



NAVIGATING NEUTRALITY: HOW TO FIND THE BEST MATCH BETWEEN NATO AND ITS FOUR REMAINING NEUTRAL WESTERN EUROPEAN PARTNERS (WEP4)?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO has renewed its focus on collective defense and deterrence. As a result, the strategic relevance of partner countries to the Alliance has diminished.

The WEP4—Austria, Ireland, Malta, and Switzerland—the last NATO's neutral Western European partners after Finland and Sweden's full membership, have been unsettled by Europe's shifting geopolitical landscape. Yet, as NATO prioritizes collective defense, these partners risk marginalization, despite their alignment with the Alliance's values and commitment to Euro-Atlantic security.

This Policy Analysis introduces the WEP4 and the specificity of their approach. It offers various options with regards to the 'buddy system' they should adopt vis-à-vis NATO to increase their visibility, and concludes in favor of the relevance of the WEP4 format. It assesses whether the EU membership of Austria, Ireland and Malta could help, or whether a more assertive EU in 2025 risks complicating the relationship with Switzerland.

In the four countries, the war in Ukraine reopened a global domestic conversation about neutrality and, consequently, about the relationship with NATO. A rigid legal concept no longer seems appropriate. The war in Ukraine represents an important opportunity for the WEP4 to address defense capability shortfalls and re-visit and reinvigorate their partnership with the Atlantic Alliance. In December 2023, the four countries put forward a "positive agenda" highlighting five priorities to further promote the cooperation.

The key findings the least presented in this Policy Analysis are the following:

1 Trapped into its own existential crisis, facing Donald Trump's constant delegitimization of the Atlantic Alliance and its pillar Article V, NATO must focus on the 'bare necessity' and on its own survival. The Hague Summit in June 2025 could well be NATO's last. Quite obviously, it is highly unlikely that NATO partners and especially the WEP4 will feature prominently at the agenda of the discussion, let alone receive an answer to their 2023 non-paper.

2 In general, the current time is a delicate one for Austria. NATO's refocusing on its "core business" – collective defense and deterrence – and the least attention given to crisis management in the 2022 Strategic Concept, restrict Austria's room for maneuver. Austria should be vigilant in keeping 'cooperation' and 'partnership' on NATO's agenda but 2025 should offer little room for manoeuvre. In this uncertain time for NATO, Austria should make sure not to represent a security gap for a much-needed common defense capability including the territory of the WEP4, especially Austria and Switzerland.

3 More than ever, Austria can act as a bridge-builder between the EU and NATO. While defending budgetary orthodoxy, Austria should carefully navigate the current change of mindset among the 27 in favor of EU's strategic autonomy and rearmament.

4 With regards to the several 'coalitions of the willing' that are emerging to move European defence forward (France-and UK -driven 'reassurance force' in Ukraine, Weimar+ format) offer valuable formats for more assertive action but might, on the longer term, damage Europe's cohesion and push neutral and 'frugal' countries like Austria to the extreme outside of Europe's 'concentric circles'.

5 Switzerland's new security strategy, to be adopted by the end of 2025, will pave the road. Taking full measure of the "after shock" of Trump's second mandate and its impact on NATO and Europe, as well as the outcome of the June Hague summit, Switzerland's position should be carefully observed and might, to a certain extent, drive the WEP4 approach with regard to NATO.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Seit dem Einmarsch Russlands in die Ukraine hat die NATO ihren Schwerpunkt wieder auf die kollektive Verteidigung und die Abschreckung gelegt. Dies hat dazu geführt, dass die strategische Bedeutung der Partnerstaaten für das Bündnis abgenommen hat.

Die WEP4 - Österreich, Irland, Malta und die Schweiz -, die letzten neutralen westeuropäischen Partner der NATO nach der Vollmitgliedschaft Finnlands und Schwedens, sind durch die sich verändernde geopolitische Landschaft Europas verunsichert worden. Da die NATO jedoch der kollektiven Verteidigung Vorrang einräumt, laufen diese Partner Gefahr, an den Rand gedrängt zu werden, obwohl sie sich den Werten des Bündnisses anschließen und sich für die euro-atlantische Sicherheit einsetzen.

In dieser Politikanalyse werden die WEP4 und die Besonderheit ihres Ansatzes vorgestellt. Sie bietet verschiedene Optionen in Bezug auf das „Buddy-System“, das sie gegenüber der NATO anwenden sollten, um ihre Sichtbarkeit zu erhöhen, und kommt zu dem Schluss, dass das WEP4-Format von Bedeutung ist. Es wird bewertet, ob die EU-Mitgliedschaft Österreichs, Irlands und Maltas hilfreich sein könnte oder ob eine selbstbewusstere EU im Jahr 2025 die Gefahr birgt, die Beziehungen zur Schweiz zu erschweren.

Die wichtigsten Ergebnisse dieser Politikanalyse sind die folgenden:

1 In ihrer eigenen existenziellen Krise gefangen und mit Donald Trumps ständiger Delegitimierung des Atlantischen Bündnisses und seines Pfeilers Artikel V konfrontiert, muss sich die NATO auf das „Nötigste“ und ihr eigenes Überleben konzentrieren. Der Haager Gipfel im Juni 2025 könnte durchaus der letzte der NATO sein. Es ist sehr unwahrscheinlich, dass die NATO-Partner und insbesondere die WEP4 auf der Tagesordnung stehen werden, geschweige denn eine Antwort auf ihr Non-Paper von 2023 erhalten.

2 Generell ist die jetzige Zeit für Österreich eine heikle Zeit. Die Neuausrichtung der NATO auf ihr „Kerngeschäft“ - kollektive Verteidigung und Abschreckung - und die geringe Aufmerksamkeit, die dem Krisenmanagement im Strategischen Konzept 2022 gewidmet wurde, schränken Österreichs Handlungsspielraum ein. Österreich sollte darauf achten, dass „Zusammenarbeit“ und „Partnerschaft“ weiterhin auf der Tagesordnung der NATO stehen, aber das Jahr 2025 dürfte wenig Spielraum bieten. In dieser für die NATO unsicheren Zeit sollte Österreich darauf achten, dass es keine Sicherheitslücke für eine dringend benötigte gemeinsame Verteidigungsfähigkeit darstellen könnte, die auch das Gebiet der WEP4, insbesondere Österreichs und der Schweiz, einschließt.

