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NATO and the Gulf

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With the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 2024, the nature and outlook for the initiative and its impact on the GCC states and their security should be analyzed and evaluated, not only in terms of the tangible contributions made to the stability of the vital Gulf region but also in light of the changing circumstances that differentiate the current security environment from the one that existed twenty years ago.

NATO and ICI – A Balance Sheet

ICI was established at the 2004 NATO Summit in Istanbul as a mechanism to promote security cooperation on a bilateral basis between NATO and the GCC countries. While Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) joined the initiative, Oman and Saudi Arabia decided to stay outside the formal framework, opting instead to participate only in selected activities offered by the initiative.

Practical cooperation between NATO and ICI partners has taken on many different forms with a focus on military-to-military cooperation, the fight against terrorism, the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, border security, and civil preparedness. Individual plans with the four countries listed above have been worked out with an emphasis on defense transformation, interoperability, and civil-military cooperation.

GCC states have also contributed to NATO-led missions and operations including Bahrain and the UAE, who have contributed to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan; Kuwait who joined the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism to combat piracy in the Indian Ocean; and Qatar and the UAE who participated in Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011. Furthermore, ICI partners are regular participants in NATO exercises.

On an institutional level, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Group, established just after the launch of the ICI, coordinates regular interactions. The group is now known as the Partnerships and Cooperative Security Committee. Moreover, the NATO-ICI Regional Centre was established in Kuwait in 2017 to “improve common understanding of security challenges and, through increased interoperability and standardization, enable closer cooperation.”¹ The activities of the NATO-ICI Regional Centre are open not only to ICI members, but also to Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

As far as regional stability and security are concerned, one could argue that the ICI has contributed, at least indirectly, to a better understanding between the parties on defining common threats and concerns. One aspect has been the platform provided by ICI through which NATO and the GCC states have been able to discuss pressing security concerns in the region, exchange perspectives, and share best practices. This includes holding regular meetings at the heads of state, government, ambassador, expert, and staff levels. One particular mechanism to highlight is the participation and contribution to training courses at the NATO Defense College in Rome, Italy. This includes the

¹North Atlantic Treaty Organization, (September 2022). “Istanbul Cooperation Initiative “available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52956.htm (accessed June 17, 2024)



NATO Regional Cooperation Course which aims to develop a mutual understanding on issues of common concern between the countries of the ICI, the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), and NATO.

The need for enhanced NATO-Gulf ties is evident in the list of threats to the GCC states that NATO could potentially play a substantive role in mitigating. The most glaring of these involves maritime navigation, ballistic missiles, nuclear proliferation, the role of violent non-state actors, cyber security, extremism, and border security. Many of these issues are causes for common concern between the two sides, and with NATO's large array of tools and vast experience, effective defense planning and deconfliction strategies could materialize to help ensure GCC security.



At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the existing rationale for combatting consistent threats has not necessarily translated into a functioning and effective relationship. For one, the GCC states have not been fully convinced that NATO would contribute significantly to greater regional security. Here, the issue of maritime security is illustrative as NATO has not executed a maritime mission in the waters around the Arabian Peninsula in response to the recent numerous disruptions against safe maritime passage. They have failed to adequately confront current threats from piracy, attacks by Iran on ships through the Strait of Hormuz, or the more recent attacks by Houthis against Red Sea shipping vessels, the consequences of which have been clearly visible. Insecurity on these primary maritime navigation routes have interrupted supply chains, increased insurance costs, and prolonged shipping routes as suppliers seek to avoid these volatile areas. The responses against these threats, however, have come not from NATO as a security organization, but from NATO member states, such as the United States through the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and most recently, Operation Prosperity Guardian, and Europe through Operation Atalanta, the European Maritime Awareness Mission in the Strait of Hormuz, and Operation Aspides in the Red Sea. NATO maritime missions like its Standing Naval Forces and Operation Sea Guardian operate in the Mediterranean Sea and have a narrow focus on responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine rather than in the waters that directly concern the GCC states.

Second, the Gulf region still views NATO operations as cumbersome given the fact that all decisions within it are subject to the unanimous approval of all member states. The difficulty this presents was highlighted by the recent accession process for Finland and Sweden into NATO which was held back by the objection of Turkey. It took months of deliberation and negotiation before



Turkey finally agreed to move forward with the accession process. The lack of consensus among member states was also demonstrated by the case of Libya where France and Italy were supporting opposite camps inside the country. The lack of consistent priorities within the organization hinders the threat assessment process, where differing political considerations among member states can halt any progress being made.

Third, NATO's ICI is not currently viewed by the GCC states as playing an integral role in their regional strategic calculations. While numerous programs have been announced, and even many have been implemented, the scope of these programs is viewed as being more of good intentions rather than any concrete substantive contributions. In addition, existing measures have not been adequately assessed in their effectiveness and there have been no visible efforts to build a comprehensive strategy to identify desired outcomes. What exists within ICI remains limited and to a degree, disjointed.

A factor that certainly plays a role in why NATO is not being seen as a strategic choice now, twenty years after the establishment of ICI, is that many of the common threats faced by the GCC states continued unabated. The programs put forward within the framework of ICI have had a limited impact on lessening these threats. This includes maritime security, as mentioned above, but also the concern of Iran's nuclear program and the role of violent non-state actors active in the region, many of whom receive direct support from Iran. The effectiveness of any cooperation mechanism is ultimately evaluated by its ability to achieve its stated aims and objectives. In the case of ICI and from a Gulf perspective, there are question marks as to whether any of these objectives have in fact been realized.

