



EXPANDING NATO'S PARTNERSHIPS IN THE SOUTHERN REGION. WHY AND HOW?

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A joint paper by





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A joint paper by the NATO Defense College Foundation and
the Policy Center for the New South

Edited by Umberto Profazio

With contributions from Eleonora Ardemagni, Nuray Atmaca, Rachid El Houdaigui, Kidane Kiros and Alessandro Politi

Index

1. Introduction	3
Umberto Profazio	
2. The Mediterranean Dialogue	7
<i>2.1 Navigating the ever-changing landscape in the Western Mediterranean</i>	7
Umberto Profazio	
<i>2.2 Daring new formats in the East Mediterranean</i>	11
Nuray Atmaca	
<i>2.3 Changes in the Southern Mediterranean:</i>	15
<i>Challenges and opportunities for the NATO Partnership</i>	
Rachid El Houdaigui	
3. The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative	23
<i>3.1 The ICI in the general Gulf realignment</i>	23
Eleonora Ardemagni	
4. The African Union	28
<i>4.1 The Horn of Africa: A Region for AU-NATO Cooperation</i>	28
Kidane Kiros	
5. Conclusions	37
Alessandro Politi	
6. Bibliography	I

INTRODUCTION

Umberto Profazio¹

In the last few months, the global order has been going through some fundamental changes which are affecting the competition between the great powers and have a direct impact on their relations with regional partners. Emerging challenges such as the climate change, cyberwarfare and artificial intelligence, hybrid warfare and non-state actors are shaping a new world that is profoundly different compared to the post-9/11 era, where the war on terrorism opened the gates to what have been successfully described as ‘forever wars’, which have forced the US and its allies to be engaged in the greater Middle East indefinitely.

The withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021 marked not only the end of a 20-year military presence in the country, but also the end of an era in which different administrations have spent an incredible amount of resources and time focusing on nation-building. Facing domestic and international criticism after the broadcasting of chaotic scenes during the evacuation operations at the Hamid Karzai International Airport (which drew interesting parallels with the fall of Saigon in 1975), US President Joe Biden defended his decision to move out the troops from Afghanistan, saying that the decision ‘is not just about Afghanistan, it’s about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries’².

Driven by the emerging great-power competition with China and Russia, the US decision to end its nation-building efforts in the Middle East is a symptom of a gradual disengagement of Washington from the region, presumably to shift resources towards the Indo-Pacific. Recently confirmed by the announcement of the end of the US combat mission in Iraq³, the new policy course set by Biden and his administration raise important questions on the future role of NATO in the region, where strategic competitors are making progress, reaching out to partners disillusioned by what they perceive as a US retrenchment. Russia for example has been

¹ Umberto Profazio is Maghreb Analyst at the NATO Defence College Foundation (NDCF) and Associate Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

² Amanda Macias, ‘Biden says the era of US nation building is over as he marks the end of the Afghanistan war’, 31 August 2021, CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/31/biden-addresses-the-end-of-the-us-war-in-afghanistan.html>

³ Umberto Profazio, ‘As elections approach, the US walk a thin line in Iraq’, 30 July 2021, Gulf Strategic Trends, NATO Defence College Foundation. <https://www.natofoundation.org/gulf/iraqi-elections-and-the-us-thin-line/>

particularly eager to exploit the vacuum created in several conflict hotbeds, such as Libya, Syria and different Sahel countries for example, to expand its military presence. China's relations with the region has so far been limited to the economic domain, but the medical diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic also offer Beijing the opportunity to make significant inroads.

More importantly, the rise of the regional powers and the return of the power politics is the direct result of these latest developments. Passing from an era of US hegemony to a multipolar order, the Middle East and North Africa has been affected by power politics and competition that are threatening stability in NATO's immediate neighbourhood. For this reason, the commitment of NATO to its partners in the region remains crucial, but its form is likely to be different from the one offered in the last few decades. NATO has already two mechanisms in place to carry out cooperative security tasks with its southern partners: the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). There has been some recent criticism about the inaction and passive stance that have prevented these partnerships from going further⁴. According to some observers, the ICI and the MD 'continue to fall short of their intended purpose and lack a clear agenda for the future'⁵.

Facing these shortcomings, NATO needs to revamp its partnership, offering valuable alternatives to countries in the region. Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg already offered an anticipation of what the future of NATO's commitment to its partners in the South would look like. Answering to a question about the Mediterranean region and the southern front after the meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government in Brussels on 14 June 2021, Stoltenberg said that 'the best way to stabilise our neighbourhood is to train and build local capacity'⁶. As NATO moves towards a new era in which 'prevention is better than intervention'⁷, Defence Capacity Building (DCB) will likely represent a main pillar of NATO's strategy in the south, where a DCB package is already in place for partners such as Jordan, Iraq and Tunisia. Train, advise and equip local forces is now considered a better way to stabilise the southern flank, while

⁴ 'NATO already has a structure in place to improve cooperation with partners in this part of the world but has done little to enhance these relationships in recent years'. Like Coffey, 'What does the future hold for NATO in MENA?', Research & Studies, Arab News, https://www.arabnews.com/sites/default/files/nato_mena_region.pdf

⁵ They are also 'less effective when it comes to driving actual outcomes that benefit NATO's interests or strategy, or those of its partner countries'. Sophie Arts, Steven Keil, 'Flexible Security Arrangement and the Future of NATO Partnerships', February 2021, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Arts%2520%2526%2520Keil%2520-%2520NATO%2520partnerships%2520formats.pdf>

⁶ Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government, 14 June 2021, NATO. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_184959.htm

⁷ Press Conference, cit.

at the same time limiting NATO's military presence which can be considered controversial in very peculiar contexts.

The aim of this joint paper, result of the efforts of the NATO Defence College Foundation and the Policy Center for the New South, is to look at the current state of NATO's partnership with the South. Its aim is to explain main reasons behind the need to rethink the partnerships and expand them, the cost of inaction and the associated risks. Following this brief introduction, the paper will focus on the existing partnerships according to three main geographical areas of interest to NATO: the Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf region and Africa. Given the fact that 'transatlantic security cannot be divorced from security in the Mediterranean'⁸, stability in this region is crucial for NATO. Since the collapse of the bipolar order, the region has attempted to institutionalize political, economic and strategic relationships between its North and South shores through a range of regulatory instruments, including the MD, the Partner Countries for Peace process within OSCE, the 5+5 forum, the Barcelona process and the Union for the Mediterranean. While imperfect, these institutional proceedings are attempts by neighbouring states to address common geopolitical and geo-economic issues. Yet structural and aggravating factors today undermine the capacity of these instruments to meet stated objectives.

The Mediterranean is indeed confronted with new geopolitical reality and pressing emergencies that call for a unifying project designed to foster peace and stability and create an area of common prosperity between North and South. A precondition to the revival of momentum between both shores, however, is a wide-ranging debate between Mediterranean countries to build on achievements, correct imperfections and adapt institutional frameworks to emerging needs.

Given its natural resources and strategic location between the East and the West, the Gulf region is increasingly important in the global balance of power. Maritime security and protection of energy infrastructures are shared interests between NATO and its partners, which have also legitimate concerns about the rise of Iran on the regional landscape, its use of local proxies and its nuclear program, on which the new administrations in both Teheran and

⁸ Ian Lesser, Charlotte Brandsma, Laura Basagni and Bruno L  t  , "The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. Perspectives on Security, Strategy and Partnership, June 2018, The German Marshall Fund of the United States". https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/The_future_of_NATO%2527s_MD_INTERACTIVE_FINAL_1705.pdf

Washington are still negotiating. Given their relative stability and ambitious programmes of defence modernisation, members of the ICI seem to be perfect candidates to ensure stability, passing from a security consumer to a security provider perspective that could prove instrumental for NATO's broader interests in the region. However, conflicting geopolitical ambitions and divisive political agendas represent significant hurdles towards this goal. Despite recent signs of reconciliation, the main actors involved seem still engaged in a zero-sum game that has also its reverberations in the Mediterranean Sea.

The final case study is dedicated to the African continent. The security and stability of NATO's immediate neighbourhood cannot be separate from the developments in Africa, where most of the emerging challenges mentioned before, including climate change, mass migration and non-state actors, are present. From the Horn of Africa to the Sahel region, the arc of instability in the continent represent a serious security threat to the immediate neighbourhood, including North Africa, with inevitable repercussion on the southern flank of NATO. To face the emerging threats coming from the south, an enhanced and comprehensive cooperation framework is thus needed, engaging not only with the African Union (AU), but also the different regional organisations present in the African continent that could prove instrumental to address security challenges in collaboration with NATO.