3 Österreich kann mehr denn je als Brückenbauer zwischen der EU und der NATO fungieren. Während es die haushaltspolitische Orthodoxie verteidigt, sollte Österreich den gegenwärtigen Mentalitätswandel unter den 27 Staaten zugunsten der strategischen Autonomie der EU und der Wiederaufrüstung vorsichtig steuern.

4 Was die verschiedenen „Koalitionen der Willigen“ betrifft, die sich abzeichnen, um die europäische Verteidigung voranzubringen (die von Frankreich und Großbritannien betriebene „Beruhigungstruppe“ in der Ukraine, das Weimar+-Format), so bieten sie wertvolle Formate für ein selbstbewussteres Vorgehen, könnten aber längerfristig dem Zusammenhalt Europas schaden und neutrale und „genügsame“ Länder wie Österreich an den äußeren Rand der „konzentrischen Kreise“ Europas drängen.

5 Die neue Sicherheitsstrategie der Schweiz, die bis Ende 2025 verabschiedet werden soll, wird den Weg ebnen. Unter Berücksichtigung des „Nachschocks“ von Trumps zweitem Mandat und seiner Auswirkungen auf die NATO und Europa sowie der Ergebnisse des Haager Gipfels im Juni sollte die Position der Schweiz sorgfältig beobachtet werden und könnte in gewissem Maße den WEP4-Ansatz in Bezug auf die NATO bestimmen.

INTRODUCTION

In a world characterized by shifts in global power, NATO's partnerships – in Europe as well as elsewhere – have made a concrete and valued contribution to the success of the Alliance's fundamental tasks. However, the war in Ukraine has raised a paradox.

On the one hand the crisis requires NATO to leverage one of its greatest assets: its network of structured and individual partnerships across the globe, which remain “crucial to protect the global commons, enhance our resilience and uphold the rules-based international order.” (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, para. 42).

On the other hand, the partners' strategic importance to NATO has decreased since 2014, with the Alliance's renewed strategic focus on collective defense and deterrence. Aside from a few capable partners in Europe, notably Finland and Sweden, NATO's other global partners came to be seen as more discretionary than of real strategic value (Aronsson & Swaney, 2022, 9-10). In the current state of emergency in Europe, it seems that NATO has less time for those who are not fully committed to its ‘boots on the ground’ approach.

The WEP4, NATO's four neutral Western European Partners Austria, Ireland, Malta and Switzerland, have been particularly affected by the geopolitical challenges facing Europe and the world.

Traditionally much more discreet than other NATO partners such as Australia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan – or than controversial ‘in between’ partners such as Ukraine

or Georgia, the WEP4 find themselves in a middle – and quite problematic – position. Even before Russia's invasion, the reflection group appointed by NATO's Secretary General to explore forward strengthening the political dimension of the Alliance (NATO 2030) focused prominently on partnerships “in the North and East”, “in the South” and on “Indo-Pacific and Asian Partnerships” (NATO, 2020, 59-60), without even mentioning NATO's European neutral partners. Finland and Sweden joined NATO on April 4, 2023, and March 7, 2024, respectively, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Alliance also carried out its largest reinforcement of deterrence and defense along its eastern flank since the Cold War (Simonet, 2023a). These developments have further isolated the remaining four small neutral partners.

The former WEP5, the informal collective of neutral and non-aligned states during the Cold War (Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland – excluding Malta), which since the 1990s functioned as a tool to influence NATO practices and support each other's interests with the Alliance (Nünlist, 2015), has been dismantled. With the NATO accession of two EU member states, Austria, Ireland and Malta find themselves further isolated, both as EU member States and as neutral countries. The shift in influence within the European security architecture toward states in northern and eastern Europe, brought about both by the new NATO members and by the Baltic States and Poland's reinforcement on the front-line, further risk marginalizing the WEP4. Indirectly, the relevance of the neutral group

might be also affected by NATO's new Indo-Pacific ambitions, as enshrined in the new Strategic Concept (para. 45) and evidenced by the participation of Indo-Pacific leaders in the 2022 Madrid NATO Summit and the Washington 75th anniversary summit (NATO, 2024a, para. 30).

All the WEP4 participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP),¹ which was founded in 1994. As a key element of NATO's political and military cooperation with non-member states in its periphery, the PfP aims to deepen interaction, cooperation and stability in Europe and to contribute to the overall goal of transparency. It has been seen as an instrument that prepares countries for membership to the Alliance, but also as a tool for strengthening relations with countries which may not want join NATO (NATO, 1995, para. 12 & 31 f.). Its very objectives – to increase stability and diminish threats to peace – have been undermined by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, its 30th anniversary was however somehow eclipsed by NATO's 75th anniversary in 2024.

In the WEP4, the war in Ukraine reopened a domestic conversation around neutrality on multiple levels and the opportunity to seek closer institutional ties with NATO. While public opinion remains in favor of neutrality, some security policy experts have questioned the long-term sustainability of

the status quo. Although the WEP4 countries have made clear that they would not join the Alliance anytime soon, their joint issuance of a 'non paper' in 2023 calling for more interaction with NATO (WEP4 Non-Paper, 2023; Löwenstein, 2024; Der Standard, 2024; *Ankasam*, 2024), including concrete proposals, has confirmed both the relevance of the current partnership to the WEP4 countries and the need to update and develop its content.

This paper aims to assess the current state of the partnership between NATO and the WEP4, against the background of current geopolitical challenges. It also aims to provide a framework for its redefinition in light of the new security context in Europe.

First, it focuses on commonalities and differences between the WEP4 states in their relations with NATO. Such national identity considerations have been either overlooked or treated as a 'technical' problem in the existing scholarship on NATO and its partners. Understanding how identities are constructed in relationships between NATO and partners can help in remedying this problem. The general question of how the Alliance's partners perceive NATO remains under-addressed (Chaban N. et al., 2018), therefore I hope to fill a gap.

Second, it raises and compares different formats that NATO could use to structure its relationship with the four countries.

Finally, on the basis of the WEP4's recent 'non paper', it explores the substance of a renewed partnership between the two parties and offers recommendations in that regard.

¹ Austria was the first to join the PfP in 1995, in parallel to becoming an EU member State that same year. Switzerland followed suit in 1996 and Ireland in 1999 (Ireland has always called its representation in Brussels "Mission to the Partnership for Peace" and not "to NATO"). Malta also joined the PFP in 1995, but suspended participation in 1996 before reactivating it in 2008.

