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The unrealized potential of cooperative security in the Arab Gulf

Silvia Colombo *

Over the past three decades, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has undergone a geopolitical transformation, punctuated by a series of critical junctures: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991, the American and NATO operations in Afghanistan the following decade, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab uprisings of 2011. These regional geopolitical shifts – often dictated by domestic drivers – have been accompanied by global geostrategic changes. As a result, the Gulf sub-region, encompassing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries,¹ Iraq, Yemen, and Iran, has emerged as the new center of gravity in the MENA region.

Thus, NATO should give the Gulf sub-region special consideration in its strategy for the South. This sub-region is distinctive and important for NATO for two reasons. First, it plays a key role in global energy geopolitics, a role further reinforced by the fallout of the Ukraine war. Second, the specific security challenges confronting the Gulf sub-region (e.g., terrorism, maritime insecurity and piracy, cyber-attacks and climate change-related threats) are more in line with what NATO can deliver for the security of the area. No other sub-region along the southern flank holds the same potential for NATO. Yet, the current partnership framework, structured around the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), has major flaws in terms of format and substance.

This *Policy Brief* investigates NATO's political and military cooperation with the GCC countries.² So far, the political dimension of the NATO-GCC countries partnership remains underdeveloped. This has had signifi-

cant implications for practical cooperation. However, there is now a window of opportunity (and a growing imperative) to align political and military relations between NATO and the GCC countries with changing regional geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics. One way to do so is to invest more in cooperative security.

The reconfiguration of Arab Gulf international relations

Shifts in the geostrategic landscape of the Gulf have first and foremost manifested themselves in new patterns of competition and cooperation at the regional and global levels. Regionally, the GCC countries have actively engaged in local and regional conflicts, from Libya to Syria and Yemen, while advancing their geo-economic goals in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Red Sea area. Globally, new matrixes of alliances that connect the GCC countries to external players are in the making – a trend accelerated by the 2022 war in Ukraine.

The war is perceived by the GCC countries as a nuisance rather than a direct security threat, though with important ramifications for their external relations. It constitutes a stress test for their international engagement with the West and the United States in particular. Since the beginning of hostilities in February 2022, the GCC countries have displayed a position of strategic neutrality and hedging, withstanding any attempts to be drawn into the name-and-shame game *vis-à-vis* Russia. They have not imposed sanctions on Moscow and had initially resisted pressure

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* Senior Researcher at the NATO Defense College. The author would like to thank Cinzia Bianco, Ashraf Keshk, Youssef Mnaili, Marc Ozawa, Cynthia Salloum and Thierry Tardy for their feedback on previous drafts.

1 They include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

2 Iraq is beyond the scope of this analysis.

from American and European leaders to increase the production of oil – and de facto abandon the OPEC+ mechanism – to lower prices. With regard to successive votes over the war in Ukraine in multilateral fora, first and foremost in the United Nations, all GCC countries voted in favor of the General Assembly's resolution denouncing Moscow's invasion and calling for the withdrawal of its military forces in early March.³ As time passed, however, fissures between the GCC countries and the West emerged. During a vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council at the beginning of April, all GCC countries abstained, a clear signal of disagreement with a resolution that would set "a serious precedent".⁴

These fissures predate the outbreak of the war itself. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi harbor strong sentiments *vis-à-vis* what they perceive as material and ideational disengagement from the MENA by successive US administrations since President Obama. The GCC countries feel abandoned by their long-term American partner, fearing serious implications for their security. In this context, they are looking for more reliable partners elsewhere, mainly in the direction of China and Russia.⁵ Arab Gulf leaders have invested heavily in their countries' relations with China, built personal bonds with President Xi Jin-

ping and overseen the growth of deals in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing's de facto monopoly over the development of fifth-generation (5G) wireless networks in the Middle East and Africa represents an important

pull factor.⁶ Many in Washington have raised concerns regarding Chinese inroads in Gulf markets as this might expose the United States to backdoor risks. The fact that Riyadh is considering oil transactions in yuan instead of dollars is an additional indication of a new (possible) foreign policy direction.⁷ With regard to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the real preoccupation in the Gulf is that the war will spiral into a direct confrontation between China and the West. This would have significant destabilizing effects on the MENA region and on Gulf energy exports towards the Asian continent.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and the other Gulf monarchies today play an important role in the competition between Russia and the West. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to the GCC countries at the end of May 2022 could be considered an attempt to consolidate existing bilateral links in the face of growing Western pressure. At the same time, President Biden's mid-July trip to Saudi Arabia can be viewed as an attempt to mend fences with the pivotal GCC country after its détente with Qatar following the Al-Ula declaration of January 2021. Relations between the United States and the UAE are also warming up again. The United States now wants to directly oversee the consolidation of the recent Israel-Arab Gulf countries normalization. The 2020-2021 Abraham Accords have an important anti-Iran (air) defense cooperation dimension that could produce a sort of mini-regional NATO (GCC countries + Israel).