The conclusive part of this joint paper will reflect on the work done so far by the North Atlantic Alliance and its partners in the southern neighbourhood, highlighting the main obstacles that prevent the partnership from being effective and reinforce mutual trusts. While there is still some space for improvement, the window of opportunity is closing fast, as strategic competitors are advancing their interests in the area taking advantage of the perceived withdrawal of the US and the frequent divisions emerging from within the EU and its perceived inaction in the area. A joint effort to propose possible solutions would be made in order to answer to the question 'how' to expand NATO's partnership in the South, including several references and recommendation to energise the MD, the ICI and reinforce partnerships in the Southern neighbourhood.

2. THE MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUE

2.1 Navigating the ever-changing landscape in the Western Mediterranean

Umberto Profazio

Since its launch in 1994, the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) has represented a forum for cooperation between NATO and its partners on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Basin, increasing opportunities for synergy and collaboration. Including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, the partnership has gradually evolved and expanded according to the interests of the partner countries and the most relevant political developments in the region, showing a high degree of flexibility. For example, Algeria joined in 2000, the year in which the civil war that affected the country and was known as '*decennie noire*' (black decade), started winding down. More in general, the MD showed its resilience, being able to navigate the ever-changing regional landscape, from the end of the Cold War to the upheaval associated to the Arab uprisings that erupted in 2011, commonly known as the Arab Spring. During this period, and particularly after the 9/11 attacks, terrorism represented the main prism through which NATO and its partners interpreted developments in the region, as well as the main point of convergence for increasing security cooperation.

A watershed moment, the Arab Spring raised new hopes about a more inclusive future for the people of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Nevertheless, the wind of changes that blew on the region at the beginning of the last decade did not last long and the geopolitical struggle between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces undermined the political transitions in many countries.

Representing a considerable exception in the region, Tunisia has been able to escape this fate. In 2014 Tunis had already entered a NATO Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) focused on counterterrorism and border security. However, after a string of terrorist attacks in 2015 threatened to derail the transition, NATO decided to increase its efforts to

reinforce Tunisia's defence capacities, as a way to preserve the local democratic experiment while projecting stability beyond its borders at the same time. The establishment of an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia, announced by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in July 2016 and aimed at providing support to Tunisian Special Forces, was meant to support Tunisia's counterterrorism and intelligence, focusing on the phenomenon of Tunisian foreign fighters⁹, while at the same time deepening the cooperation between NATO and Tunis.

Nevertheless, the Intelligence Fusion Centre never materialized, and plans for the establishment of a Joint Command Centre for joint military operations were scrapped after the Tunisian government rejected a NATO grant of US\$3,7 million in 2018. Domestic politics and external factors help explain Tunisia's ambiguous stance, and well as its reluctance to deepen its partnership with NATO¹⁰. Nevertheless, cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance remains crucial in modernizing defence and security institutions. For this reason, both parts found in the Defence-Capacity Building (DCB) package a less intrusive way of moving the cooperation to the next level. Approved in 2018, the DCB package for Tunisia is a demand-driven and tailored set of initiatives aimed at reinforcing intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities. It includes a training mission aimed at developing Tunisia's defence capabilities in the areas of defence, disposal of IEDs and enhanced transparency in resource management¹¹.

Alongside its partnership with NATO, bilateral cooperation with NATO member states is also important for capacity building of the Tunisian security sector. Designated by the US as Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA)¹², Tunisia has received increasing security assistance from Washington since 2015, which helped bolstering its defence capabilities to mitigate the terrorist threat¹³. Nevertheless, the strategic importance of Tunisia goes well beyond the war on terrorism.

⁹ Estimates in 2016 said that there were at least 5.000 Tunisian fighters in Iraq, Libya and Syria. Most of them had joined the ranks of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL). Umberto Profazio, 'Projecting Stability beyond NATO's borders: an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia, Maghreb Strategic Trends, July 2016, NATO Defence College Foundation.

¹⁰ Umberto Profazio, 'Tunisia's reluctant partnership with NATO', 6 April 2018, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

¹¹ Umberto Profazio, NATO's Strategic Directions towards Tunisia, Maghreb Strategic Trends, July 2018, NATO Defence College Foundation. For more on the DCB package on Tunisia, see Tunisia, Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, NATO, accessed on 14 June 2021: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132756.htm

¹² The MNNA status offers tangible privileges, such as eligibility for training, loans of equipment for cooperative research and development and foreign military financing for commercial leasing of several defence articles.

¹³ From 2011 to 2020 Tunisia has received a total US\$815 million in US military aid, according to the Security Assistance Monitor. Security Assistance Database, accessed on 14 June 2021: <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>. Border protection has been the focus so far, with US companies such as BTP and AECOM awarded a contract to install an electronic security surveillance system on Tunisia's border with Libya. The first

This has become more evident after the latest round of fighting in Libya, where power projection by Russia represented an immediate threat for NATO on its southern flank. In this context, the activities conducted by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) are particularly telling: following the transfer of Russian military aircraft (including MiG-29 and Sukhoi Su-24) to the Jufra airbase in Libya in May 2020, the USA reaffirmed the importance of their bilateral partnership with Tunisia. The deployment of the US Security Force Assistant Brigade (SFAB), a small training unit part of a military assistance programme, was a clear sign of the commitment to the Tunisian partners¹⁴, which is likely to go ahead despite the recent political turbulences and President Kais Saied's power grab, that have casted a shadow on the future of Tunisia's democratic experiment.

Morocco too enjoys the status of MNNA since 2004. Its strategic importance increased considerably in the past few years, to the point where it is safe to say that both Rabat and Tunis represent the two main pillars upon which NATO can build a new security architecture in the Western Mediterranean. The normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel, that occurred on the backdrop of the Abraham Accords and in exchange for the US recognition of the Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, showed the peculiar position of Rabat in the eyes of the former administration in Washington, that was also eager to reinforce military cooperation. Also, in this case AFRICOM took the lead: the interoperability training mission carried out in September 2020 between the Moroccan, the Tunisian and the US air forces was a perfect illustration of this alignment in the Maghreb¹⁵, immediately followed by the signature of two defence cooperation roadmaps between the US, Morocco and Tunisia that will reinforce the partnership for the next decade.

The triangulation between Morocco, Tunisia and the US took place in the context of a wider regional realignment, driven by the conflict in Libya and the COVID-19 pandemic. The former factor showed the extent of Russia's expanded military footprint in the region, while the latter highlighted the looming presence of China, relying on mask and vaccine diplomacy as instrument of soft power projection in the region. Both Beijing and Moscow are traditional partners of Algeria, which is still going through a difficult political transition characterized by mass protests

instalment of US\$24,9 million was disbursed in 2016. 'US to fund multi-million dollar Tunisia border surveillance', 26 March 2016, al-Arabiya.

¹⁴ AFRICOM commander reaffirms bilateral partnership with Tunisia', 29 May 2020, AFRICOM: <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32888/africom-commander-reaffirms-bilateral-partner>

¹⁵ Umberto Profazio, 'AFRICOM cements its strategy in the Maghreb', Maghreb Strategic Trend, September 2020, NATO Defence College Foundation.

and calls for change. Together with the evolving regional landscape, this is offering a window of opportunity to enhance dialogue and cooperation with Algeria, therefore included in the regional tour of the Maghreb by former US Defence Secretary Mark Esper in October 2020. NATO too has increased its efforts to reinforce its partnership with Algerian authorities, that see warming relations with the West as useful to consolidate legitimacy at home and abroad. Alongside visits, training programmes and military exercises¹⁶, scientific cooperation programmes such as the development of the first terahertz imaging technology in North Africa are seen as instrumental in stepping up the partnership with Algeria in an incremental perspective¹⁷.

¹⁶ On 12-14 September 2020 the flagship of the Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2), the Spanish air defence frigate Alvaro de Bazán (F-100, Bazán class) visited Algiers, taking part in a training with the el-Moudamir, a MEKO-A 200AN (el-Radii class) frigate of the Algerian navy. Umberto Profazio, 'US diplomatic push faces serious structural challenges in Algiers', Maghreb Strategic Trend, October 2020, NATO Defence College Foundation.

¹⁷ The project, concluded on 17 May 2021, was launched in 2017 within the framework of the NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) programme. The technology will enable the detection of dangerous materials, such as firearms and explosives, reinforcing the protection of critical infrastructures from terrorist threats. Umberto Profazio, 'NATO reinforces its cooperation with Algeria, at a critical juncture, Maghreb Strategic Trends, May 2021, NATO Defence College Foundation.