This contribution, aimed at defense and security experts within the WEP4—particularly in Austria—NATO’s broader community, and scholars of European security, draws on both primary and secondary literature. It also incorporates qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with experts and officials from the WEP4 and former WEP5 countries, including Finland and Sweden. Interviewees included ambassadors, deputy chiefs of mission to NATO, policy staff from defense and foreign ministries, academics, and analysts. Additionally, I reviewed strategic documents related to the WEP4’s NATO partnership.

Nota bene: This policy analysis was initiated before Donald Trump’s (re)election and his inauguration in January 2025. Trump’s constant delegitimization of the Atlantic Alliance and its pillar Article V - and of multilateralism in general -, his doubts about NATO Allies’ will for collective defence, as well as his uncoordinated contacts with Russian President Vladimir Putin over Ukraine, pose an existential threat to NATO. This will have major implications on NATO’s partners in general and the WEP4 in particular. However, at the time of publication of this paper, we can only speculate about whether NATO is on the verge of a major reconfiguration or an irreversible decline. The oiip will re-address and re-evaluate the state of play during the second part of 2025, based on, inter alia, the outcome of the Hague Summit and the ongoing talks about a ceasefire in Ukraine.

1. WEP4 POSITION VIS-À-VIS NATO: COMMONALITIES AND NUANCES

From 2011 until 2022, the neutral and non-aligned Western European states Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, and Ireland were included in the WEP5 format. These states have traditionally shared the same democratic and social values with NATO members (Ivanov, 2017, 147-148). Although truly ‘like-minded’ and members of the “Western project” of which NATO has been seen itself as a cornerstone for preservation and promotion (Kolodziej, 2003, 4), the WEP5 countries preferred not to join the Alliance in the post-Cold War era. This stood in contrast to most Central and Eastern European countries which first joined NATO and then the EU. However, despite remaining outside of NATO, the WEP5 have shared the strategic goal of promoting stability in Europe.

Until 2022, the WEP5 maintained low levels of institutionalization within the Pfp. More than a value-based *integrationalist* rationale or an *influentialist* rationale, the WEP-5 have been guided by what Trine Flockhart calls an interventionist rationale. In this approach, partners cooperate with the Alliance in missions and interventions in areas of conflict and instability or in facing a number of security challenges, such as piracy, cyber threats or other security issues of relevance to the Alliance and its partners. This rationale is almost entirely interest-based. The functionality/outcome of this category is an enhanced capability to meet global and regional security challenges through cooperation (Flockhart, 2014, 27-28).

Whereas Finland and Sweden have long been labelled “informal allies” of NATO

(Wieslander, 2019, 197) and massively engaged into interoperability with NATO, the remaining WEP share limited defense capabilities. Although it seems to be proven that “NATO engages primarily with countries that are powerful relative to their neighbourhood” (Mićko, 2021, 7), this assessment certainly does not apply to Austria, Ireland and Malta, military “dwarves” in the Euro-Atlantic region, Switzerland being the only country to have strongly prioritized territorial defense as part of its security policy. Austria, Ireland - which has no real defense army - and Switzerland are far below the six ‘ambitious’ partners identified at the 2014 NATO Wales Summit as eligible for enhanced opportunities partnership for dialogue and cooperation (EOP), Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden, and Ukraine. Even the category of ‘Advanced Partners’ in which K.-H. Kamp and H. Reisinger and H. Larsen suggests to range Western-style democracies located in the most immediate European vicinity, stressing the benefits of their technological strengths and shared values to bolster joint resilience capacity (Kamp & Reisinger, 2013, 6; Larsen, 2021, 87-88), does not easily correspond to, for instance, Austria’s limited military capacity.

In each of the four countries, neutrality has been an essential factor in the formation of national identity. It is therefore not a surprise that the debate on NATO and neutrality has been quasi consubstantial to political life after the end of the Cold War (Wodak & Kovács, 2004).

Hope that the WEP4 would follow Sweden and Finland’s path and reconsider their position (Hoare, 2023) has now faded. None of the four countries plan on joining

NATO “any time soon” (McGreevy, 2022; Swiss Federal Council, 2022, 19).² In May 2022, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said that his country had no intention of following suit to Finland and Sweden and that “Austria was neutral, is neutral and remains neutral”. “For Austria, this question does not arise in this way. We also have a different history than Sweden and Finland” (Kurmayer, 2022). The current domestic context marked by far-right electoral successes should prevent any further move.

Today, the WEP-4 consider themselves “NATO’s closest partners in values” and have a “shared interest in Euro-Atlantic security” (WEP4 Non-Paper, 2023). They see themselves as “contributing partners”, first to NATO missions and operations (the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), the NATO Mission in Iraq), second to interoperability and capacity building through education and training, funding and expertise. They are committed to facilitating dialogue and cooperation between NATO and its partners. They are ready to act at the technological forefront and to establish opportunities for participation in the innovation and EDT (Emerging and Disruptive Technology) agendas (WEP4 Non-Paper, 2023). Despite these commonalities, the WEP4 still find themselves in very different situation with regards to NATO.

Geographically, Ireland and Malta are located at Europe’s remote periphery, with no proximity to the Russian Federation.

2 In March 2022, the three coalition government parties—Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party—all voted against a bill that called for a referendum about writing neutrality into the Irish constitution (Finn, 2022).

On the opposite, Switzerland and Austria are situated at the very heart of Europe, the latter being almost fully surrounded by NATO members — Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Italy. With the massive reinforcement of the Alliance's eastern flank, Vienna finds itself at a few hundred kilometers from NATO deployed combat formations. Should Russia decide to attack a NATO member country and target Allied troops stationed in Romania or Hungary, and should the Alliance choose to replicate, Austria could find itself at the edge of the conflict. The accidental fall of a missile on the Polish territory, on 15 November 2022, was indeed an alert.

Is there a common vision between Austria's 'I do it my way' ³ approach, Ireland's exceptionalism in the EU's periphery which M. Ewers-Peters ranges among the "blockers" (Ewers-Peters, 2022, 89), Malta's 'wait and see' approach, troubled with ups and downs ranging from participation to withdrawing and re-joining the PfP programme, and Switzerland, perhaps the most visible and active partner within the group? Is their remaining neutral or non-aligned status, their seemingly similar needs and requirements enough to formalize them as a group?

