



NATO-GCC Engagement: A Question of Appetite

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NATO-GCC Engagement: A Question of Appetite

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, or ICI, was initiated by NATO during the Istanbul Summit in June 2004, inviting all six GCC member states to engage in tailored, operational security collaborations with NATO in domains including counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, border security, disaster response readiness, and defense reform guidance. It was developed as a step toward transitioning from a "[genuine partnership](#)" framework with the seven member-states in the Mediterranean Dialogue — Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia — to establish a distinct 'proposal' for the Gulf. Four out of the six invited nations (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE) ultimately joined the ICI and formalized agreements from January to May 2005. Saudi Arabia and Oman opted not to endorse the agreement as members of the ICI; rather, they continued to engage independently in particular activities while refraining from complete accession.

The ICI was organized as a more informal, bilateral, and non-binding arrangement compared to NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program, which aimed to prepare Central and Eastern European nations for possible future membership. Unlike the PfP, which offered a definitive trajectory via standardized multinational frameworks and mechanisms, the ICI was founded on six fundamental principles—non-discrimination, self-differentiation, mutual engagement, non-imposition, diversity, and complementarity—aimed explicitly at addressing Gulf states' apprehensions about their sovereignty and NATO's collective defense identity. However, these principles—avoiding a single relationship model and offering a membership path—hampered building the institutional momentum tied to a clearly defined end goal. Twenty years post-establishment, the ICI continues to evolve

based on a "Partnership Cooperation Menu," detailing specific bilateral collaborative efforts instead of a unified strategic policy framework. Additionally, the ICI regional center in Kuwait, inaugurated in 2017, signifies the inaugural concrete advancement within the ICI — functioning mostly as a training and discourse center with no particular mandate.

Given its limited impact, the ICI requires "[substantive reforms](#)" in light of the constantly changing and evolving world system. Despite NATO's numerous outreach efforts to its partners — through the establishment of the NATO-ICI Regional Center in Kuwait, the appointment of a Special Representative for the South Neighborhood at the 2024 Summit, and various Summit pledges to enhance partnerships — the ICI has not delivered according to expectations. Existing narratives explain the stagnation in NATO-GCC partnership one of two ways: as a failure of NATO to invest genuinely in the Gulf, or as the latter's reluctance to engage with what NATO offers. So far, neither framing captures the dynamic well.

This policy brief calls for a third perspective. The disparity between NATO's engagement initiatives and the enthusiasm exhibited by the Gulf states cannot be attributed only to a unilateral shortcoming of alliance programs. Instead, it signifies a genuine bilateral inadequacy. NATO's competing goals, differing perspectives within the alliance on engaging with the Gulf, and ongoing tensions regarding acceptable norms for interaction with Gulf states have rendered Gulf engagement a secondary concern. The Gulf states have prioritized strategic hedging, influenced by perceived threats from Iran, engagements with Russia and China, existing bilateral security agreements, and their growing capacity to



generate security independently. All this has resulted in a reluctance to foster a more profound collective alliance arrangement within NATO. This brief emphasizes that the ICI's two decades of recognized, yet unresolved problems serve as proof that the shortfall is systemic rather than a design defect that can be fixed through reform. The classification of the ICI as either a structural issue or a design defect directly influences the nature of reforms that should be implemented.

Framing the 'Appetite' Question

This policy brief adopts 'appetite' to cover two distinct concepts: political will and operational capability. An alliance, or a state, may want to expand a partnership but lack the bandwidth to do so, or it may have the potential but lack the political will to prioritize it. Treating both scenarios as one does not accurately capture the existing dynamics.

It is essential to determine whose appetite is being addressed. The NATO institutional framework, being a consensus-driven entity, is a collective posture and does not reflect the sum of its members' individual preferences. National capitals have significantly outpaced the Alliance on Gulf affairs and have engaged with the Gulf bilaterally more vigorously than the NATO collective. Merging these divisions results in holding "NATO" accountable for internal alliance conflicts and treating the Gulf as a single actor with one set of attitudes.

