakeholders to steer reforms and promote NATO’s values. A similar position for the Western Balkans would mirror that model of high-level diplomacy and partnership, while adapting its focus to local realities—namely the interplay of unresolved disputes, outside interference, and internal divisions that threaten the region’s forward momentum.

Establishing a Special Representative for the Western Balkans would reinforce existing efforts by other international actors—particularly the European Union—to facilitate normalization and political progress. In the ongoing normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, for instance, the EU’s envoy has shouldered most of the responsibility for bridging gaps and keeping lines of communication open. Yet the security dimension

remains equally vital. NATO, which already has a history of involvement in the region through KFOR in Kosovo and various capacity-building programs, has both the credibility and the expertise to serve as an additional stabilizing force. A NATO Special Representative would work in tandem with the EU’s envoy, ensuring that security- and defense-related considerations dovetail with political negotiations. This alignment would help preempt the flare-up of local violence that can derail long-term solutions. The appointment of such a representative would send a clear message that NATO stands ready to support peaceful settlements, build defense-sector capacity, and deter those who might exploit local grievances for political gain.

One of the most pressing reasons to create this position is the challenge posed by malicious actors seeking to undermine stability in the Western Balkans. Political figures like Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina have questioned the legitimacy of state institutions, while external players—sometimes backed by Russian or other foreign disinformation campaigns—fuel narratives designed to sow mistrust toward NATO and the EU. A Special Representative with a permanent mandate to engage with regional leaders, security agencies, and civil society would be better positioned to recognize nascent threats, facilitate open channels of communication, and coordinate rapid responses. This would include working closely with NATO’s intelligence and strategic-communications divisions to track and confront disinformation at its early stages, rather than reacting only after harmful narratives gain traction.

In addition to disinformation, malign influence often takes subtler forms, such as economic leverage, cyber interference, or political patronage networks that extend across borders. The Special Representative would provide an authoritative point of contact for Western Balkans governments seeking to strengthen institutional resilience and reduce vulnerabilities in their defense, cybersecurity, and infrastructure sectors. By replicating the role of the Caucasus/Central Asia representative—who liaises with senior officials, advises on reform, and shows how NATO tools can

foster modernization—this official would help shape a cohesive approach for the Western Balkans. The representative could also coordinate with international organizations like the OSCE, the Council of Europe, or the UN where mandates overlap, ensuring that NATO's resources and expertise are aligned with other international efforts.

A further benefit is the ability to channel lessons learned from other regions—such as the Caucasus or even Afghanistan—into targeted guidance for Western Balkans partners. Just as the Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia has engaged with governments on defense-sector reform, border security, and crisis management, a similar figure for the Balkans would work with local counterparts to identify the most effective ways of achieving interoperability with NATO forces, applying democratic oversight to the security sector, and containing cross-border criminal or extremist networks. Creating a single, identifiable focal point for NATO engagement would simplify the maze of bilateral and multilateral consultations that currently exist, thereby making assistance programs more coherent and less duplicative.

The position would also elevate the role of public diplomacy, a vital component of modern security. As seen in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Special Representative's outreach to media, think tanks, and civil society organizations has helped clarify NATO's role, reducing suspicion and providing accessible, factual information about the Alliance's interests in the region. In the Western Balkans, widespread misconceptions about NATO—from historical baggage to concerns about sovereignty—are often exploited by local and foreign actors seeking to fracture public confidence in Euro-Atlantic integration. By proactively engaging these narratives through regular briefings, community forums, and engagement with journalists, a Special Representative could bring greater transparency to NATO's objectives, while simultaneously encouraging local reformers to integrate democratic values into their security frameworks.

The appointment of such a representative would resonate strongly with Allies who have witnessed how quickly local disputes can spin out of control in this historically fragile region. Unresolved tensions between Kosovo and Serbia remain a risk, while the precarious unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to hinge on international oversight. Addressing these challenges early and in a sustained manner can reduce the likelihood of crises that would force NATO to intervene

after violence has already begun. The presence of a high-level representative would show that the Alliance is not merely reactive but is systematically guiding the region toward stability, transparency, and alignment with Euro-Atlantic norms.

Moreover, this initiative would dovetail neatly with other recent suggestions—such as the creation of a Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative—that emphasize the importance of hands-on political engagement, defense reform, and dialogue with minority communities. A Special Representative would be well placed to assess local security arrangements, offer direct support for implementing aspects of EU-mediated agreements, and ensure that stakeholders across the region are aware of—and adhere to—NATO standards where relevant. In instances where local governance bodies or minority representatives feel sidelined, the Representative could mediate or clarify misunderstandings, preventing the sense of exclusion that so often leads to escalations.

Finally, from a strategic perspective, this move would reinforce NATO's core value of cooperative security. The Alliance's 2010 Strategic Concept, and subsequent declarations, place increased importance on partnerships that extend stability beyond NATO's borders. As the Western Balkans remains a crossroad for European and Eurasian influences, ensuring that its states do not slide back into conflict or become breeding grounds for extremist ideologies aligns directly with NATO's vision of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. The Secretary General's Special Representative would not replicate or replace national embassies or EU representatives, but rather amplify their efforts with direct backing from NATO's leadership, sending a strong signal that the region is a collective priority for the Alliance.