2. A "BUDDY SYSTEM", ⁴ BUT WITH WHOM?

"NATO should strive to work more efficiently with regional partnership frameworks", the

NATO 2030 report advised (NATO, 2020, 58). However, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, the question arises which format should govern NATO's relationship with the new WEP4. Are NATO's regional groupings for political consultations outdated? (Aronsson and Swaney 2022, 25). Should NATO englobe the four neutral in a broader format or should it approach the WEP4 as a 'minilateral' format? Four different modalities can be outlined.

2.1 All NATO partners in one group

Voices within NATO are advocating for a more flexible and wider grouping which would allow bringing in European like-minded partners such as WEP4, but also partners from further afield such as Australia and Japan (interview, NATO officer, Brussels, 13 Oct. 2023). There is still a lot of common ground between these nations, though the precise attendance at different discussions would depend on the issue at hand. The decision of the NATO Military Committee, on 14 December 2023, to grant the five Nations of the Partner Interoperability Advocacy Group (PIAG) – Australia, Austria, Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland - non-NATO Nation Status (NNN), is a step in that direction. Such status grants an individual security agreement that allows for the exchange of classified information and participation in NATO training and exercises (NATO, 2023b).

Such an approach has its merits. For instance, it distinguishes the PIAG & Indo-Pacific Partners, and established liberal democracies, from increasingly illiberal partners (Grgić, 2024, 4). However, merging Austria, Ireland and Switzerland with some of the so-called IP4 (Australia, Japan, South

³ I borrow to Hauser, 2019, 201.

⁴ The expression is borrowed to J. Simon, 2004, 30.

Korea and New Zealand) makes little sense in my opinion, especially since NATO is ostensibly moving eastward and deepening its relationships with key Indo-Pacific partners, in line with its 2022 Strategic Concept (Galic, 2024; Simonet, 2023a). The diversity of interests and perceptions of foreign policy challenges among partners highlights the need for stronger differentiation (Larsen, 2021).

2.2 The WEP4 as a group

In this configuration, the pre-2022 WEP5 continues to exist with a different membership (with Malta, minus Finland and Sweden). It is the wish of the four partners since, in December 2023, they reached out to NATO under the WEP4 denomination.

Such group format follows the pattern of NATO's engagement with the Asia-Pacific IP4 on issues of mutual interest since 2016 (Galic, 2024; Grgić, 2024, 3⁵). It also draws inspiration from a variety of 'minilateral' formats which have proliferated on NATO's eastern flank, such as the Nordic Baltic 8, a regional format for political consultations formally established in 2000 that engaged Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland,

Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden, or the Bucharest 9, that includes all allies on NATO's Eastern Flank—from Estonia in the North to Bulgaria in the South (Arts & Keil, 2021, 6⁶).

Such de facto regional partner grouping – a mini European “non-aligned” group – facilitates NATO's ability to gather its member states together with the four European like-minded partners and underscore the significance of their specific neutral status. It does not replace bilateral relations between NATO and the three partner countries, which remain of prime importance to the partners, but instead offers a complementary avenue of engagement.

Such a group approach exemplifies common views and interests beyond what a single country's voice could do and provide each of the said partners with much greater attention and space at NATO than any one of them alone would enjoy. It may also facilitate valuable diplomatic opportunities on the sidelines of high-level NATO meetings.

Continuing the WEP4 approach nevertheless presents a few drawbacks.

First, the extent to which the Alliance sees a possible WEP4 as a useful unit, rather than just a collection mechanism or a way to emphasize the importance of the neutral countries, remains unclear. Grouping the WEP4 under the same regional ‘roof’ appears irrelevant in many regards. As Gorana Grgić rightfully assesses, “the large

5 While the institutional basis of cooperation between NATO and the IP4 countries is still informed by bilateral ITTPs, NATO is also pursuing engagement with these partners as a minilateral group rather than as a collection of four individual partnerships. Regarding coordination on issues of mutual concern, in April 2022, NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners agreed the Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges to deepen cooperation in 10 priority areas, including cyber defence, new technology and hybrid threats (NATO, 2023a). At the Washington Summit in July 2024, The Allies and the IP4 further agreed on four joint projects focusing on assistance to Ukraine, artificial intelligence, combating disinformation, and cybersecurity (Moriyasu, 2024, interpreted by Grgić, 2024, 3).

6 Interestingly, the WEP-5 is completely absent from S. Arts and S. Keil's ambitious study, which further evidences the lack of visibility of NATO's neutral partners.

legacy groupings are losing their organizational importance” (Grgić, 2024, 3). NATO’s partnership policies have shifted from emphasizing geography to flexibility (NATO, 2011; Kamp & Reisinger, 2013, 5; Larsen, 2021, 85). As the NATO 2030 report advises, “NATO should make more use of thematic rather than only geographic groupings for advancing work on cross-cutting challenges” (NATO, 2020, 58). Moreover, as underlined earlier, asserting that Ireland and Malta belong to the same region is open to criticism. As for Austria, it seems much more connected with the Balkans than with Ireland and Malta.⁷

Second, artificially merging the WEP4 in one group might only make their divergences more visible. The ‘Western Europe’ geographic approach collides with NATO’s relationship with the EU (Rudischhauser, 2019) which is irrelevant for Switzerland. NATO and the EU are now more closely aligned in terms of their membership: 23 over 27 EU members also are NATO members; 96% of the EU population live in a NATO country. Of the four remaining non-NATO EU countries (Cyprus included), Austria is the only one located not at the EU’s northern or southern periphery, but in Europe’s very geographical heart. The fact that Ewers-Peters ranges Austria and Malta (“neutrals”, generally positive towards EU-NATO cooperation) and Ireland (“blocker”) in two different categories proves that, even among the non-NATO EU member states, the approach vis-à-vis NATO considerably

differs (Ewers-Peters, 2022, chap. 4 & 6).

The current developments in the ‘geopolitical EU’ are obviously a game-changer which might complicate a harmonious cooperation between EU WEP4 members (Austria, Ireland and Malta) and EU non-member WEP4 (Switzerland). Based on the Commission’s *ReArm Europe Plan* and proposal to provide member states with €150 billion in defense loans to invest “better and together” (European Council, 2025) and the White Paper for European Defense – Readiness 2030 presented on 19 March 2025, Brussels should be in a position to take key decisions before June.