The primary issue lies not in NATO's inadequate engagement with the Gulf Region, but in the simultaneous divergence of supply and demand. [NATO](#) has persistently sought to enhance public awareness of its connection with the Gulf through the establishment of the NATO-ICI Regional Center in Kuwait in 2017, the appointment of a Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood in 2024, and by advocating for greater involvement across the

MENA and Sahel regions during the 2024 Washington Summit. At the same time, the GCC has gradually diversified away from any single security patron. This could be seen in building their own domestic defense industries, deepening arms-procurement and diplomatic ties with Turkey and South Korea, and investing in mini-lateral groupings like IMEC and I2U2 that sit outside any Western alliance and NATO structure. Each side has therefore its own reasons for maintaining this distance.

Diagnosing the Deficit

The formative years of the ICI were predominantly influenced by inconspicuous, collaborative conduct. An illustration of such could be seen in the 2011 NATO-led operation in Libya, which complicated the dynamics between Gulf States and NATO, and continues to affect their relationship presently. Indeed, only two Gulf nations — Qatar and the UAE — endorsed the preliminary request for involvement. GCC countries, among other 22-Arab nations, additionally [implored](#) the Arab League to petition the UN for the endorsement of a no-fly zone. The Arab League's appeal for the establishment of a no-fly zone provided Western countries with the political justification to intervene. Qatar and the UAE advanced their assistance by supplying aircraft to implement the no-fly zone. This marked the inaugural instance of Gulf State military aircraft participating in a NATO-led combat mission.

The difficulties emerged as the mission deviated from its sanctioned boundaries outlined in the civilian protection segment of [UNSC Resolution 1973](#) and transitioned toward what was eventually perceived by the international community as regime change. Following the enactment of UNSCR 1973, it was uncovered that several NATO members and all Gulf States violated the concurrent UN arms embargo. The subsequent disintegration of the Libyan state has been perceived as an



undermining of the R2P doctrine. For Gulf Capitals, the insights gained from Libya pertained less to opposing interventions outright—despite their active involvement in the operation—and more to the dangers associated with financing a NATO-branded initiative, the outcome of which would either be dominated by NATO or left ungoverned by both NATO and its regional partners. These lessons illustrate a continual apprehension over the utilization of NATO as a means for collective action, which may exacerbate existing sovereignty issues inherent in ICI's framework.

The persistent identification of issues with the ICI has been evident since all independent assessments of the ICI demonstrate that the framework's shortcomings have consistently been [diagnosed but remain unfixed](#). The persistence of the same problems following numerous assessments suggests that the fundamental reason for their unresolved status is rooted in the program's design structure. Had there been a design flaw or error within the ICI, it is probable that reforms would have been implemented to address the issues once identified; nevertheless, each instance of NATO's outreach concerning the ICI (such as the “deeper security partnership” articulated at the 2010 Lisbon Summit, the creation of a new “Regional Center” in 2017, and the designation of a “Special Representative” for the ICI in 2024) led to some minor organizational adjustments in ICI's operations.

Yet none of these initiatives altered the fundamental nature of the relationship. The rationale for this stagnation originates from the independent and enduring interests of both parties in preserving the existing dynamics of their relationship — NATO's bandwidth preoccupied by developments in the Eastern flank and Russia's continuing security threats, Gulf capitals and their respective hedging --

rather than any technological deficiencies within the ICI.

NATO's Side

Four elements help explain NATO's constrained readiness to engage in a more substantial institutional commitment to the Gulf.

The primary element is bandwidth competition. Since 2014, and particularly since February 2022, NATO has encountered an excessive burden of obligations on strategic and political issues on the eastern front and the persistent war in Ukraine. Consequently, the [2022 Strategic Concept](#) — NATO's inaugural update since 2010 — declared that “the Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace,” contrary to the assertion made in the 2010 Strategic Concept, and designates Russia as “the most significant and direct threat” to Allied security; however, the Gulf is deemed a lesser priority theater due to limited bandwidth availability (not due to a diminished institutional commitment,) rather than a deliberate choice by Allies to lessen their engagement.

