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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Delegations  
Subject: Digital Partnerships in Action: Economic and Technological Security in Practice  
- Briefing note

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Delegations will find attached a Briefing note prepared by the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), with a view to the discussion by the Working Party on Telecommunications and Information Society at its meeting on 19 February 2026<sup>1</sup>.

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## Digital Partnerships in Action

### Economic and Technological Security in Practice

*Briefing Note, February 2026*

#### Executive Summary

Digital Partnerships have become key tools of the European Union's (EU) external policy in an era characterised by geopolitical competition over technology. As digital infrastructures, emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), and standards increasingly influence global power dynamics, the EU has transitioned from a primarily values-driven digital diplomacy towards an integrated strategy that combines normative leadership with economic security aims. This shift reflects a fundamental change in international politics, whereby technological capability now directly impacts economic resilience, strategic independence, and geopolitical influence.

The EU's International Digital Strategy emphasises partnerships with trusted countries as essential tools to enhance competitiveness, reduce strategic dependencies, and influence global digital governance. Likewise, initiatives such as the Horizon Europe-funded INPACE Hub demonstrate how this strategy can be put into practice through continuous, multi-stakeholder cooperation platforms that link policymakers, industry, and research entities across regions.

To succeed, however, Digital Partnerships must progress from mere declarations towards effective implementation, institutional coordination, and tangible results. When properly executed, they can act as strategic infrastructure, helping Europe strengthen its technological foundation, promote shared standards, and reaffirm its role as a dependable partner in an increasingly fragmented global digital landscape.

#### Strategic Context: Why Digital Partnerships Matter Now

Technological change is reshaping geopolitics. Control over advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), semiconductors, quantum computing, and secure connectivity is becoming increasingly tied to economic competitiveness, military strength, and political influence. Meanwhile, global governance of digital technologies remains divided, with overlapping regulatory frameworks, conflicting standards, and mounting geopolitical tensions.

The states that shape technological ecosystems today will shape global governance tomorrow. Major powers are increasingly treating technology partnerships as instruments of geopolitical alignment.

These dynamics have revealed structural vulnerabilities in global supply chains and technological dependencies. Economic interdependence, once seen mainly as a source of efficiency, is now recognised as a potential pathway for coercion or instability. As a result, economic security has become a key organising principle of EU external policy. Digital Partnerships directly address this shift. They establish structured frameworks through which Europe can collaborate with trusted partners to diversify dependencies, harmonise standards, and enhance resilience.



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## From Normative Digital Diplomacy to Economic Security Diplomacy

EU digital diplomacy has traditionally focused on universal values such as human rights, privacy, and open internet governance. While these principles are still core, policy discussions increasingly include economic security issues, like supply chain resilience, technological sovereignty, and competitiveness in strategic sectors.

This recalibration does not indicate a departure from values. Instead, it reflects the realisation that values necessitate capabilities to be upheld. Secure infrastructure, strong innovation ecosystems, and dependable partnerships are essential to safeguarding democratic norms in the digital sphere. The emerging EU approach thus combines normative commitments with strategic pragmatism, integrating principles within a broader geoeconomic framework.

Digital Partnerships are essential to this hybrid model. They facilitate regulatory alignment, collaborative research, infrastructure cooperation, and standards development, turning high-level principles into practical forms of collaboration.

## EU International Digital Strategy: Architecture and Instruments

The EU's International Digital Strategy provides the institutional framework for this approach. It seeks to:

- deepen existing Digital Partnerships and Dialogues,
- establish a global network of cooperation frameworks,
- strengthen competitiveness and secure digital ecosystems,
- promote a rules-based digital order aligned with EU values.

A key innovation is the EU Tech Business Offer, which combines public investment, private sector involvement, regulatory cooperation, and capacity-building into customised packages for partner countries. This modular approach enables the EU to coordinate technological collaboration with partner priorities while promoting mutual benefits.

The strategy positions Europe as a stable and predictable partner, emphasising transparency, trust, and long-term engagement as distinguishing features of its global digital role. The strategy also signals that digital diplomacy is no longer premised on sectoral policies but systemic statecraft.

## Strategic Domains of Cooperation

Digital Partnerships invariably focus on technological domains that will shape future power dynamics:

- emerging technologies such as AI, semiconductors, and quantum computing,
- cybersecurity and secure digital infrastructure,
- digital public infrastructure and digital identity systems,
- online platforms and governance frameworks.

Cooperation in these areas strengthens innovation capacity, reduces systemic risks, and promotes interoperability. It also allows partners to coordinate standards and governance approaches, thereby influencing global technological trajectories.



## INPACE as a Case Study in Implementation

The INPACE project illustrates how Digital Partnerships can be turned into a practical operation. As a Horizon Europe initiative, it creates a multi-stakeholder Indo-Pacific European Hub for cooperation, linking policymakers, researchers, industry representatives, and civil society actors to promote ongoing cooperation.

INPACE illustrates three key lessons:

1. **Institutionalisation matters:** durable cooperation mechanisms build trust and continuity.
2. **Multi-stakeholder engagement is essential:** innovation and governance depend on collaboration between public and private actors.
3. **Regional engagement strengthens resilience:** diversified partnerships reduce dependency risks and expand strategic influence.

Such initiatives function as diplomatic infrastructure, enabling Europe to operationalise its strategic objectives through concrete networks and projects.

## Implementation Challenges

Despite strong strategic framing, the effectiveness of Digital Partnerships will depend on execution. Key challenges include:

- ensuring coordination across EU institutions and Member States,
- integrating public and private investment instruments,
- balancing openness with resilience and risk management,
- establishing measurable benchmarks for partnership outcomes.

Without sustained resources, political will, and governance coherence, partnerships risk remaining largely declaratory. Hence, implementation capacity will be the decisive factor determining success.

## Strategic Takeaways

- Digital Partnerships should be treated as strategic infrastructure for economic digital diplomacy rather than optional instruments of cooperation.
- Economic security diplomacy is becoming a structural feature of International Relations.
- Europe's comparative advantage lies in combining trusted governance with technological collaboration.
- Scaling models such as INPACE can enhance EU resilience and diplomatic standing.

## Conclusion

Digital Partnerships are emerging as cornerstone instruments of EU external action. They enable the Union to navigate a world defined by technological competition, geopolitical fragmentation, and systemic risk. By combining normative leadership with economic security strategy, the EU is developing a distinctive model of digital diplomacy grounded in trusted cooperation. If supported by sustained investment, institutional coordination, and clear implementation mechanisms, Digital Partnerships can strengthen Europe's technological capacity, reduce vulnerabilities, and position it as a central actor in shaping the global digital order. In a technologically competitive world, the strength of Europe's partnerships will thus increasingly determine the strength of Europe's power.

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