2.3 Just Austria and Switzerland

Located in the same area and sharing a border, Austria and Switzerland have sometimes taken the lead, for instance when the two neutral partners featured among the thirteen partners “who have recently made particular political, operational and financial contributions to NATO-led operations” specially invited to the NATO Chicago Summit in May 2012 or when both issued a “Non-Paper on the Development of our Partnerships with NATO post-2014” which was circulated in the margins of the NATO Summit in Wales (Sept. 2014). However, this ‘duo’ approach would come up against the access and contribution to Europe’s defense (see above) and, in my opinion, presents little interest.

⁷ Like a number of European neutral countries (Sweden, Finland, Switzerland and Ireland), Austria joined the PFP program during the mid-1990s, mainly in order to be able to participate in the NATO-led operations in the Balkans.

2.4 The ‘One Partner, One Plan’ approach

In March 2021, the North Atlantic Council agreed on the “One Partner, One Plan” concept, establishing the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) as an overarching framework for NATO’s cooperation with individual partner countries (NATO, 2024c). Replacing the earlier Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) and Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the ITPP integrates various partnership tools into a cohesive plan with specific and measurable objectives over four-year cycles. Its negotiation offers an opportunity to align mutually beneficial initiatives (Grgić, 2024, 3). Switzerland and NATO have defined the objectives of their cooperation for 2023 and 2024 in such a non-legally binding ITPP concluded under the PfP.

2.5 My recommendation

Building on the second option (the WEP4 as a group), I argue that both NATO and the WEP4 as a whole have much to gain from a continued partnership. Such ‘mini-lateral’ arrangement can facilitate political dialogue and participation in missions, or operations, without the constraints of consensus rules or lengthy decision-making processes. It can provide opportunities for the ‘willing and capable’ to take swift action. It also creates connections between partners and between the group and key Allies and across institutions to foster greater consensus and interoperability among Euro-Atlantic states. It avoids the bilateralization of NATO’s engagement with partners (Arts & Keil, 2021, 10-11).

Former WEP5 members Finland and

Sweden could build on their history and experience to function as bridge builders between NATO and PfP countries. The two ‘junior’ members of the Atlantic Alliance could implement the Framework Nations Concept (FNC),⁸ proposed by Germany in 2013 and endorsed since then by the United Kingdom and Italy, as a viable flexible format within NATO. Voluntary and bottom-up, this approach enables individual NATO members, called framework nation, to work with a limited set of other members to fill critical capability and operational gaps. Non-NATO nations Austria, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland were invited to join the German FNC initiative in 2017 (Arts & Keil, 2021, 9 & 10; Glatz & Zapfe, 2017; Monaghan & Arnold, 2022; Major & Mölling, 2014). Finland and Sweden could be tasked with chairing dedicated formats supporting such formats.

3. “IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO”: HOW COULD THE WEP4 GET CLOSER TO NATO WITHOUT UNDERMINING THEIR NEUTRALITY?

Reforming NATO’s partnerships has long been a constant – and still unresolved – endeavor on the Alliance’s agenda. German Marshall Fund scholars Sophie Arts and Steven Keil see partnerships as “hampered by increasingly outdated frameworks, political barriers, and decreased institutional bandwidth,” just as Europe became less

8 NATO’s Framework Nations Concept encourages groups of nations within NATO to come together to “work multinationally for the joint development of forces and capabilities required by the Alliance, facilitated by a framework nation” (NATO, 2014).

secure (Arts & Keil, 2021, 2).

It is my belief that the war in Ukraine represents an important opportunity for WEP4 to strengthen their common security and address defense capability shortfalls. Their main challenge is “to grasp the extent of recent changes and fully seize the opportunities for collaboration” (Grgić, 2024, 4). The four neutral partners should benefit from the ongoing NATO ‘reset’ to re-visit and reinvigorate their partnership with the Alliance, to move it from a ‘security taker’/consumer-driven approach towards an interest-driven partnership, based on more converging interests but also, from the WEP4, political focus and support, proactive engagement and willingness to adequately resource its own efforts.

3.1 Can the WEP4 further adapt their neutrality?

In each of the WEP4 countries, the war in Ukraine has triggered a notable change of posture.

In 2022, Ireland announced it would double its relatively low annual defense spending by at least €500 million in the coming years, a 50 per cent increase on pre-war levels - a mere 0.3% of its GDP (Wall & Gallagher, 2022). Having joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence in 2019, despite not being a NATO member, Ireland, in 2022, provided €1 million to enhance cyber security in Ukraine, following a request circulated via NATO channels (Irish Partnership for Peace Delegation). Both former Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Micheál Martin and his Defence Minister Simon Coveney supported the evolution and ‘redefinition’ of the Irish

concept of neutrality (Leahy, 2022; Killeen, 2022). In June 2023, Ireland launched a reflection process on its neutrality. Irish citizens raised questions and expressed their concerns about neutrality – whether to maintain, modify, or discontinue it. A majority continues to support neutrality, but at the same time the Irish people is increasingly open to cooperating with other nations and their militaries to counter threats to Irish security (Leahy & Mc Laughlin, 2022).

In Austria, Defense Minister Klaudia Tanner reiterated her willingness to see her country participate in the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI),⁹ the air defense system planned by European NATO countries (Salzburger Nachrichten, 2023). In order to support military mobility and bringing troops eastward to the defense of NATO borders, at the start of Russian invasion, Austria pushed for adapting the European regulatory toolbox to allow “the Member States (to) permit the transit of military equipment, including accompanying personnel, through their territories, including their airspace”¹⁰ to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Austria’s

9 On 13 Oct. 2022, Defence Ministers from 14 NATO Allies and Finland came together to sign a Letter of Intent for the development of a “European Sky Shield Initiative”. Spearheaded by Germany, the cooperative initiative aims to create a European air and missile defence system through the common acquisition of air defence equipment and missiles by European nations. See Khvostova & Kryvosheiev, 2022.

10 Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/339 of 28 February 2022 on an assistance measure under the European Peace Facility to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, OJEU L61, 28.2.2022, Art. 5 para. 2, p. 4, <https://eurlex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022D0339&from=FR>.

