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## **PARTNERSHIP AND DIALOGUE Strengthening and differentiating NATO relations with the Middle East and North Africa**

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**PARTNERSHIP AND DIALOGUE**  
**Strengthening and differentiating NATO relations**  
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This paper discusses ways and means to strengthen and enlarge NATO's co-operative ties with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Security co-operation between NATO and the MENA countries is limited in many ways. The two groups do not share values and finalities. They do share some significant threat perceptions, e.g. transnational terrorism, but have largely different strategic perspectives, so that, at the end of the day, even common threats play different roles in the context of national and domestic security. This political and strategic gap prevents NATO and MENA countries from aiming at setting up any kind of security community, in the sense of NATO or OSCE. Introducing security co-operation in their relations could, however, help narrow the gap and make sectoral co-operative security undertakings more likely. It could also increase transparency and act as a process of confidence building and conflict prevention.

With these limits and for these reasons, NATO has promoted the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (NMD) with part of the MENA countries in North Africa and the Near East. The focus on the Mediterranean stems from a set of factors. In the mid-1990s, the Mediterranean area looked like the focus of religious extremism. Security co-operation in the area was to be a precursor of the regional security arrangements the Middle East peace process was supposed to bring about. Last but not least a Mediterranean arrangement was supposed to reassure Southern NATO partners, as a balance to the Alliance's major involvement towards Central-Eastern European areas.

In the last years, challenges emanating from the Mediterranean area have more clearly linked up with those emanating from the Gulf area, Pakistan and Central Asia, in particular WMD proliferation and religious extremism. Religious extremism has turned into a transnational trend of terrorism aiming at West/Christian countries as a whole. The United States has responded militarily by toppling, first, the rogue Taliban regime in Afghanistan and, then, the Baathist regime in Iraq. While these interventions have proved far from conclusive and, to some extent, have generated new challenges (particularly in Iraq) and aggravated old ones (providing fresh opportunities for transnational terrorism), the reasons to strengthen current arrangements with Mediterranean partners in the new situation and expand security co-operation eastwards in the region seem no less cogent than those those underlying the NMD in the mid-1990s. Challenges are, in fact, expanding to a larger Middle Eastern area and some allies - in particular the United States - need to be reassured by the Alliance in the face of their threat perceptions stemming from that expansion.

## **Strengthening and enlarging NATO-MENA relations**

While the aim of strengthening NATO security arrangements in the Mediterranean and expanding them to the wider Middle Eastern region definitely makes sense, that aim is no less constrained by existing gaps in strategic perspectives than is the NMD. In this sense, NATO faces two complementary challenges: (a) how to narrow the strategic gap with the MENA countries, and (b) how to articulate the strengthening and widening of its MENA security co-operation arrangements.

A response to the need to narrow the strategic gap may be precisely the way these security co-operation arrangements can be articulated. The upgrading of security relations through the setting up of a Partnership could be the right response, provided the Partnership manages to work out credible objectives that are really shared and politically balanced. In order for the Partnership to do that, NATO and the MENA countries will have to provide some responses that narrow their strategic gap. In other words, the Partnership cannot be an empty box.

As for the enlargement of security relations, they cannot be, at one and the same time, upgraded and established with all MENA countries. These countries reflect very different situations and not all of them – nor all NATO countries – may be prepared to undertake such an engaging venture as a partnership. Enlarging NATO relations necessarily means foreseeing different levels of commitment and relations. In this paper, we start from two assumptions: (a) relations will potentially be enlarged to all MENA countries, in the sense that any such country is in principle eligible to enter into relations with NATO; (b) relations will be structured, though, according to two levels of engagement, a higher and a lower one, that is the Partnership for Co-operation (PfC) and the Dialogue for Co-operation (DfC).

To start with, we can imagine that, while the natural candidates for engaging in a partnership with NATO today would be the present members of the NMD and those new countries from the MENA *parterre* that the partners would like jointly to co-opt, all other MENA countries would be potential candidates for membership in the Dialogue. Furthermore, while the PfC would develop a collective and plurilateral tier of relations among members, besides strong bilateral relations, the DfC would essentially develop bilateral relations (with or without a thin layer of common gatherings to exchange information and views).