2.2 Daring new formats in the East Mediterranean

Nuray Atmaca¹⁸

NATO's partnership programme with the Mediterranean countries has evolved and refined over the years. Within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), Jordan and Israel are two key partners since the launch of the MD in 1994. Both Jordan and Israel are considered stabilizing factors and have a record of continuous progress in the partnership. At the launching of the Defence Capacity Building (DCB) programme (2014 Wales Summit), Jordan was among the first NATO partners to be granted initial DCB packages. The DCB is part of NATO's "Projecting Stability" initiative, a defence and security-capacity building programme to train, advise, and assist missions with NATO partners to strengthen their resilience.

The examples of Jordan and Israel demonstrate the imbalances between the military capabilities of the MD partners. Indeed, Israel is significantly self-reliant in a complex geographic environment, having extensive experience in intelligence, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, cyber security and conventional warfare. Evidently it has a crucial relation with the USA from which it depends for the most advanced military technology. As a NATO partner it is already providing essential intelligence to the North Atlantic Alliance.

Jordan, on the other hand, is much more dependent on the military assistance that it receives from NATO within the framework of the MD. The DCB project revised and approved in 2017, showed how the focus for Jordan has shifted from being a security recipient only to a demand-driven provision of security cooperation with partner countries, mainly to address the drivers of instability stemming from their environment, before they become a security concern for NATO – a development in the right direction. The Jordanian DCB project aims at strengthening Jordan's crisis management and border control capacities as well as cyber defence abilities.

¹⁸ Major (res.) at the German Armed Forces Centre for Operational Communication, Nuray Atmaca is Levant and Eastern Mediterranean Analyst at the NATO Defence College Foundation (NDCF) and consultant at the BwConsulting, the in-house consultancy of the German Armed Forces.

Within this framework of cooperation, it is important not to focus on the breadth, but rather the depth of the action points that address the respective needs.

At the same time, the introduction and establishment of an impact measurement mechanism of the annual work programmes is deemed just as essential. Rather than continually developing new, untested concepts for security cooperation, the full exploitation and further refinement of the existing formats by drawing lessons learned from them and using the good practices for improvement is felt to be important.

In addition to bilateral work programmes, cooperation among the Mediterranean partners should be initiated and institutionally fostered – despite and even because diplomatic relations between Israel and Jordan are often tense. Nonetheless, the concern for shared regional security challenges lays the groundwork for cooperation. Security cooperation and intelligence sharing regarding common threats are already existent and hold up. For example, Jordan keeps Israel's eastern border safe and, as per its treaty commitment, it has not allowed any foreign army into its territory, nor has it entered any alliance with a country hostile to Israel. Furthermore, Jordan has even reportedly allowed Israeli jets to fly through its airspace to carry out airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria.

Fostering such existing frameworks for security cooperation among partners within the MD could not only be seen as a confidence-building measure, but also has the potential to offer a more adequate problem-solving strategy. At the same time, it could relieve the burden on NATO. In this context, incorporating Israel and Jordan into a holistic regional security concept organized by NATO would be important for strategic reasons. In this way forces can be bundled effectively by creating transparency and thus creating confidence-building measures.

Taking this further, a trilateral cooperation between NATO member Turkey and the MD-partner states Israel and Jordan is a desirable constellation here. Despite diverging views and conflicting agendas between Turkey and Israel, there is common ground for security cooperation since both must face similar security challenges. Thus, cooperation on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and border security is feasible. Both Ankara and Tel Aviv possess sophisticated military technology and military capabilities like no other counterparts in the region. The Turkish military's capabilities have enhanced remarkably in the last decade due to major investment and developments of its military industry.

Incentives for cooperation are there for both as well. Turkey is a NATO member, but increasingly isolated inside and outside NATO. Several factors have contributed to the isolation of Turkey in recent years: conflicts in its neighbourhood over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean and with NATO members in Libya, the tense relationship with the USA and the accumulation of frictions with Russia are urging Turkey to take diplomatic action to overcome isolation.

Accelerated by the normalization process between some Arab states with Israel and the rapprochement between Qatar (Turkey's main regional strategic ally) and the other states members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the wide regional realignment has put Turkey in a disadvantageous position. Initial efforts by Ankara to normalize its ties with Israel can be observed since mid-2020; they have a twofold rationale, namely, to improve indirectly its relationship with the USA, while on the other hand rebuilding regional integration through Israel as a strong ally. Evidently the prolonged rift with Washington on Iran's sanctions, its relationship with terrorist-designated Kurdish forces in northeast Syria, the S-400 missiles purchase from Russia, etc. needs to be healed.

Seen from Israel's perspective, the tide has now turned. While Turkey was once an indispensable ally in the region, now Turkey engaging in rapprochement efforts with Israel speaks volumes about the swift change in the regional order after the end of the Trump presidency. The most recent wave of normalization with Arab states since 2020, stronger relations with Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), states that themselves have a problematic relationship with Turkey, put Israel in much better diplomatic position vis-à-vis Turkey.

But, despite this, there is a mutual interest and readiness for rapprochement and normalization on the side of Israel as well. If one undergoes a sober evaluation, the results of Ankara's military operations in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan do not run fundamentally counter either to American or Israeli interests. Considering that Iran, Iraq and Syria all have common borders with Turkey, renewed defence ties with Ankara would enhance Israeli military and intelligence activities in the region. As a NATO member and a close ally of the US, Turkey is a strategic asset for Israel and its national security.

Now, transferring these bilateral constellations to a trilateral NATO-sponsored format between Turkey, Israel and Jordan, could serve as an example for expanding NATO's partnerships to the southern region in which Jordan could be more effectively assisted by a strong NATO member and an equally strong NATO partner with mutual benefits in terms of regional 'security promotion' for all involved stakeholders. Such an approach requires focusing on the very practical benefits of a regional security concept while hushing up prevailing political disputes.

2.3 Changes in the Southern Mediterranean: Challenges and opportunities for the NATO Partnership

Rachid El Houdaigui¹⁹

The Mediterranean equation in its Southern dimension, connects four processes that combine and reinforce each other, producing a situation that calls for the revival of partnership frameworks on new grounds:

- I. Concerns around current national trajectories.
- II. An uncertain regional context.
- III. Changing security doctrines.
- IV. Defence modernization and upgrading through partnerships.

I. National trajectories fraught with concerns

The wind of freedom that swept across North Africa in the wake of the Arab Spring propelled individual citizens onto the political stage and pushed abstract basic political rights to become unalienable rights. Masses have since assumed the lead in bringing about change (revolution or reform) and continue to weigh in on the governance of political reconstruction. It is a long process (sometimes confrontational, sometimes cooperative) that is shaping national dynamics. Economic and social grievances continued to drive national political trajectories in 2020, albeit with different modalities, accelerating a trend started in 2011 and based on a bottom-up approach, that is reversing the political regime from an authoritarian to an inclusive model. Individuals and civil society organisations have occupied the public space, so much so that authorities are compelled to temper and compose, even though North Africa faces three major challenges of unpredictable consequences on human security and stability.

¹⁹ Rachid el-Houdaigui is Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South and Professor of International Relations at Abdelmalek University, Tangiers' Law Faculty. He is also co-director of the Moroccan-Spanish review 'Peace and International Security' and in charge of the Observatory of Mediterranean Studies at the Abdelmalek Essaadi University.

✓ *A major socio-economic crisis*

The bond between economic development and security is natural, interdependent and permanent. Social science theories all clearly confirm both this bond and North Africa's socio-economic reality and underlying structural imbalance: wealth creation that fails to benefit the population and territory as a whole; and growth that comes short of generating sufficient employment.

The Covid-19 pandemic therefore occurred in an already disrupted North African economic context, bringing about a shock of unprecedented magnitude with devastating impact on Maghreb economies, along multiple avenues, including a dwindling GDP²⁰; worsening budget deficits and rising debt; falling trade with the euro zone, the area's leading market for energy, industrial and agricultural products; falling foreign direct investment and reduced foreign currency transfers, notably from North Africans residing abroad.

Covid-19 exacerbated existing social inequalities, leaving governments with limited leeway: to decide on austerity plans amidst explosive social conditions, while seeking new opportunities to revive economic growth in spite of inadequate financial resources. Covid-19 transformed a dual crisis (political and economic at the outset) into a triple whammy: with political uncertainty compounding the area's social and economic problems. This problem would surely have been less acute if a Maghreb integration were in place.

✓ *The need for an inclusive political construct*

Much of the socio-economic and political context across North Africa breeds despair and poor political and economic prospects. Together or in isolation, these states of mind contribute to an individual's conditioning and predispose him or her to political and/or religious radicalism, and even to revolutionary jihadism. In fact, the intellectual debate throughout the region oscillates between the need to engage in modernization on the one hand and loyalty to cultural and religious heritage on the other. The debate is not clear-cut, and anxiety is its main driver. Religious radicalism, for example, interferes in this debate, categorically rejecting all Western values and suggesting a model that is antithetical to globalization.