“engaged neutrality” (Gärtner, 2017) is certainly not an outdated concept in Austria, but the accumulation of events and doctrinal changes since 24 February 2022 might nevertheless impel its reinterpretation (Jonsson, 2022). In May 2022, 50 prominent Austrians — from business, politics, academia and civil society — raised the issue publicly. In an open letter, they called on Federal President A. van der Bellen to independently examine whether the country’s policy of neutrality was fitting for the times (Walter, 2022). The long-awaited 2024 security strategy does not modify the current state of play vis-à-vis NATO but calls to “exhaust the possibilities of cooperating with NATO in the fields of conflict prevention, crisis management, and cooperative security in the interest of strengthening the interoperability of our military capacities” and to make full use of the Austrian ITTP (Austrian Security Strategy, 2024, 19).

Switzerland, so far, might be the WEP where the “flirtation with NATO” (IISS, 2023) has been pushed to its maximum. In Bern, the authorities were prompt to acknowledge the fundamental shift in European security and the severe breach of international law with lasting consequences for European security. Switzerland adopted the EU’s entire sanctions package against Russia (Euronews, 2022). The Swiss Federal Council envisaged “developments” in the cooperation with NATO, with far-reaching opportunities such as participation in NATO military exercises, partial participation in ‘high readiness’ forces such as NATO Reaction Force, or the opening of a NATO Liaison Office in Geneva (Swiss Federal Council, 2022, 22-24). In January 2023, 55% of the Swiss population (plus 10%

compared to 2021) expressed willingness to move closer to NATO (« rapprochement avec l’OTAN ») (Swiss Federal Council, 2023a; Szvircsev Tresch et al., 2023). On 22 March 2023, Swiss Federal Counsellor Viola Amherd, Head of the Defense Federal Department and the principal architect of the Swiss policy shift, participated for the first time ever in a meeting of the NAC and met with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. In July 2023, Switzerland (along with Austria) signed the letter of intent on the ESSI; “Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the concept of Switzerland joining a Europe-wide defense project was unimaginable”, the International Institute for Strategic Studies noted (Saunders, 2023).

The “flirt” should not turn to a “wild marriage”, though (Swissinfo, 2024). The neutrality pledge remains firmly anchored: it has led the Swiss government to deny requests from Denmark and Germany to provide Ukraine with certain military equipment, including Leopard 1 A5 tanks (Swiss Federal Council, 2023b). Efforts by Switzerland’s upper house to reform these rules were voted down in the lower house, in part reflecting a view held by the far-right Swiss People’s Party (SVP), which said recent actions have already put the state at risk of violating its neutrality policy (Swiss Parliament, 2023; Saunders, 2023). And the “Neutrality Initiative” which promoted a very restrictive and legalistic approach to neutrality (Möckli, 2024) showed that overcoming the status quo will not be an easy task.

The forthcoming 2025 Swiss Security Policy Strategy will set the tone. In its 68-page final report published on 26 August 2024,

the Swiss commission for security policy set up by the defense ministry the year before, traced a way that could inspire the other WEP4 countries. A rigid legal concept no longer seems appropriate: neutrality is an instrument and not a goal in itself. Neutrality policy must take precedence over neutrality law. As the Swiss commission recommends, a greater alignment of neutrality with the Charter of the United Nations and, thus, a distinction between the aggressor and the victim who has the right to defend himself, could be a path to follow. Adapting the concept of neutrality to current conditions would enable the neutral partners to formulate their position on possible future conflicts (China-Taiwan, Russia-NATO) in good time, and to anticipate any demands made on them (Swiss Federal Defense Department, 2024, 29). Concretely, the Commission recommended encouraging and guaranteeing access to cooperation projects developed by NATO and deepening the cooperation with NATO in order to reach a joint defense capability and a real defense cooperation.

3.2 Should the PfP evolve to provide WEP4 with further opportunities?

As the main “partnership basket”, can the PfP provide the political elites of the neutral states with new opportunities to conduct their foreign and security policy and frame the norm of neutrality in different ways, as Beyer and Hofmann suggest? (2011, 293)? Can it make pragmatism easier?

Despite successive reforms aiming at making partnership consultation mechanisms stronger and substance-focused

– such as, in 2011, the so-called “Berlin Package (Appathurai, 2014, 39) –, the PfP seems largely outdated and overcome by new realities. When it was introduced in the 1990s, it was designed to accommodate emerging democracies from Eastern Europe and Central Asia but consequently expanded to include more than thirty states with varying interests and aspirations. After three decades, and with the introduction of many differentiated cooperation formats, the PfP appears like an old suit turned too broad. With the war in Ukraine, the different formats and contents of partnership with NATO have been relegated to the background. Today, the emphasis is on common defense (Swiss Federal Defense Department, 2024, 35).

3.3 The new priorities of the WEP4: the 2023 non-paper

What are the WEP4’s expectations vis-à-vis NATO? What is this “demand side” or partner views about the value of cooperating with NATO which, according to Aronsson and Swaney, is missing in the literature on NATO (2022, 12)?

In order to implement and further expand their defense cooperation with NATO, the WEP4 must define expectations regarding their own defense capability, draw up a catalog of counterpart services for cooperation partners and guarantee the necessary human and financial resources. They should be recognized not only as recipients of Allied support, but also as providers. That was the purpose of the “positive agenda” put forward by the WEP4 in December 2023. The 2023 non-paper highlights five priorities to further promote the cooperation:

- “Frequent bilateral exchanges with Allies and partners, as WEP4 (and PIAG). Regular exchange and briefings on topics of interest, e.g. RBIO,¹¹ ESC¹² or EDTs¹³. In particular, high-level meetings, tailored briefings and frequent exchanges with PASP.”¹⁴ Regular political consultations on security issues, including at ministerial level, have been further enhanced by the Swiss group of experts (Swiss Federal Defense Department, 2024, 40).
- “Privileged access to documents and information, based on mutual trust and cooperation and existing security agreements (including NNN-status for WEP4).”
- Early engagement on the shaping of new norms and policies. Including partners before decisions are already made broadens the legitimacy of new norms, and facilitates partners’ willingness to subscribe to such norms. Dialogue can aggregate the views and expertise of different partners, ultimately leading to better policy outcomes.” NATO should make use of the WEP4 to set up the Alliance’s policies and expectations (Dinev Ivanov, 2017, 135).
- “Opportunities to participate in additional exercises to improve interoperability and high-level exercises such as CMX.¹⁵” Joint exercises are indeed crucial for prepare for a crisis situation, and to really test and improve interoperability. Not all exercises involve the participation of troops. There are also simulation and staff exercises on possible scenarios and their reactions.