In short, the Western Balkans stands at a crossroads where progress is possible but not guaranteed. The combination of unsettled boundaries, ethnic tensions, political populism, and foreign meddling remains a potent destabilizing mix. Drawing inspiration from the existing Special Representative's role for the Caucasus and Central Asia, NATO can enhance its engagement by creating a dedicated position for the Western Balkans. Such a representative, entrusted with a mandate to advise the Secretary General, coordinate partnership policies, and maintain open lines with local leaders, would provide a much-needed political and strategic anchor. By working hand in hand with the EU's envoy for normalization and other international

organizations, this individual could contribute to averting new crises, countering disinformation, safeguarding democratic institutions, and advancing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of countries determined

to break free from the cycle of conflict. In doing so, the Special Representative for the Western Balkans would become a pivotal figure in guaranteeing that NATO's investment in regional security yields stability.

Conclusions

Kosovo's relationship with NATO occupies a uniquely pivotal position in the Western Balkans, balancing the region's delicate security environment with the practical and political challenges of partial non-recognition. On the one hand, Kosovo's overwhelming public support for NATO underscores a broad societal consensus that transcends internal political divides. On the other, the lack of unity among NATO Allies regarding Kosovo's status creates a complex dynamic in which deeper cooperation must be carefully designed to avoid undermining the Alliance's cohesion. Despite these constraints, NATO's role in Kosovo remains indispensable, both through its KFOR mission—ensuring a safe and secure environment—and through evolving advisory structures that support defense reform and institutional capacity-building. Kosovo's credible path towards NATO membership would be beneficial for the alliance from several angles:

- It would ensure that no external malicious actor, whether Russia or Serbian pro-Russian nationalist elements inside and outside governmental institutions, would seek to destabilize the security situation in the country.
- Kosovo's membership in NATO would reduce the burden on alliance members regarding investment in KFOR.
- Kosovo would become an exporter of security within the framework of the alliance, rather than continuing to only import resources from it.

The 1995 "Study on NATO Enlargement" offers a valuable strategic and conceptual guide for navigating these nuances. It teaches that gradual,

transparent, and values-based integration, paired with a commitment to democratic oversight and civilian control of the armed forces, can alleviate tensions and advance mutual interests. When applied to Kosovo's context, this ethos supports a flexible, functional approach—such as a Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative (KECI)—that maximizes tangible cooperation without obliging all Allies to agree on statehood recognition. By building upon existing programs like the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Partnership for Peace toolkit, the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme, and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, NATO can help Kosovo strengthen its security institutions, public trust, and regional relationships in a pragmatic and incremental manner.

Equally decisive is the interplay between Kosovo's internal governance approach and its broader diplomatic posture, especially regarding normalization with Serbia. Credible progress in implementing the 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations—whether through reintegrating Kosovo Serb police officers, respecting minority rights, or establishing the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities under a constitutionally vetted framework—would signal to NATO Allies that Kosovo is a solution-oriented and reliable partner. Meanwhile, the appointment of a NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Western Balkans could reinforce conflict prevention, strategic coordination with the EU, and resistance to malign foreign influence. Kosovo and NATO both stand to benefit substantially from a deeper, more resilient partnership, one that not only secures Kosovo's territory and citizens but also exemplifies the Alliance's capacity to adapt to complex regional realities.

Recommendations

Adopt a Gradual Alignment Framework: NATO should finalize and implement a Kosovo Enhanced Cooperation Initiative (KECI) that focuses on concrete, functional areas—training, disaster relief, defense reform—thereby moving beyond the political impasse surrounding recognition. Such a framework would enable step-by-step progress on interoperability, crisis management, and defense institution building.

Embed KECI in Broader Regional Security Efforts: Coordination with existing EU-led initiatives is crucial. By aligning KECI activities with the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, NATO can help ensure that military and security cooperation complements diplomatic normalization efforts, reinforcing a holistic approach to stability in the Western Balkans.

Maintain a Strong KFOR Presence and Mandate: The recent terrorist attacks in Banjska and on water infrastructure in Zubin Potok highlight lingering fragilities. A well-resourced, adequately equipped KFOR remains critical for deterring violence, reassuring minority communities, and supporting normalization talks. Any drawdown should be tied to verifiable improvements in security conditions.

Demonstrate Leadership in Normalization with Serbia: For Kosovo to advance its NATO aspirations, it must show consistent implementation of the 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations. Formally employing Kosovo Serb police officers in the north, coordinating any security or police actions with NATO and the EU, and clarifying the legal framework for the

Serb-majority municipalities are tangible steps that build trust among Allies and facilitate deeper Euro-Atlantic integration.

Strengthen Civil-Military Cooperation and Governance: Kosovo should intensify cooperation with NATO's various training programs, from defense budgeting and anti-corruption measures to humanitarian assistance. Civil society engagement in these programs—through roundtables, joint exercises, and oversight initiatives—can enhance transparency and underscore the government's commitment to inclusive governance.

Appoint a NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Western Balkans: NATO should create this role to facilitate high-level dialogue, preempt conflict, and harmonize efforts with the EU's normalization envoy. A dedicated official would champion NATO's strategic perspective, address emerging threats such as disinformation and radicalization, and provide consistent guidance to partners throughout the region.

Prepare for Various Long-term Scenarios: A potential diplomatic breakthrough on recognition might accelerate Kosovo's path to formal NATO membership; a continued stalemate might require sustaining a standalone cooperation framework for the foreseeable future. Flexible planning for both scenarios will ensure that KECI remains valuable and credible, regardless of shifts in international politics.

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About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice.

Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development; identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime; foreign policy and regional cooperation; and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

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