NATO and the GCC – Shortcomings

Despite identifiable shortcomings and drawbacks, the GCC countries remain interested in developing relations between the Gulf states and NATO, given that the security environment in the Gulf and Middle East remains highly uncertain especially under the looming threat of wider regional escalation resulting from the Gaza war. The GCC states are continuing their search for a comprehensive security arrangement that might reverse the instability trends of recent years. Whether NATO has a role in this equation is unclear at this stage.

It must be understood from the outset that the ICI cannot and will not be seen as a replacement for other existing or pending security arrangements. As far as security partnerships go, the United States remains by far the most important and consequential partner for the GCC states, and this is unlikely to change in the near future. While NATO also includes the United States, a broader commitment by NATO to the security of the Middle East and the Gulf region is not seen as an alternative to the existing defense and security ties to Washington. ICI could be seen as a supplementary partner of added value, but not as a replacement.

It would be advantageous to Invest In mechanisms through which views and perceptions can be exchanged regarding the security challenges of the region and how to address them. As such, the political dialogue component mentioned above is one aspect that can be broadened and intensified given the need for in-depth security discussions among partners that essentially share many of the same concerns. During NATO's Warsaw Summit in 2016, both sides agreed to increasing the exchange of information and holding regular political dialogues. However, actual progress on that front has been limited and inconsistent. The NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait has not been



sufficiently used for such purposes. With the GCC states having increased influence and agency in all matters pertaining to recent Middle Eastern developments, an institutionalized political-strategic dialogue occurring at set intervals should now be implemented.



Photo Source: NATO (2018)

Given the developments that have impacted the Middle East in recent years pointing to the overall security of the Gulf region remaining volatile, NATO will have to demonstrate that its commitment to the security of the region is focused, despite the other developments that have captivated its attention in recent years. This includes first and foremost the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine which NATO has characterized as the most consequential conflict for the organization at the moment and the key example as to why NATO exists in the first place. As a result, all other priorities and plans of NATO are seconded to securing NATO's Eastern flank and ensuring that Ukraine is able to defend itself against Russia. NATO officials perceive the failure to move all resources behind Ukraine's defense as opening the door to direct confrontation with Russia by one of its Eastern European members.

In addition, the rising Sino-American rivalry plays a role within the NATO thought process. In terms of China though, the Gulf states do not want to be put into a position where they have to make an either-or decision. While it is understood that NATO is primarily a Western-oriented security organization, programs such as ICI are seen in the GCC as not being tied to or contingent upon the larger geopolitical imperatives that are not tied to the security situation on the ground. Having broadened political dialogue would be one way to ensure that NATO's role and function are focused on the specific objectives identified at the outset.

The same can be argued for the current developments as they relate to the Middle East, Iran's nuclear ambitions, the role of maritime security, and NATO's support for Israel—all key considerations that have to be kept in mind by the GCC states as they determine how to structure their future relationship with NATO.



While Iran's nuclear program and its maritime security role have already been discussed above, the position of NATO on the Gaza crisis needs further clarification. NATO strongly condemned the October 7 attacks by Hamas against Israel, labeling them as horrific terrorist actions. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and other NATO officials expressed their solidarity with Israel, emphasizing its right to defend itself. Additionally, NATO urged measures to prevent further escalation in the region while continuing to support Israel amidst its response to the attacks.

The GCC states meanwhile see the Israeli action against the Palestinians as a fundamental issue that contributes to regional instability and one that has the potential to escalate further still. To date, the NATO response is seen as lacking a political solution to the conflict as it makes no mention of the need for a comprehensive and sustainable two-state solution to which Israel must agree. The Gaza crisis is therefore another example where NATO and the Gulf states have different perspectives on what the most effective and just way forward should be.

Moving Forward

Twenty years following the establishment of ICI, it is clear that NATO's engagement with the GCC is due for a strategic revision. What is required in order to make ICI a comprehensive and substantive contribution to Gulf regional security in the coming twenty years is a unified strategic framework that reflects both NATO and GCC threat perceptions and concerns. This involves ensuring two-way communication between ICI and the Gulf states as well as GCC involvement in the development of the strategic concept that includes Saudi Arabia and Oman. During a visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2013, the first ever by a sitting NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg stated that there "is huge potential for NATO to do more with Saudi Arabia because we have mutual challenges."² And while he cited the areas of maritime security, protection of critical infrastructure, the fight against terrorism, as well as innovation and military education as areas to focus on, it is clear that the first step is to arrange for an official inclusion of the Kingdom into the ICI reformed structure.

On the broader level of information sharing and expertise, regular institutional mechanisms need to be established that provide a comprehensive assessment of the issues that play a role in the Gulf region, the wider Middle East, and North Africa as well as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. The dialogue among the NATO initiatives of the MD and ICI should be brought closer together as many of the challenges pertaining to the regions cannot be separated from one another. On the specific aspects, the unified strategic framework needs to lay out in clear detail what the nature of the security commitment is and where the value-added of the relationship lies. Emphasis needs to be given to joint training, capacity-building, and coordinated maneuvers, in particular on the maritime security front. Taken together, such an approach will ensure that ICI will continue to play a fundamental role)

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² National Treaty Organization, (December 2023). "Secretary General sets out vision for deeper NATO–Saudi Arabia cooperation in historic first visit to Riyadh." https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_220769.htm (accessed June 17, 2024).

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