When the WEP4 take part in such multi-lateral exercises, they do so as partners, not allies.

- “Opportunities to participate in bodies and formats working on innovation and EDTs, such as DIANA, the Innovation Funds, the Cyber Pledge and instruments like the resilience goals.” Given the growing importance of influence operations and disinformation in hybrid warfare, particularly as a means of weakening democracies, it is no surprise to see WEP4 willing to contribute with appropriate options for analysis, prevention and defense against such attacks.

Reinforced cooperation with NATO Centers for Excellence is not mentioned but would have been useful (Swiss Federal Defense Department, 2024, 33), just like the dispatch of temporary representatives to NATO headquarters and institutions, as the Swiss Armed Forces extensively do (Swiss Federal Center, 2024, 24).

3.4 NATO’s answer to the 2023 ‘Non Paper’

“What does the Alliance actually owe its partners?” The question asked by Rebecca Moore in her 2017 book on NATO’s Return to Europe (168) remains acute in 2025, particularly for the WEP4. “NATO should review and reinvigorate existing partnerships by shifting from the current demand-driven approach, in which partner countries determine the scope and depth of their partnership, to an interest-driven approach, in which NATO itself prioritizes what it does with partners based on strategic needs and limited resources”, the NATO 2030 report said (NATO, 2020, 58). In

11 Rules-based international order.

12 Emerging Security Challenges.

13 Emerging Security Challenges.

14 NATO’s Political Affairs and Security Policy Division.

15 Crisis Management Exercises.

2023, the WEP4 took the initiative, and NATO still needs to answer. However, the Alliance's lack of formal reaction so far is no surprise: each partner decides individually what kind of partnership it wants with NATO; hence the fact that NATO's expectations are not concretely formulated, as it is up to the WEP4 to define their mode of cooperation, as well as its pace, scope, intensity, priorities and individual objectives.

"NATO's partnerships are crucial instruments of cooperative security", the NATO 2030 report reaffirms (NATO, 2020, 57). But this was before the Russian invasion and, in the meantime, the 'cooperative security' pillar seems to have lost traction compared to the 'deterrence and defense' one. Since the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine, NATO has undertaken the largest reinforcement of its deterrence and defense since the end of the Cold War and has indeed emerged as the more important agent of collective military action in Europe and "the strongest Alliance in history" (NATO, 2024a, para. 1). The WEP4 will have to deal with a reinvigorated Atlantic Alliance with the wind in its sails, completely absorbed by its new deterrence posture in Europe (Simonet, 2023a). There is a risk that NATO might be neglecting its European neutral partners which, beyond urgent technical needs such as transit of military equipment and access to airspaces, are not of a crucial importance with regard to the defense of the Alliance's eastern borders. This will make it more difficult for countries at the periphery to attract NATO's attention. Quite obviously, the Washington Summit Declaration issued on 10 July 2024 did not say a word about the WEP4, although it prominently mentioned the Asia-Pacific partners and the partnership with the EU (para. 29 & 30).

To avoid such risk, the Atlantic Alliance should take a more proactive approach to engagement – what Joe Kyle calls a 'Proactive

Partnership for Peace' (Kyle, 2019, 67)? The WEP4 can definitely contribute to NATO's liberal-order-building project (Moore, 2017, 167 f.) at a time when it is seriously threatened by the new U.S. administration. The WEP4 can help the Alliance confront systemic competition from a position of strength that is "firmly rooted in transatlantic solidarity." (Aronsson & Swaney, 2022, 30). The four partners could be seen as possible pioneers in relation to neutrality.

CONCLUSION

The summit scheduled to take place on 24 and 25 June 2025 at the World Forum in The Hague could well be NATO's last. Quite obviously, it is highly unlikely that NATO partners and especially the WEP4 will feature prominently at the agenda of the discussion, let alone receive an answer to their 2023 non-paper. Faced with an unprecedented legitimization crisis, the Allies must – and will certainly – focus on the 'bare necessity' and on NATO's own survival.

In general, the current time is a delicate one for Austria.

- **NATO's refocusing on its "core business" – collective defense and deterrence – and the least attention given to crisis management in the 2022 Strategic Concept, restrict Austria's room for maneuver.** Its cooperation with NATO has been focusing on crisis management, peace-support operations in the Balkans, co-shaping the cooperative security activities in the political field and improving interoperability. "An exclusive focus on both the East and on collective defense would reduce cooperative security as

well as the role of partners”, H. Gärtner premonitory wrote in 2017. Austria should be vigilant in keeping ‘cooperation’ and ‘partnership’ on NATO’s agenda but, for the reasons exposed above, 2025 should offer little room for manoeuvre.

- Due to the dangers facing Europe, there seems to be no alternative to a **common defense capability** including the territory of the WEP4, especially Austria and Switzerland, in its defense planning (Swiss Federal Defense Department, 2024, 39). Austria should act as a facilitator. **It should make sure not to represent a security gap for European security, particularly when it comes to infrastructures and equipment which are critical for the whole of Europe.** In that regard, the ban on re-exporting military equipment purchased in the four countries is not understood and no longer accepted (Swiss Federal Defense Department, 2024, 34). Even if Switzerland is much more concerned than Austria, the Vienna authorities may consider lifting re-export ban for democratic states within and outside the EU and NATO.
- At the same time, **Austria might contribute to lowering NATO’s excessive ambition**, in a context where the Atlantic Alliance could be tempted to invoke the historic disruption of the war in Ukraine to more actively promote its ways and means towards its partners. For instance, concepts like Hamilton’s “forward resilience”¹⁶ or the “Secure Neighborhood Initiative” (SNI) promoted by former NATO Deputy

Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow,¹⁷ stretch the mandate of a more assertive Atlantic Alliance to its maximum and would require careful examination. Due to its geographical situation, Austria could face further pressure to ensure the swift movement of NATO military personnel and their equipment, which could challenge its neutral status. For instance, the calls from the Baltic States and other Allies in close proximity to Russia for a ‘Military Schengen Zone’, “something that would allow a military convoy to move across Europe as fast as a migrant is able to move across Europe”, in the words of Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the outgoing US Army Europe Commander (Hudson, 2017; Jan & Rizzo, 2017), is not to be rejected per se but requires scrutiny in the way it might be implemented.