NATO's partnerships with the GCC countries

In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, NATO has increased its focus on collective defense on its Eastern flank. Consequently, crisis management and cooperative security – the Alliance's two other core tasks – have become less pivotal, as demonstrated by the new Strategic Concept unveiled at the end of June 2022 in Madrid. However, the interconnected nature of today's crises (with the primary example of dynamics in the energy, food and water nexus) makes it imperative not to overlook other regions that could create further tensions – amongst which include the Gulf. NATO's engagement with Arab Gulf countries has proven resilient in the face of regional geopolitical shifts. It has, however, failed to evolve and adapt. As a result, it is not in sync with current realities and new opportunities. Two issues are worth examining: the format and range of activities.

With regard to format, NATO and the GCC countries are partners in the framework of the ICI launched at the June 2004 Istanbul Summit. This initiative contributes to long-term security by offering Arab Gulf region countries bilateral and limited multilateral military and political cooperation with NATO.⁸ Four countries of the GCC have joined the initiative: Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait in 2004, followed by the UAE in 2005. The NATO partnership framework is ill-suited for the Arab Gulf countries as it is supposed to mainly target countries that a) see the partnership with NATO as a way to develop relations with the United States; b) see it as a complement to the European Union (EU); and c) aim at becoming NATO members in the future. In view of

3 "The UN Resolution on Ukraine: how did the Middle East vote?", Washington Institute, 2 March 2022.

4 "Gulf states abstain as UN suspends Russia from rights council over Ukraine abuses", *Middle East Eye*, 7 April 2022.

5 "Gulf states' neutrality on Ukraine reflects deeper Russian ties", *Financial Times*, 28 February 2022; A. Stent, "The West vs. the rest. Welcome to the 21st century Cold War", *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2022.

6 G. Fulton, *China's relations with the Gulf monarchies*, Routledge, 2020.

7 "Saudi Arabia considers accepting yuan instead of dollars for oil sales, report says", *Middle East Eye*, 15 March 2022.

8 A. Yıldız, *Security and political dynamics in the Gulf*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 19 April 2020.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and the other Gulf monarchies today play an important role in the competition between Russia and the West

the significant cooperation that has traditionally existed between the GCC countries and the United States at the bilateral level – less so with the EU, but indeed with the main European member states – this rationale cannot apply to Abu Dhabi, Doha, Kuwait City or Manama. This argument is further confirmed by the fact that Muscat and Riyadh have not (yet) felt the need to develop a partnership with NATO.⁹ Nevertheless, they have over the years expanded their links to and occasionally participated in ICI activities.

Turning to the range of activities, two points are worth mentioning. First, despite the rich “menu” available to NATO ICI partners, military education, capacity building, trainings and socialization remain the cornerstones of NATO’s engagement with the GCC countries.¹⁰ The NATO-ICI Regional Center in Kuwait and the NATO Defense College in Rome are the primary venues for these activities. Furthermore, Arab Gulf partners have participated in crisis management operations and missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Libya and Afghanistan, although to a limited extent (the important role played by some Arab Gulf NATO partners during the August 2021 evacuation from Afghanistan should also be added).¹¹ However, what the GCC countries want from NATO the most – namely, the provision of defense equipment, technology and cyber intelligence sharing, as well as solid security guarantees to replace the American umbrella – is off the table.

Second, the Arab Gulf countries remain reticent to engage in more substantive dialogue with NATO that includes political issues beyond what is referred to broadly in meeting reports. In light of enduring geopolitical disagreements between the GCC countries and the West – including 9/11, the spread of terrorism, and Arab Gulf countries’ counter-revolutionary approach towards the 2011 Arab uprisings – NATO Allies have offered few politico-diplomatic incentives to the GCC countries while the GCC countries have had little appetite to address these political issues themselves. A number of factors explain this shortfall. First, regional sensitivities among the GCC countries and limited integration of existing regional bodies (including the GCC itself) have hampered intra-regional political and security cooperation that could address common challenges – from border security and illegal trafficking to the fight against terrorism. Despite American pressure and the existence of a GCC Unified Military Command, the GCC countries are resisting plans for integrated missile defense as this would require not only interoperability but also

intelligence sharing, a highly political issue for these countries.¹² Second, divergences among the Allies and their desire to preserve lucrative bilateral relations with the GCC countries has prevented more robust efforts in public diplomacy and political and security dialogue.¹³ Ultimately, this is also connected to the issue of mixed perceptions regarding NATO by its partners in the South – not only among the GCC countries – as recently demonstrated by a NATO survey.¹⁴

On balance, NATO’s engagement with the GCC countries must be strategically revised. The fact that military cooperation remains limited and shielded from potential stumbling blocks of political engagement leaves the NATO-GCC countries partnership room for improvements. In order to attain this, however, new geopolitical realities and their ramifications identified above must be better accounted for. These shifts represent a challenge but, if managed correctly and in a timely manner, could also turn into an opportunity.