²⁰ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts a decrease of 5,2% in the GDP for; -4,3% for Tunisia -4,3%; 3,7% for Morocco and 2% for Mauritania. <https://www.imf.org/fr/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>.

The stability of regimes depends also, in our view, on their ability to legitimately regulate the ideological cleavage and composite nature of society: violence remains, for the time being, the go-to means of doing politics differently, particularly in Libya and the Sahel. The risk is great that this *modus operandi* spreads across the Maghreb, by way of imitation. Receptivity to extremist ideas, the revival of communitarianism and minority issues also provide an opportunity for Salafist networks and minority representatives to project themselves as transnational forces across the cultural space. All hope rests on the ability of political transition mechanisms to peacefully integrate these sub-state actors into a consensual political process.

II. A regional context full of uncertainty

The burden of irreconcilable geopolitical ambitions continues to paralyze integration momentum. Beyond the impact of the Libyan crisis, North African integration is primarily weakened by the stiffening positions of rival neighbours Algeria and Morocco. We now observe a progressive strategic split between the two and a shift in the Maghreb towards genuine confrontation. Exacerbated diverging positions on the Western Sahara gave way to a state of constant power struggle and posturing: on 13 November 2020, the Moroccan army launched an operation to secure the Guerguerat border crossing and “restore free civilian and commercial circulation” on the road to Mauritania; on the same day, Algeria denounced Morocco's intervention. The history of Moroccan-Algerian relations further increases the risk of strategic rupture: the Sand War in 1963; the Battle of Amgala in 1976; the diplomatic rupture of 1975-1988; and the sealing of land borders since 1994. In the wake of all this, the arms race grew particularly intense in 2020 with military modernization programmes, both through qualitative and diversified procurement policies and the creation of conditions conducive to the emergence of a defence industry.

This rivalry accentuates three entrenched trends, already embedded in the Maghreb:

- States continue to pursue foreign policy without a cooperative spirit. As a matter of fact, the crisis of Maghreb's unity is perfectly illustrated by the lack of security coordination, specifically between Morocco and Algeria, vis-à-vis terrorist networks that have adopted a regional Sahel-Maghreb deployment strategy around three major areas: the Sahelo-

Saharan area and its Atlantic coastline; the Tindouf-Moroccan and Mauritanian border areas; and the South of Libya.

- Geopolitical and security developments confirm the persistence of all types of divisions that threaten regional stability, and indeed the territorial unity of some countries. It is hard to predict future prospects, as the situation remains uncertain and unpredictable, against a backdrop of inertia bolstered by selfish and primitive views of national interest and erroneous perceptions.
- European and extra-regional powers continue to adjust positions towards Maghreb countries according to their own interests. The energy, security and political stakes drive them to a tightrope walk to maintain both a presence and a role in the region.

III. Security doctrines in the midst of transformation

Despite geopolitical uncertainties and differences, North African countries share a common desire for the reconceptualization of foreign and defence policy along a specific conception of Mediterranean issues. What we see and record on the scoreboard are five perspectives:

- *China and Russia, necessary and useful partners*

Countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean continue to conduct foreign policy in accordance with their geography and history. However, this is a time to consolidate strategic advances, forged since independence and eclectic positioning. Foreign policy needs to remain based on a subtle balance of pragmatic management of interference with the West, as determined by geography and history, on the one hand, and the rise of China and Russia on the global stage, on the other.²¹ North Africa has no option but to build and/or consolidate all ties and connections both along a North-South logic and the China-Russia cooperation axis. One thing is for sure: the Covid-19 health crisis further entrenched a fundamental trend; countries of the region find in China a more responsive and effective partner than the United States and Europe in times of stability as well as in times of health crisis. Western countries and international institutions should take into account this important development if they want to continue to be relevant.

²¹ Admiral Jean Casabianca, Mediterranean: paradigm of contemporary conflicts, Robert Schuman Foundation / Question d'Europe, n°564/22 June 2020

- *Migration flows, a constant reality*

Covid-19 has certainly curbed migratory flows, although these are certain to resume at their usual pace once the pandemic diminishes its intensity or will be over. Indeed, soaring demographics in the Sahel-Saharan area and in West Africa, along with climate change and permanently precarious economic conditions, impact people's daily lives and fuel migration flows, particularly to the Mediterranean and beyond. UNICEF population projections²² show fertility rates at 7,6 in Niger, 6,5 in Mali, 6 in Chad, 4,7 in Mauritania, 4,3 in Sudan, and 5,3 in Nigeria. This means Niger's population is to grow from 19 million in 2015 to 69 million in 2050, while Nigeria is to rank third in the world with 433 million inhabitants, and Egypt will reach 180 million. This state of affairs creates a security stress in North Africa and Europe, especially since illegal migration is hardly a temporary phenomenon to be contained by purely punctual action. So, when Europe adopts a repressive policy and fortifies its Southern and Eastern borders, it is only addressing the symptoms in the short-medium term. No consistent alternative to security measures has ever been adopted in a Mediterranean context; we instead see mere announcements and programmes without any practical impact.

- *Libya, Syrian and the collapse of the Responsibility to Protect*

The Libyan and Syrian crises exceed for the time being the crisis management capacity of Mediterranean institutions and regional organisations. The UN and NATO (the former providing legitimacy and the latter as the only military organization able to deploy in any given theatre, thanks to US logistics) were the only two organizations involved at the start of the crisis, along with very few countries. Subsequently, the interplay of some state actors allowed them to position themselves as elements of the solution or as arbiters of the crises underway in the region. The Mediterranean configuration is therefore primarily structured by state interests, which, when converging on the basis of a minimum of agreement, mobilize the UN and NATO to intervene in the Libyan crisis. In the event of divergence, they do not intervene, as was the case in Syria. This gives credence to the idea of a two-speed “Responsibility to Protect”, generalized and deeply entrenched in informed public opinion. It is not so much the principle that is questioned, because it is legitimate to want to protect populations that are victims of genocide, but rather its instrumentalization, distorting both its philosophy and meaning.

²² UNICEF: Africa, Generation 2030. August 2014.
www.unicef.org/french/publications/files/UNICEF_Africa_Generation_2030_fr.pdf.

- *Biological risks, a priority for defence policies*

In the same way as the Cold War shaped military strategy and industry throughout its duration, and the post-9/11 period revealed the weight first of asymmetric and then of hybrid threats, the Covid-19 health crisis could refocus defence and security strategies, if not on the likely use of biological weapons, then at least on aspects of public health preservation, biosecurity, biodefence and resilience. This specific broadening from defence to security challenges is a milestone in modernizing African defence policy, because non-conventional biological, chemical and radiological risks are bound to receive more attention in a context that is very different from the Cold War NBCR threat. NATO is just beginning to tackle this shift in security matters.

- *Mobility of terrorist networks, a challenge to regional security*

Porous borders across the Maghreb and political instability in Libya and the Sahel facilitate the mobility of terrorist networks and the emergence of “de-statized” or “grey” areas, particularly in the Sahel. These networks flourish in a wide corridor of vulnerability running from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Stability in the Mediterranean is therefore no longer exclusively bound to considerations inherent to the Mediterranean Basin but has now also become dependent on the stability of other peripheral regions in Africa (Sahel-Saharan strip, Atlantic coast). In reality only the NDCF concept of “Deep Maghreb” is taking significantly into account this fact, while unsuccessful stabilising operations in the Sahel are a clear symptom of the situation. Indeed, any change, dysfunction or crisis within these peripheral areas has a direct impact on the security and stability of the entire Euro-Mediterranean region.

IV. Partnership, a tool for defence modernization and upgrading

The three above-described processes offer both opportunity and challenges that inevitably impact both shores of the Mediterranean. While the NATO partnership has neither the mandate nor the capacity to support the great transformations underway on the Southern shore, it can provide value in consolidating defence policy modernization processes.

Partnership in the area of defence is by no means set in a universal model. Its forms (bilateral, multilateral, pluri-lateral), nature (alliance, dialogue, cooperation) and purposes (military exercises, military stabilization or safeguard operations, defence modernization support, etc.) depend on strategic and geopolitical considerations that are not set in stone. Partnerships are highly dependent on temporal frameworks and revolve around an international system driven by state interests. Any partnership is therefore bound to develop according to the strategic priorities of states involved and changing environments.

The Mediterranean's various military and security cooperation instruments (NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, the 5+5 Defence Initiative, the security component of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) bring together Western powers and Arab countries undergoing political and strategic reconstruction. What interests do the latter have in this partnership? What is the added value, if any, to their defence policy?