- **Cooperation with NATO and the EU** is not mutually exclusive, quite the contrary. NATO and the EU work closely together, pursuing the same complementary tasks. More than ever, Austria can act as a bridge-builder between the two ensembles. However, as we underlined, the EU finds itself at the same crossroad. The lines are moving on formerly controversial issues such as joint indebtedness and mutualization to boost European defense. Denmark and Finland, formerly members of the “frugal” clan, said they are now open to the idea. The smooth reform of the Schuldenbremse in Germany confirms that Germany is now in favor of taking

16 “Projecting resilience capacities forward to vulnerable democratic partners” (Hamilton, 2022a, 2-3), a task in which NATO should embark the EU (Hamilton, 2022b, 137).

17 “Given the stakes, allies should use NATO’s new Strategic Concept to adopt a Secure Neighborhood Initiative (SNI) that would extend the Alliance’s security protection to non-members along Russia’s borders” (Vershbow, 2022).

on more debt (59% of the German population, according to a poll commissioned by the media ARD - Riesebeck, 2025).

While defending budgetary orthodoxy, Austria should carefully navigate this change of mindset among the 27 and push for a prudent approach.

- Trump and his electors want peace, Putin looks forward to lowering the pressure of the war economy, the rest of the world wants transaction and pragmatism. Therefore, **transforming the EU into a new “NATO without the U.S.” might not be in Europe’s long-term interest.** Austria should also be vigilant with regards to the several **‘coalitions of the willing’ that are emerging to move European defence forward** (France-and UK -driven ‘reassurance force’ in Ukraine, Weimar+ format). While offering valuable formats for further more assertive action, these initiatives might, on the longer term, damage Europe’s cohesion and push neutral and ‘frugal’ countries like Austria, wrongly seen as unsuitable for this quantum leap, to the extreme outside of Europe’s ‘concentric circles’.
- **Switzerland’s new security strategy**, to be definitively adopted by the end of 2025, will pave the road. Austria’s own strategy, issued in 2024 after years of brainstorming, might have come too soon and does not fully reflect the variety of challenges that lies ahead in 2025. So far, the Swiss strategy identifies defense against hybrid attacks and **cooperation with NATO and neighbouring countries** as the main priorities (SWI, 2024), but it will also take full measure of the “after shock” of Trump’s second mandate and its impact on NATO and Europe, as well as the outcome of the June Hague summit. Therefore, Switzerland’s position should be carefully observed and might,

to a certain extent, drive the WEP4 approach with regards to NATO or – in the worst case scenario which would be the desintegration of the Alliance at the June meeting – its adaptation and re-orientation.

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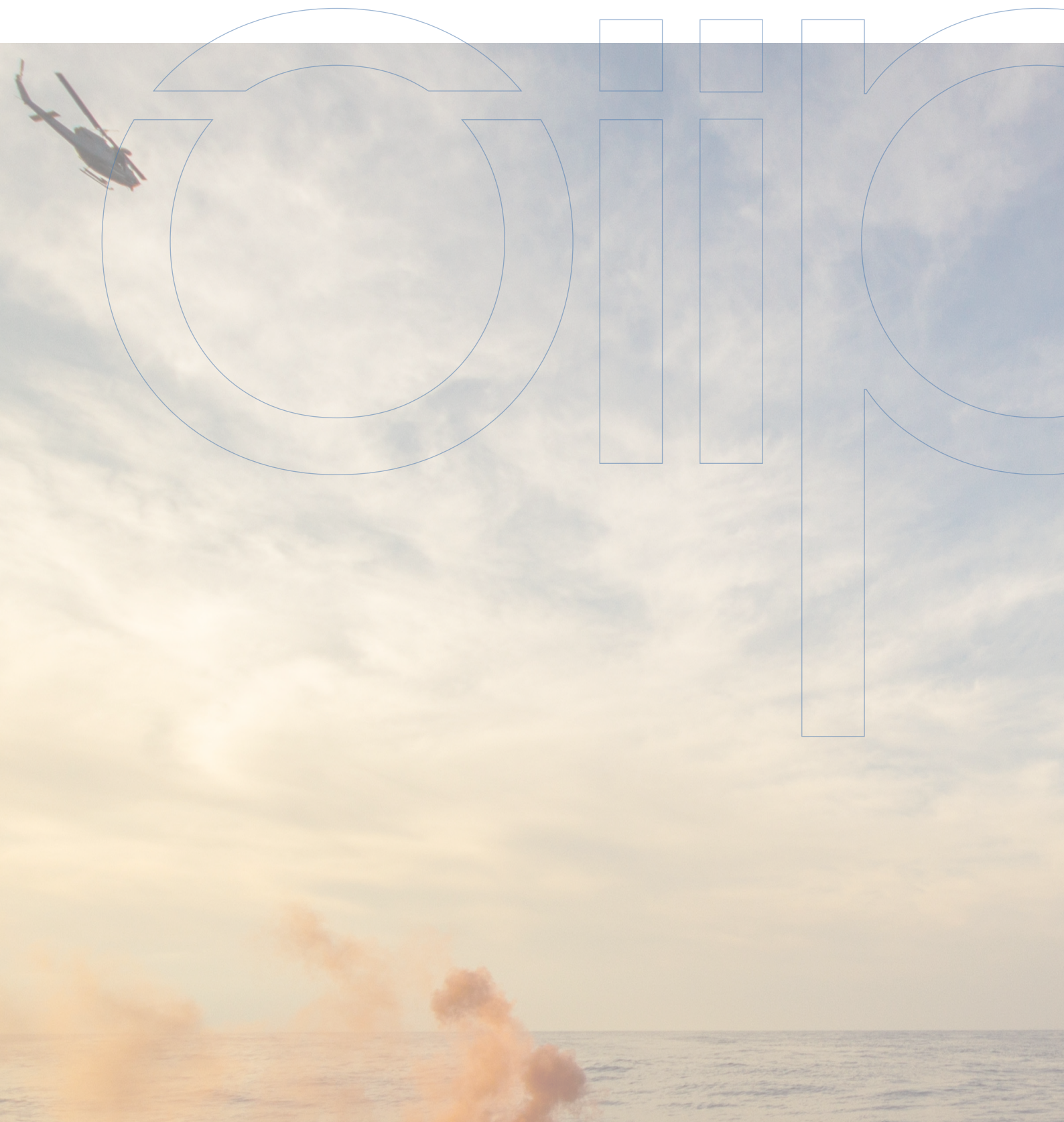
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