Putting cooperative security center stage

Although a complete overhaul of the present framework of NATO-GCC countries cooperation centered on the ICI is not envisaged in the near future, it is equally important to dispel the view that a new “strategy” would be needed to move forward. As welcome as a push for a new strategic framework for cooperation might be (since this would send a clear signal to the GCC partners regarding Allies’ willingness to remain focused on them), previous experiences with strategic documents demonstrate that documents alone are not enough. Their proliferation and an excessive focus on institutional frameworks over substance and on quantity over quality is unlikely to be the answer. Nevertheless, the identification of mutual strategic interests, common priorities and the means to achieve them within the contours of the existing framework is the necessary first step to ensure that NATO’s engagement with the GCC countries matches real needs and fosters mutual understanding and trust among the parties.

To achieve this goal, NATO should first and foremost open concrete paths for greater pragmatic politi-

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9 For Oman the issue is further complicated by the perception of NATO as an extension of the American anti-Iranian posture.

10 T. Tardy, “NATO’s sub-strategic role in the Middle East and North Africa”, GMF Insights, 11 February 2022.

11 “From Afghanistan to the World Cup, tiny, wealthy Qatar steps up”, *The New York Times*, 7 September 2021.

12 “The Status of air and missile defence in the Arab Gulf”, Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, 31 March 2022.

13 This is the case, for example, of NATO-UAE cooperation being often blocked by some Allies.

14 Author’s conversation with a NATO official, NATO Headquarters, July 2022.

cal dialogue with the GCC countries. On the one hand, NATO should broaden the spectrum of interlocutors with whom it engages, to target the populations – the youth and women in particular – alongside military institutions and governments, in order to better understand local challenges, opportunities and needs. On the other hand, while it would undoubtedly be beneficial to keep governance issues in mind when framing discussions on NATO-Arab Gulf cooperation, it would be equally sensible to avoid adopting a lens that pits democratic countries (i.e., the NATO Allies) versus the rest, as this risks further alienating these partners while pushing them into the Russian and Chinese embrace. The often-used concept of cooperating with “like-minded partners” is

counter-productive as a guiding principle in the Gulf that is structurally different from NATO Allies in political, societal and cultural terms.

Strengthening NATO’s political engagement with the GCC countries is fundamental and should ultimately place cooperative security center stage during the revision process. In the Arab Gulf context, fostering cooperative security should be understood as incentivizing and sup-

porting endogenous mechanisms and institutions that provide peace, stability and prosperity on the basis of mutually-accepted organizing principles such as sovereignty, deterrence and nuclear stability.¹⁵ Despite their slow and limited progress, ongoing dialogues between Saudi Arabia and Iran mediated by Iraq represent a window of opportunity. This is particularly true when confronted with the slim prospects of a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran

and the international community. Against this backdrop, NATO can contribute to the implementation of (new) regional security mechanisms in the Gulf by sharing its experience with relevant regional organizations and by providing the Arab Gulf countries with practical tools they can employ in tackling their own security preoccupations, provided this is framed within a continued political and security dialogue.

Concretely, investing more in cooperative security vis-à-vis the Arab Gulf region through an engagement with the GCC should be the priority. That this sub-region is already equipped with a regional organization, through which the members’ different and competitive positions can be reconciled and channeled, is an added value. This would foster inter-regional cooperation between NATO and the GCC. One possibility would be to develop forms of trilateral cooperation involving NATO, the EU and either the GCC as a whole or its individual members by leveraging the recently released Europe-Gulf strategy.¹⁶ NATO should focus on what it can offer that is most needed by its Arab Gulf partners – and that the EU cannot offer – in terms of capacity building and defense forces training. In particular, counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency training, border control with specific attention to the maritime dimension along the example of the Sea Guardian operation, Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Defense Institution Building (DIB) should be prioritized in light of the inefficiencies besetting the Arab Gulf armies.¹⁷ Energy security, the protection of critical infrastructures and cyber security and drones are also increasingly relevant.¹⁸

In conclusion, several factors call for a greater engagement by NATO in the Arab Gulf by harnessing the potential of cooperative security. In this way, not only would NATO strengthen its posture vis-à-vis its competitors in a pivotal region but it would also contribute to fostering more locally-driven and flexible cooperation with its Arab Gulf partners.

16 Joint Communication to the European Council and the Parliament. A Strategic Partnership with the Gulf, 18 May 2022.

17 Z.D. Barany, *Armies of Arabia. Military politics and effectiveness in the Gulf*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

18 Author’s conversation with an official from an Arab Gulf partner, NATO Headquarters, July 2022.

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15 S. Colombo and A. Dessi (eds.), *Fostering a new security architecture in the Middle East*, FEPS and IAI, November 2020.



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Research Division

Marc Ozawa, PhD, and Cynthia Salloum, PhD,
Series Editors
NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143 Rome – Italy
www.ndc.nato.int



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