The predominance of European and American naval forces in the Mediterranean is evident, to the extent that only their warships do continually patrol its waters. A control made easier by allied naval bases in Spain and Turkey, near significant choke points, and by peninsular NATO bases in Italy and Greece. In such a context, partnership is, if not an impossible hope of military rebalancing, at least an opportunity to tie Southern shore countries to the strategic momentum set in motion by Europe and the USA in the Mediterranean, and beyond. Such a scenario offers the added advantage of including these countries in Western strategic control, no longer as a source of asymmetric threats, but as partners for peace and stability.

Cooperation between Morocco and NATO is a perfect illustration of partnership with high added value for both parties. The Atlantic Alliance understands the tactical and political importance of involving Mediterranean partners in these activities, while Morocco sees the opportunity to strengthen its military capabilities through human and technical interoperability. Interests of both sides converge in a partnership instrument through which defence and diplomacy combine to contribute to the consolidation of trust.

This defence diplomacy, embodied in security cooperation instruments, is an opportunity to advance a shared vision and comprehensive solutions in a geostrategic space fraught with uncertainty. Organizational limitations and outdated military concepts in several countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, however, make it difficult to immediately incorporate these

countries into international operations. Should partnership therefore be directed towards defence upgrading mechanisms? Weapons systems modernization requires significant collaboration in terms of practical technology transfer.

Conclusion

At this backdrop, NATO's approach to extend its partnerships to the south should be threefold: 1. Design of demand-driven, tailor-made annual work programmes, 2. Focus on the impact evaluation of those annual work programmes, 3. Promotion of inter-MD cooperation among the MD-partners and trilaterally with NATO.

The opportunity of reviving the partnership, in general, and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, in particular, depends on the coherence between NATO's real intentions, partner countries' commitment and regional and extra-Mediterranean power play, in a context fraught with uncertainty and concern. One thing is sure, the Mediterranean must improve information exchange and broaden contacts, through the systematic involvement of academics and civil society representatives, to better understand each other and dispel negative perceptions, beyond the work already done.

3. THE ISTANBUL COOPERATION INITIATIVE (ICI)

3.1 The ICI in the general Gulf realignment

Eleonora Ardemagni²³

In 2004, NATO and four Gulf monarchies (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE) signed the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), creating a practical framework to improve confidence-building and shape mutual understanding in the security domain. Seventeen years after ICI's formation, the partnership has achieved limited goals, although some interoperability efforts have been displayed by Bahrain, Qatar and most of all by the UAE in Afghanistan, Libya and against Daesh, as part of NATO-led operations.

Today NATO's aims in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), such as stabilization, countering jihadi terrorism and asymmetric threats, energy and maritime security, cannot be effectively pursued without building strong relations with the Gulf states: important aspects of cooperative security and projection of stability in the Arab region pass now through the Gulf capitals. Since the beginning, Oman and Saudi Arabia have opted out from ICI, thus weakening the inner potential of the format. But reality runs faster than formal agreements: the ICI as an institutional framework has been left behind by events, since practical cooperation initiatives often include Muscat and Riyadh and diplomatic developments following the Abraham Accords have opened new political prospects.

For instance, in the 2010-2020 decade, NATO and its member states have played a significant role in enhancing collaboration with Gulf states, supporting military education and training programmes: Security Sector Reform (SSR) is no longer a taboo for Gulf monarchies which, beyond expensive defence procurement, have also started to invest in local expertise and indigenous defence capacity-building, a demand driven by the highly volatile regional geopolitics. In fact, 17 years after the launch of ICI, Gulf monarchies face new security challenges due to expanded strategic objectives by the monarchies and by external actors, hence boosting national military expertise.

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Since 2011, most of the Gulf monarchies (Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) have promoted assertive, often military-driven foreign policies to strengthen national security and to protect or advance their geopolitical interests. They have increased investments in military expertise, training and education. For decades, they focused on procurement and military hardware purchase, necessary but not sufficient to improve defence capabilities. Nowadays, however, they are working to combine defence expenditure with increasing professionalization of their armed forces, developing local military expertise (manpower, training, education, arms maintenance, defence industry) as well.

This recalibration was driven by a deteriorated security context. Today the Gulf monarchies face new security challenges such as ballistic, drone, maritime, border threats and the need to protect an expanding civilian infrastructure. In the Arab/Persian Gulf, the Southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Oman, they are dealing with rising and multifaceted maritime attacks: in the Southern Red Sea, these are launched by Yemen's Houthis rebel supported by Iran. These attacks (sabotage, hijackings, missile and armed drone attacks, water-borne improvised explosive devices, sea mines), show a confusing interplay between maritime interdiction, piracy and maritime terrorism. The conflict in Yemen and the parallel escalation with Iran on Gulf and nuclear issues have jeopardised the freedom of navigation in the Straits of both Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, with implications for energy security, global trade and related insurance costs for shipping. The systematic launch of missiles and armed drones by Houthi insurgents against Saudi territory emphasizes Riyadh's sense of encirclement, aggravated by Iranian-related maritime destabilizing activities and the presence of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a powerful constellation of hybrid forces in Iraq in which some groups answer directly to Tehran. This may have potential implications for NATO, which explicitly recognizes that it shares "common interests and common challenges" with Gulf partners²⁴.

Moreover, in an age of post-oil economic diversification, Gulf partners have been consistently investing in civilian energy infrastructure (commercial ports, airports, roads and highways, new oil/gas installations and pipelines), military installations and new urban and industrial areas to develop their economies. However, connectivity entails new security issues, because critical

²⁴ NATO (2019), Remarks by the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and President of the National Security Bureau of the State of Kuwait Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah during the ICI Anniversary Ceremony at the NATO-ICI Regional Centre. Available from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_171928.htm [Accessed 24 November 2020].

infrastructures are also potential targets that must be protected against conventional and asymmetrical attacks, disruption, cyber warfare, insurgencies and terrorism.

In this loosely structured and competitive context, Gulf monarchies are ambitiously working to adapt their traditional security doctrines and toolkits to maximize self-reliance and the partnership with NATO indirectly helped pursue this goal. Considering these developments, the relationship between NATO and the Gulf states have entered a closer and, to a certain extent, more operational phase in the last decade. This was strengthened by the tightened bilateral relations between Gulf States and NATO members, with geostrategic implications in terms of basing rights and security agreements. The establishment of a number of permanent military bases in the Gulf²⁵ has boosted military-to-military cooperation and joint training with members of the Atlantic Alliance, although these bilateral experiences are not part of a NATO training framework.

The Gulf states' participation to many NATO-led Peace Support Operations (PSO) has enhanced trust among partners, shaping an embryonic interoperability especially between NATO and the UAE, currently the most capable army in the GCC. Some Gulf states joined NATO-led operations before the establishment of the ICI. In Kosovo, the UAE deployed troops between 1999 and 2001 also as part of the NATO-led KFOR (Kosovo Force). In Afghanistan, about 200 Emirati Special Forces were part of the NATO-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) since 2003, mainly active in Kandahar and Helmand, the core area of the Taliban's insurgency. Since 2009, Bahrain has deployed members of its Special Security Forces in Afghanistan, mainly to support US military operations in Helmand. In 2011, Qatar and the UAE joined the 'Unified Protector' mission in Libya: Emirati fighter jets enforced the no-fly zone against Muammar Gaddafi's forces. All the six countries of the GCC are part of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, formed in 2014: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE contributed to the airstrikes against the "Islamic State" in Syria. Since 2018, Afghanistan accepted the UAE offer to provide training to its armed forces²⁶. In the same year, the UAE joined NATO's 'Resolute Support' as partner country, together with Qatar. Beyond the ICI, NATO and the Gulf monarchies have contributed to counter-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean as part, respectively, of 'Ocean Shield'²⁷ and of the Combined Maritime Forces headquartered in Bahrain.

²⁵ France in Abu Dhabi, UAE (2009), Turkey in Qatar (2017), the United Kingdom in Bahrain (2018) and Oman (2019).

²⁶ Emirati troops are tasked to train recruits enlisted by the Afghan Elite Forces for counterinsurgency.

²⁷ (2009-2016).

These practical examples give an indication of the growing military cooperation that has contributed to build trust between NATO and the ICI partners, thus fostering diplomatic exchanges, tailored cooperation and technical and transit agreements. For instance, the Kuwaiti National Assembly approved in 2017 a NATO transit agreement for personnel and material deployed in the Resolute Support mission. ICI partners also signed with NATO security agreements for the protection of exchange of classified information and for cross-border transit.

On the diplomatic level, all ICI partners opened missions to the NATO headquarters in Brussels²⁸. Military representatives of the Gulf states part of the ICI also sit at NATO's Allied Command Operations/Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons. Each ICI member has activated its Individual and Partnership Cooperation Programme (IPCP): this strengthens NATO-partners cooperation focusing on the specific security needs and interests of each partner. In this way, IPCP is one of the brightest examples of NATO's adaptability with respect to partners' know-how building goals.