### **A new framework: the Partnership for Co-operation**

In order to take form and survive, the Partnership for Co-operation has to tackle two very important issues. It has to try, first, to narrow the strategic gap existing between the new partners and, second, to set out a few principles to be shared and respected by the members.

Narrowing the strategic gap entails facing a dreadful host of divisive issues. Of such issues, the key ones with a view to making any PfC workable seem to be the need (a) for the United States to return to effective management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict hand in hand with the Quartet and the international community, (b) for the MENA countries to stop proliferation and set in motion the necessary processes to establish

regional arrangements of co-operative security, (c) for the MENA countries to take a less ambiguous and more co-operative attitude towards transnational terrorism.

These understandings should not be regarded as conditions for setting up the PfC but as urgent items in its agenda.

When it comes to principles, while the NMD has developed an impressive menu of co-operative opportunities for its Southern partners in a context of self-differentiation, but has given principles a minor role, the PfC, in addition to a robust menu, should expand the role of shared principles. Letting common principles play a greater role should help consolidate the partnership.

Partnership should be defined as a joint process of consultation whereby the partners identify common challenges, devise the means to cope with them and set up joint actions to implement their decisions. Because of the political limits already pointed out, however, this process will be less a *modus operandi* than a target of the NATO-MENA Partnership for Co-operation. To work towards a process constituting full-fledged partnership, the partners should emphasise two principles – (a) joint ownership, and (b) systemic linkage with international and regional institutions – over all others (transparency, autonomy, self-differentiation etc.).

While the link with international and regional organisations would reassure partners against interference, illegality, illegitimacy and the use of double standards, the principle of joint ownership would provide substance to the partnership by affirming the equal responsibility of partners to implement objectives that have been freely agreed upon. Especially in the beginning, it is likely that partners will jointly own only modest common endeavours, in tune with the modest political common ground that links them today. Exercise of a genuine though limited partnership may, however, help enlarge this common ground and allow for an upgrading of the PfC in time.

The PfC should also bring about a commitment to dialogue on principles relating to the organisation of military forces with a view to their modernisation and reform. Within the PfC, a positive dialogue on democratic control and security governance should be mutually accepted and initiated, of course, in a perspective of self-differentiation.

By enforcing a principle of joint ownership, as limited by self-differentiation as it may be, the PfC will basically work as a multilateral exercise. The PfC would subsume, expand and reinforce the very reduced layer of common activities contemplated today by the NMD agenda.

## **Partnership institutions**

According to these principles and means, the NATO-MENA PfC will agree and implement a number of security co-operation activities. To do that, its activity must be given an institutional setting. This setting could be articulated in two different processes. First, to set the PfC in motion, the representatives and ambassadors should meet periodically (3-4 times a year) in a kind of MENA Co-operation Council (MenaCC), which, by its very denomination, would represent a regular political partnership between NATO and MENA countries. This should include a meeting of the MenaCC at the Foreign Minister level at least once a year. The MenaCC should also consider holding meetings at Defence Minister level at appropriate times.

The deliberations of the MenaCC should be prepared by a NATO MENA Co-operation Group (MenaCG), which would derive from the enlargement of the present Mediterranean Co-operation Group (MCG). This MenaCG would be committed to generating an agenda to be submitted to and jointly considered by the MenaCC. In doing so, it should keep in touch with the Partnership countries' representatives in more or less formal or informal ways (seminars, routine diplomatic contacts and so forth).

Today, in the NMD, similar procedures are only informal. The MenaCC would institutionalise this process and give it more pregnant political significance.

In a second process, NATO should consider involving interested MENA countries more closely in some activities of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council — as suggested in 2002 by Secretary General Lord Robertson. This involvement would give the partners the chance to assess international security trends alongside Western countries in a partnership role. It would help ensure the inclusiveness that NMD relations lack today and provide political substance to the partnership.

### **The Dialogue for Co-operation**

Besides the new Partnership for Co-operation, the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue would be addressed to the wider setting of MENA countries not involved in the PfC and devoted to a lower level of co-operation. It would maintain its less politically ambitious objective, principles and aims, while definitely not being prevented from continuing to develop its current significant programme of military and security co-operation. As it would concern the whole of the MENA area rather than the Mediterranean only, its denomination would be turned into Dialogue for Co-operation, to stress at one and the same time its difference and parallelism with the Partnership for Co-Operation.