Cooperation on military education and training also played a special role, contributing to the evolution of the relationship between NATO, ICI partners and Gulf states in general. In 2006, the Riga Summit launched the NATO Training Cooperative Initiative (NTCI) to complement the activities held under the ICI framework: in this context, the NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC) was established as a ten-week strategic level course gathering twice a year, enrolling diplomats and officers from MD and the ICI at the NATO Defence College in Rome. The focus on military education was a way to boost cooperation, overcoming political disagreements and divergent security perspectives among NATO, its members and the Middle Eastern partners. Launched in March 2009, the course focussed on security challenges in the MENA and was organized by the Middle East Faculty²⁹ of the NDC. Although intermittently, also Saudi and Omanis nationals attend the NRCC. In 2019, Kuwait appointed a senior officer to serve as Faculty Adviser and liaison officer with the ICI-NATO Regional Centre. The course programme, including study subjects such as terrorism, migration, energy and maritime security, climate change, has become an outreach tool vis-à-vis MENA partners, fostering interaction and debate between different nationalities and professionals with varied expertise (ex. militaries and civilians), also thanks to practical exercises on diplomatic negotiations and crisis management. By

²⁸ The UAE in 2012, Qatar and Bahrain in 2016, Kuwait in 2018).

²⁹ A new institution staffed with civilian experts on the Middle East.

year 2020 the Middle East Faculty has been absorbed in the NRCC itself according to a streamlining logic that left out the political significance of the exercise.

The 2017 opening of the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait represented another milestone achievement in the history of the cooperation between NATO and the Gulf states. The establishing of a facility in the MENA region was approved at the Chicago Summit in 2012; not only Kuwait but also Qatar offered to host the Centre. From a geopolitical point of view, Kuwait embodies a bridge of dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, also given the geographical proximity with Iraq, and is the only ICI partner to have signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States (1991).

At the time of writing, the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait has activated courses on border security, cyber-defence, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear consequence management, critical infrastructure and energy security, maritime security, crisis management, and civil preparedness. Beyond formal courses, growing cultural awareness and confidence building are the main positive outcomes of this new institution aimed to share NATO culture with the Arab partners in the Gulf. The establishment ‘NATO’s new home in the Gulf’³⁰ is certainly highly symbolic and could encourage and foster cooperation, although there’s still a long and complex road ahead, even if ongoing normalisation efforts could open further possibilities both in ICI and still non-ICI partners.

³⁰ As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated at the opening ceremony. NATO (2017), Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the inauguration ceremony of the NATO Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) Regional Centre, Kuwait City. Available from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_140259.htm [Accessed 24 November 2020].

3. THE AFRICAN UNION

3.1 The Horn of Africa: A Region for AU-NATO Cooperation

Kidane Kiros³¹

Although maintaining collective defence, mainly of Europe and North America, from external aggression has been the core founding mission of NATO, its very existence³² and as ‘a standing coalition of like-minded democracies’³³ has created an influence that goes beyond its military capacities or its formal areas of responsibility because of the organization’s relevance to international politics of the wider world. Recognizing any external crises and conflicts that unfold beyond allied borders as threats to its key objective of securing lasting peace in its region, NATO has been promoting peace and stability beyond Europe and North America through a range of crises management operations and partnerships with an array of international organizations and different levels of national governments. Compared to the Mediterranean Dialogue³⁴ and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative³⁵, NATO’s evolving cooperation with the Africa Union has not yet been well grounded. This is against a background of both United States’ and Europe’s continued increase of interest in Africa which they see as both a land of tremendous economic growth and a source of threats that can affect their interests.

Africa has currently become a scene of an intense competition of external powers like never happened before, and intra-state and inter-state crises are escalating in some regions of the continent posing an increasingly grave threat not only to the region’s citizens but also to international peace and security, including to NATO’s allied member states. A case in point is

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³² Clarke, Michael, The global dimensions of NATO’s future posture, NDC Policy Brief, N0. 6, March 2021. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1544>.

³³ Vershbow, Alexander, Will NATO still be Relevant in the future? Debate, Atlantic Council, July 24/2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/will-nato-still-be-relevant-in-the-future/>.

³⁴ See a report by Lesser, Ian; Brandsma, Charlotte; Basagni, Laura; and Lete, Bruno; The Future of Mediterranean Dialogue: Perspectives on Security, Strategy and Partnership, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2018. <https://www.gmfus.org/file/25923>.

³⁵ See article by Webb, Amanda, The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative at 15, NATO Review, 16 December 2019. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/12/16/the-istanbul-cooperation-initiative-at-15/index.html>.

the volatile region of the Horn of Africa – a region closer to and equally strategically important as the immediate south of the NATO allied borders.

2.3.1. Strategic importance of the Horn of Africa (HoA)

The Horn of Africa region traditionally comprises Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia though it is also broadly defined in its political and economic context to further include states of Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. The Horn of Africa is geo-strategically important to Europe, the Gulf, North America and beyond for various reasons. Firstly, the Horn of Africa, historically, straddles a vital maritime trade route connecting Europe and the East via the Red Sea since the opening of the modern Suez Canal for navigation in November 1869. In 2019,³⁶ 18,800 north-and south-bound vessels with a shipment of 1,207,087,000 tons of cargo was transited via the Red Sea, in which the Horn of Africa expands in the south-west part of the sea. Moreover, an estimated 4.8 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil and petroleum products were transported through the Horn's Bab el Mandab strait in 2016 to Europe, the United States and Asia³⁷.

The Horn of Africa has, therefore, an immense strategic importance not only for the local states but also for Europe, North America, the Middle East oil fields and Indian Ocean trade routes. Because of the region's geo-strategic importance for free flow of maritime trade and its proximity to the Middle East as a significant source of world energy, projecting military power and exerting political influence in the Horn of Africa makes it a matter of priority by European and non-western powers as it will have far reached implication to their strategic interests. Any disruption to this maritime trade route (which is also a major important world energy supply route), and instability and insecurity in the region will affect not only national strategic interests of western and non-western powers but also local, regional, and international security and economy.

This is why UN authorized counter-piracy operations have been carried out by NATO and other actors in the Gulf of Aden, off the Horn of Africa and in the Indian Ocean since 2008.³⁸ In other words, ensuring the stability and security of the Horn of Africa minimizes the regional and

³⁶ Suez Canal Authority, Suez Canal Traffic Statistics: Annual Report 2019, www.suexcanal.gov.eg.

³⁷ United States Energy Information Administration, Today in Energy, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=32352>.

³⁸ See for further information at: <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCE9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Somalia%20S%20RES%201816.pdf>.

international security threat and eases supply chain management that spans across the Mediterranean (North Africa and Europe), the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and many African countries in the region and beyond.

Secondly, the Horn of Africa is a very unstable region and yet strategically very important one. The internal political dynamics of the states in the region, which mainly is the reflection of its diversity and contrast, combined with its wider geographic importance, have attracted international attention as a potential crisis zone.³⁹ Heterogeneity and contrast as its defining features, the region is increasingly threatened by multiple state and non-state actors. The Horn of Africa is inhabited by communities with different ethnic, linguistics, cultural and religious groups with diverse moral principles that guide and affect communal behaviours and actions. The diversity in moral principles (that is, values, beliefs, and attitudes) also affected and exacerbated political and ideological differences of the states in the region ultimately generating intra-state and inter-state deep-seated animosities and suspicion⁴⁰.

The traditional Horn of Africa's contemporary history is characterized by intra-state and interstate violent conflicts, with interplay between these two levels of conflicts both vertically and horizontally. In most cases, external powers participated in the conflicts with which states in the region demonstrated a changing alliance to win over their respective enemies. A function of various factors related to the vicious intrastate and interstate conflicts, and the colonial era misdeeds led the Horn of Africa to become a region of incessant political upheavals, social instability, economic chaos, civil discord, and the scene of brutal wars waged for the last several decades, with immediate implication to regional and international security⁴¹. Instability and insecurity in the Horn of Africa means a potential obstruction to the maritime trade route to the west, Gulf, and South Asia via the Red Sea, which affects the strategic national interest of the NATO allied members. Moreover, the Horn's instability may spark a widespread refugee crisis with a huge potential to impact Europe and beyond.

Finally, but not least, this geographic region is the source of Blue Nile - one of the major tributaries of the Nile River where several hundreds of millions of people in the river's basin

³⁹ Shwab, Peter, Cold War on the Horn of Africa, *African Affairs* Vol. 77, No. 306(Jan. 1978), pp.6 – 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/721344>.

⁴⁰ Amare Tekle, Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa: Problems and Prospects, *Northeast African Studies*, 1989, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1989), pp. 75-108, Michigan State University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43660263>.

⁴¹ Reuters, Fact box: The Nile River: Treaties, Facts and Figures. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-nile-fb-idUSTRE76742R20110709>.

depend on for their livelihood. The Nile is the longest river on earth, with a length of about 6.875 km, and its basin spans across eleven (11) countries. The fact that the Horn of Africa contributes to the Nile River by supplying 85% of its volume⁴² further defines the strategic importance of the Region from the perspective of hydro-politics of the Nile basin⁴³ with far reaching regional and international implications though it is mainly dominated by three-way political discord between Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Sudan over access and use of the river's waters. As a north bound river in the north-eastern Africa, any new development in the hydro-politics of the Nile basin – comprising a vast region which is Europe's southern neighbourhood - has implication to NATO and its area of strategic priority.⁴⁴

2.3.2. Recent Developments in the HoA and their relevance to the NATO – AU Relationship

Given the geostrategic importance of the Horn of Africa, recent security developments may be a solid argument for NATO to further expand its cooperation with AU. In his first interview he conducted with *Foreign Policy* after appointed as the new U.S. envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman said that the region "... is a complex part of the world with a lot of overlapping crises happening at the same time. But it is also extremely important strategically for the U.S., for our allies, for the region"⁴⁵. Feltman's words highlight the need to address the multiple challenges currently faced by the Horn of Africa, in partnership with local, regional, and international stakeholders.

This gives room for NATO to establish expanded and closer cooperation with African Union and sub-regional organizations to contribute to the stability and security of the Horn of Africa.

Looking at the recent security environment of the wider Horn of Africa, multiple crises are currently, including active intrastate conflicts, escalating interstate disputes and external powers competition threatening regional stability. A typical instance of an intrastate crisis is the ongoing

⁴² Mthembu, Philani, Spotlight on Africa, The hydro politics of the Nile: Mapping Geopolitical Trends for Quarter One 2020, Institute for Global Dialogue (2020). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25337.6>.

⁴³ For further information, see NATO 2030: United for a New Era, Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General, November 2020. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

⁴⁵ Gramer, Robbie, U.S. Africa Envoy: Ethiopia Crisis Could Make Syria Look Like 'Child's' Play, Foreign Affairs Report, April 26/2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/26/u-s-africa-envoy-ethiopia-crisis-tigray-jeffrey-feltman-biden-diplomacy-horn-of-africa/>

deadly conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia that reportedly triggered a massive humanitarian crisis⁴⁶ and widespread allegations of atrocities by actors of the conflict⁴⁷ after the national government started a military offensive in the region as part of what the government calls “Law Enforcement Operation”⁴⁸. This crisis has attracted the attention of the international community in general, and the NATO allied members. Given Ethiopia’s population size, which is second after Nigeria in Africa, any widespread refugee crisis in the country may impact not only the Horn region but also Europe and the Middle East.

For this reason, contributing to the stability of Ethiopia is crucial, given the contagious nature of the conflict. This has been confirmed by the reported military intervention of neighbouring Eritrea in the Ethiopia’s Tigray region conflict⁴⁹, with its troops accused of widespread atrocities and violations of international humanitarian law⁵⁰.

In Somalia, Ethiopia’s next door eastern neighbour, the security crisis and political uncertainty⁵¹ are also threatening the stability of the region. Despite the relentless effort being made by regional and international actors to put Somalia back on the right track as a well-functioning state, the politician’s failure to reach at an agreement on the conduct of the next Somalian election and the continuation of military attacks by Al Shabab are destabilizing the country and putting it on a dangerous path. Sudan, as a part of the wider region of the horn, is also in a transition period⁵² trying to come to terms with its past autocratic leadership. But the transition remains to be extremely delicate with no immediate sign of its potential to succeed.

⁴⁶ United Nations Office for Coordinating Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report, 15 May 2021. <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>

⁴⁷ United Nations Security Council, Security Council Press Statement on Ethiopia, SC/14501, 22 April 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14501.doc.htm>.

⁴⁸ For further information on Tigray Conflict, see Walsh, Declan, and Dahir, Abdi Latif, why is Ethiopia at War with Itself? The New York Times, Nov. 5/2020(Updated May 13.2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-explained.html>.

⁴⁹ For further information, See a letter of Eritrea’s Ambassador to the UN to Current President of UNSC, April 16/2021. <https://shabait.com/2021/04/16/letter-of-eritreas-ambassador-to-the-un-to-current-president-of-unsc/>.

⁵⁰ Amnesty International, The Massacre in Axum, A Report 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR2537302021ENGLISH.PDF>; Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City, Report on Preliminary Findings, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lb1rKWRa54FwoLxg2PqAgLVzmoWYTkdY/view>.

⁵¹ African Union Peace and Security Council, Communique on Political and Security Situation in Somalia, PSC/PR/COMM.1(CMXCIII), 22 April 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/eng-psc-communique-993rd-meeting-on-somalia.22.04.2021.pdf>.

⁵² Pichon, Eric, and Karhilo, Jaana, Sudan: a Transition under Pressure, European Union Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2020. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659413/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659413_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659413/EPRS_BRI(2020)659413_EN.pdf).

The above current, mainly intra-state, crises are also complemented by an increased interstate disputes involving Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Alongside the border dispute (including reported clashes) between Ethiopia and Sudan⁵³, there is an increased tension between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over a Dam under construction on the Blue Nile River⁵⁴. These disputes and tensions are not the only crises that are threatening to unravel the wider region of the Horn of Africa.

There is also an ongoing external powers competition, including both regional⁵⁵ and external great powers,⁵⁶ aiming at increased political influence and at securing physical access in the region. The role of Persian Gulf states including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, has increased, as shown by establishment of military bases and commercial ports across the horn's coastline. Great powers of different nature such as the USA, China and others have also an established military presence. The problem with the competition among the external powers is that the longstanding rivalry and dispute between some of the powers is being exported to the Horn of Africa, further fuelling the already combustible region. Expanding NATO's institutional cooperation with the African Union makes sense and could be a sound and timely decision.

2.3.3. Forging Closer Institutional Cooperation Between NATO and AU: the way forward

The Horn of Africa has become a scene of overlapping intrastate and interstate security crises like never. The instability and insecurity in the Region affect not only the lives of citizens in the region but also possibly European security because of the geopolitical importance of the region. The multiple crises currently unfolding may lead to an increased inflow of refugees into Europe, which might spark hardship and social pressures on European citizens. The responsibility of maintaining stability in the region and securing free flows of shipping should be the responsibility of both local and external actors and stakeholders. As a leading contributor to and

⁵³ For further information, see PSC Report, Political Solution Needed for the Ethiopia – Sudan border dispute, Institute for Security Studies, PSC Insight, 26 March 2021. <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/political-solution-needed-for-the-ethiopia-sudan-border-dispute>.

⁵⁴ For further information, See a Report by Zeinab Mohammed Salih, Gerd: Sudan talks tough with Ethiopia over River Nile dam, BBC News, 22 April 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56799672>.

⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact, Middle East Report No 206, 19 September 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/206-intra-gulf-competition-africas-horn-lessening-impact>.

⁵⁶ Manrique Gil, Manuel, Something New Out of Africa? Chinese, US and EU Strategies for the Continent, European parliament, Policy Department, Directorate General for External Policies, April 2015. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/549031/EXPO_IDA\(2015\)549031_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/549031/EXPO_IDA(2015)549031_EN.pdf).

promoter of peace and security on the international level, NATO must expand its cooperation with African institutions, with the aim of tackling the multiple challenges facing the region.

As it stands now, the institutional cooperation between NATO and the AU does not reflect the emerging challenges, including possible threats to European security emanating from the Horn of Africa. Although NATO has been cooperating with the African Union since 2005, the cooperation was institutionalized after both organizations signed a technical deal in 2014 which enabled formalization of the NATO Military Liaison Office to the AU headquarters⁵⁷. The current cooperation of NATO and AU is predominantly demand-driven and revolves around three core principles: a request for support must first come from the AU, the support by NATO must be within the framework of the idea of African ownership and African solutions to African problems and NATO should provide the support within the framework of coordination with international organizations and partners⁵⁸. Considering the agreed core principles of cooperation between NATO and AU, the relationship between the two partners is asymmetrical and dictated only by AU in taking the initiative and requesting NATO. Indeed, not only AU initiates a request but also owns any activity carried out within the framework of the cooperation.