NATO and its MENA partners could look at the DfC as a kind of catocumenical pool for eventually acquiring new members. The upper political status represented by the PfC should act as an incentive for the DfC countries to improve their performance in terms of PfC principles so as to be able to enter the latter. The Partners should encourage such aspirations, and should at the same time monitor conditions of accession very closely before co-opting aspirants as partners.

While members in the PfC could be co-opted by partners, members in the DfC should be included - as today in the NMD - upon NATO's initiative.

### **Summary**

Successive developments after 9/11 have objectively expanded security perspectives from the Mediterranean eastward. Consequently, it would make sense to extend a broad NATO co-operative framework toward a wider Middle Eastern area to cope with new security perceptions and challenges on both the NATO and the MENA side. In this perspective, this paper puts forward a proposal to set up a new framework of security co-operation between NATO and the broad MENA area based on the following points: security co-operation is bound to have a limited scope in NATO-MENA relations, because of differences in values, finalities and strategic perspectives; still a common framework of security co-operation may help narrow the strategic gap, encourage co-

operative security undertakings, increase transparency, build confidence and foster conflict prevention;

in this perspective, NATO should propose a new enhanced framework of co-operation aimed at developing a partnership and co-operation with MENA countries - the Partnership for Co-operation and the Dialogue for Co-operation; while the PfC would represent a higher level of political co-operation based on a strong political dialogue and structured on a plurilateral basis, the DfC would represent a cluster of hub-and-spoke patterned bilateral relations, mostly devoted to implementing a program of defence modernisation and reform;

present NMD members would be the natural candidates for becoming partners with NATO countries in the new PfC; they would co-opt new members; members in the DfC would be invited by NATO, as happens today in the NMD;

the PfC should try, first of all, to narrow the existing strategic gap (i.e. enlarge the very small common ground existing today) by establishing a priority agenda contemplating key issues so as to reach common conduct with respect to them (the key issues suggested by the paper are the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, WMD, and transnational terrorism);

the PfC should establish key principles; joint ownership and a systemic linkage to international and regional organisations are regarded by the paper as particularly significant principles to be adopted by the PfC; actions stemming from the application of principles should be subjected to self-differentiation and adhered to on a voluntary basis;

within the PfC a positive dialogue on democratic control and security governance should be mutually accepted and initiated;

the PfC should be institutionalised; the Partnership's agenda should be set in motion by a MENA Co-operation Council (MenaCC) composed of the Foreign Ministers (meeting once a year) and managed on a regular basis by national high officials; the deliberations of the MenaCC should be prepared by a NATO MENA Co-operation Group (MenaCG), which would be committed to generating an agenda to be submitted to and jointly considered by the MenaCC; furthermore, NATO should consider involving interested MENA countries more closely in some activities of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

## **Epilogue**

This paper has presented a pattern of relations essentially based on an integrated vision of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, i.e. a concept close to the one introduced by the American administration with the Greater Middle East Initiative and its agenda. Both the concept and the agenda have stirred disagreement among allies. In particular, the European allies do not want the new initiatives towards the MENA countries to trivialize or supplant their long standing Mediterranean initiatives. Also, they are concerned by the survival of the very notion of "Mediterranean", a notion almost unknown to Americans. In this sense they want NATO to maintain a Mediterranean format even in the event that new co-operation is established with more distant countries in the deeper Middle East. In this sense, the European vision tends to be less integrated than that of the Americans as well as that of this paper.

However, the same basic ideas presented in this paper can be implemented according to different patterns. Let's quote two of them:

The PfC could be reserved to present NMD members only (at least at first) and maintain the concept of Mediterranean in its denomination (a Partnership for Mediterranean); whereas what is indicated in the paper as DfC could be conceived of as a separate organisation for relations with countries beyond North Africa and the Near East;

There could be one single organisation, i.e. the Partnership; this organisation would comprise a lower internal level of observers; with respect to the wider and more diversified agenda of the partners, that of the observers would only be a programme of bilateral relations and defence reform without engaging in more complex exercises of political co-operation and defence democratisation.

Finally, with respect to overlap with the existing European agenda, it would be important to avoid duplication by mentioning, first, that NATO would co-operate only where it can provide value added, and, second, that there would be regular consultations in existing NATO-EU frameworks.