Since the initiation of the cooperative agreement in 2005, AU formally requested assistance to deploy peacekeepers in Darfur and Somalia, in which NATO responded accordingly by assisting in the airlifting of AU peacekeepers and the establishment of the joint Operation centre in Darfur, Sudan. Moreover, it provided strategic airlift and sealift support to the African Union Mission in Somalia⁵⁹. Planning assistance in the deployment of peacekeepers in Somalia, and training opportunities were offered to AU experts as part of capacity building of African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) – Africa Union’s blueprint document for the promotion of peace, security, and stability in Africa⁶⁰.

This is against the background of the capability of NATO and its allied members in terms of human, material, and financial resources, and AU’s lack of all these resources. Seen from this

⁵⁷ Akuffo, Edward Ansah, *The Politics of Interregional Cooperation: The Impact of NATO's Intervention in Libya on its Relations with the African Union*, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Special Issue on The African Peace and Security Architecture (Fall 2014), pp. 108-128, Indiana University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.4.2.108>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Akuffo, Edward Ansah, *The Politics of Interregional Cooperation: The Impact of NATO's Intervention in Libya on its Relations with the African Union*, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Special Issue on The African Peace and Security Architecture (Fall 2014), pp. 108-128, Indiana University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.4.2.108>.

⁶⁰ For further details, see African Union Peace and Security, *African Peace and Security Architecture*, 02 October 2012. <https://www.peaceau.org/en/topic/the-african-peace-and-security-architecture-apsa>.

perspective and notwithstanding the context or background that explains such approach, the agreed institutional cooperation between NATO and AU is devoid of the cooperative values in which each party to the cooperation has no equal rights and benefits. Within this cooperation framework in which the AU has the say, NATO will have to provide AU operational support (that includes strategic air and sealift as well as planning support for AU missions), training support (with courses for AU officials at NATO's sites and through mobile training teams) and structural assistance (such as the support to the African Standby Force and related programmes of exercise, early warning and disaster preparedness)⁶¹.

Since the initiation of the cooperation between NATO and AU; the ad hoc based operations and activities in peacekeeping missions in Darfur and Somalia were done within the agreed framework. This was not the Libyan case, where the core principles of the cooperation between NATO and AU were not kept. The AU's plan for a negotiated transition to a post-Gaddafi order in Libya did not work and was undermined because of NATO's military Operation Unified Protector in Libya without the request and initiation of AU as espoused in the signed cooperation framework agreement.⁶² This historical event had provoked setbacks to AU's relationship with NATO, although efforts have been made by both sides to upgrade the relationship from one of ad hoc support to substantive practical partnership.⁶³ Two cases of the successful ad hoc support provided by NATO are in the wider Horn of Africa region and, currently, there are practical reasons in this particular region that compel NATO to work towards expanding its cooperation with AU.

NATO and AU (including sub-regional organizations) will have to establish practical and principles-based partnership aimed at responding to the impending multiple security crises threatening to unravel the Horn of Africa. In this context, IGAD⁶⁴, as a regional group in the Horn of Africa, is the relevant organization to partner with because it supports its members in their manifold development efforts, including in peace processes.

⁶¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Cooperation with the African Union, 16 November 2020. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8191.htm?

⁶² De Waal, Alex, African Roles in the Libyan Conflict of 2011, *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) , March 2013, Vol. 89, No. 2 (March 2013), pp. 365-379, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23473541>.

⁶³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Cooperation with the African Union, 16 November 2020. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8191.htm?

⁶⁴ IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) comprises Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda.

The goal of this cooperation should be forging closer collaboration, not to expand NATO's memberships, which will exacerbate existing crises because of the differing political ideologies, values, priorities, resources, and levels of wealth of states in the region; and the presence of significant number of external powers with differing and rival strategic interests. But in terms of NATO's cooperation expansion, forging closer relationship and building equal partnership to promote peace and security in the Horn region, and by implication, at international level, would be a step in the right direction.

The collaborative cooperation framework should be developed in such a way to assist in crisis management and conflict prevention in a region where a significant number of external powers with diverging strategic interests compete for influence and access in a context of multiple crises threatening to destabilize a wider region. If this is to happen, there is a need for the core principles on which the current NATO – AU cooperative framework is based to be reviewed, aligning them with the principles of partnership despite of AU's longer term political or doctrinal reasons, such as the idea of African ownership and African solutions to African problems.

CONCLUSIONS

Alessandro Politi⁶⁵

The history of the Alliance has been one of constant evolution not by some intelligent decision but by political interest, necessity, and expedience.

“This war will not be waged by a grand alliance united for the single purpose of defeating an axis of hostile powers. Instead, it will involve floating coalitions of countries, which may change and evolve. Countries will have different roles and contribute in different ways. Some will provide diplomatic support, others financial, still others logistical or military. Some will help us publicly, while others, because of their circumstances, may help us privately and secretly. In this war, the mission will define the coalition -- not the other way around. (...) Forget about ‘exit strategies’; we’re looking at a sustained engagement that carries no deadlines. We have no fixed rules about how to deploy our troops; we’ll instead establish guidelines to determine whether military force is the best way to achieve a given objective.” (Donald Rumsfeld, late DoD Secretary, 27th of September 2001).

The clear-cut statement of Mr Rumsfeld has only one logical innuendo: politics define the strategy, hence the mission, the functioning of an alliance and the potential coalition set up. If it happens the other way round, the ingredients for a defeat are there. Before sketching what are the main interests within NATO it is useful to see what the main proposals of this joint paper are.

The authors have mapped the following possibilities, according to their respective angles:

- In the Maghreb, the NATO-Tunisia-Morocco triangle is visible.

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- The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), besides a more efficient management of programmes, could foster inter-MD co-operation among MD partners and trilaterally with NATO.
- In the Levant, a possible Turkey-Jordan-Israel triangle is envisageable;
- For the Gulf, political dynamic offer opportunities to have more linkages between the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), Saudi Arabia and Oman (who are still out), despite the enduring useless Yemeni war.
- For the African continent, the Horn of Africa is seen as the priority region where collaboration with the African Union (AU) should be enhanced towards more assistance in crisis prevention and management. This deepening of the relation may require that the existing relation between the AU and NATO (featuring principles like African ownership and African solutions as paramount) should evolve towards a more balanced partnership, where in clear text solutions and ownership should be shared as needed.

Indeed, notwithstanding some lopsided views among allies, there is an objective potential in these three partnerships (MD, ICI, and AU) even taking into account the first predictable reactions after the retreat from Afghanistan. The Arab countries, despite their long-standing rivalries, see those transnational problems, like pandemics, big power competition, enduring jihadist terrorism or religious revolutionary ideologies and nuclear proliferation cannot be solved through purely national arrangements. NATO can indeed play a useful role in this web of relationships, provided that its political consensus is re-established.

In another simplification of the constellation of interests within the Alliance one can regroup the 30 countries in the following conglomerates: the North American, the globally minded Europeans and the continental minded ones. The North Americans (with obvious differences between Washington DC and Ottawa) have a keen interest in the Chinese issue. France and the UK are globally minded (and in fact they follow the US lead in the Indo-Pacific quadrant) but are sorely inadequate for their unrealistic aspirations and sometimes are at odds with NATO's consensus.

The most fractious group is made up by the continental minded Europeans: because some are fixed on the Russian problem, some about the Balkans, some about the South of the Mediterranean and some try to be free-riders either because they have restrained ambitions or because they are overreaching their goals. The next summit will try to forge a reasonable

consensus, provided that there is political will among the major allies to tackle together relevant challenges.

For the next two years, not necessarily spelling out a precise doctrine, the biggest ally will enact a de facto a division of labour: North Americans face the problem in the Pacific and (willing and able) Europeans the Maghreb and Sahel question, while Levant and Gulf will be managed somehow flexibly together. National debates are still revolving around the migration issue, while the major priorities are on the one hand energy security of supply of existing fossil and future renewable energy sources and on the other the existence of governments that are not hostile to the northern Mediterranean countries.

Libya's civil war has reinforced the metastasis of already simmering civil wars in the Sahel and no one can take for granted the survival of governments in Algiers, Nouakchott, Cairo, and Tunis: the bellwether is that, when survival is at stake, freedom is sacrificed to authoritarian efficiency even if authoritarian regimes are less resilient against terrorism and revolutionary warfare.

In this context the NATO-AU collaboration can be much more reinforced, but both sides must invest much more in terms of concrete contributions.

Partnerships have fallen into neglect for too long due to short-sighted political leaderships incapable to have a 360° security approach. It is high time to use them or lose them.

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The NATO Defense College Foundation

The NATO Foundation is the only existing think-tank bearing the name of the Alliance. It was established in Rome in 2011 and it grew out from a common intuition of the President Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo and the NATO Defense College top decision makers who understood the value of a non-profit NGO that could work beyond usual and institutional outreach, training, communication and scientific research activities.

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