The second element is discord among NATO member nations. Representatives from the southern region – France, Italy, Spain — have consistently advocated for increased attention to North Africa, the Sahel, and the Gulf. Certain [initiatives](#) are evident in the resolutions reached at the 2024 NATO Washington Summit concerning the Southern Neighborhood, including the appointment of a Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood and the creation of the NATO Hub for the South in Naples. Nations on the eastern front and the Baltic nations are primarily focused on the conventional and hybrid threats posed by Russia. As a result, they possess diminished motivation to invest in or endorse a wider Gulf agenda that does not directly impact their security interests. Consequently, even within



NATO — where substantial discussions occur regarding the realistic commitment of Allies to new initiatives in specific domains — there is an internal discord concerning the necessity for enhanced institutional dedication to defense operations in the Gulf region.

The third element is normative friction. A core element of NATO's identity, rooted in common democratic principles, generates unease regarding collaborations with monarchical, 'less perceived democratic' governments in the Gulf. Although this unease is mainly rhetorical, certain allies have faced internal resistance over their defense collaborations with Gulf nations involved in the conflict in Yemen, for example. Furthermore, despite European legislators occasionally discussing the circumstances surrounding [arms sales to Gulf allies](#) engaged in different conflict situations, such discussions do not hinder those allies from maintaining their bilateral defense partnerships. Despite NATO's institutional preference to refrain from incorporating this tension into the collective ICI framework, it nonetheless constrains the extent to which Allies will engage in a markedly more strategic, collective cooperation concerning defense in the Gulf.

The fourth element refers to Türkiye's unusual stance. As the only NATO member with substantially independent influencing capabilities on regional security dynamics in the Gulf, Türkiye provides a distinctive perspective for analysis. Türkiye has established significant bilateral defense-industrial partnerships with Gulf nations, exemplified by the presence of a Turkish military base in Qatar and extensive sales of drones and ground systems across the region, pursued through national channels instead of NATO's collective structure. Ankara's footing in the region reached a new level in August 2026, when it joined Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in signing the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement. This trilateral pact gives Ankara a formal

collective-defense commitment with the Gulf, and which remains [inclusive](#) in nature, that sits entirely outside of NATO's own Article 5 framework. This showcases that Türkiye remains arguably the sole member of the Alliance possessing a profound comprehension of the security dynamics in the Gulf, so it will increasingly perceive its bilateral relationships with Gulf nations as a tool for its autonomous national foreign policy aims. At times, this might position Türkiye in opposition to, rather than bolster, the collective ICI framework instituted by NATO — a fact that NATO's diverse Gulf strategy documents generally overlook.

The Gulf's Side

The deficits on the Gulf side are at least as significant, and perhaps even more so, considering the diminished full ICI membership and the restricted practical scope of the initiative.

Over the years, hedging has become closer to a default operating principle for GCC governments. While GCC capitals may have relied on the US as their sole security guarantor, they maintained other channels - cultivating ties with Ankara, Paris, London, and Beijing. The developing situation since the first US-Israel joint attacks on Iran in 2025 have further highlighted the bloc's quest for strategic autonomy and diversification. The latter is not constrained to Gulf security, whereas the same instinct shapes Gulf economic strategy in Vision 2030, trade and tech partnerships with the EU, China, India, and the US, all at once.

Strategic hedging seems to be the principal motive for the Gulf states' simultaneous armament acquisition and diplomatic interactions, and those with Russia and China mark less a break from reliance on the Washington than an old instinct extending into a new domain. This dual-track approach



signifies more of a strategic diversification than a discontent with the West. Consequently, the Gulf states' engagement in this form of hedging signifies intentions to enhance their negotiating leverage with significant global players. Consequently, irrespective of any modifications made to the effort to address some Gulf apprehensions, the Gulf will persist in this strategy of hedging as it aligns with their interests.

A second area of disparity in threat assessment concerns NATO's categorization of the most serious threats to the alliance. NATO recognizes China as the second most critical systemic threat, after Russia. Nonetheless, their viewpoints are incongruent with those of the Gulf nations. The foremost danger recognized by Gulf nations is Iran, especially in light of its nuclear program, missile capabilities, and proxy militias. Although there exist domains where both NATO and the GCC [share perceptions](#) on danger assessments, such as Iran, they do not correspond in every aspect. Moreover, while NATO sees China's expanding influence in the area as a potential threat that warrants a response, the Gulf states regard China as a vital economic partner and have shown little inclination to adopt NATO's view of China's growing presence in the region.

A further element affecting the Gulf's desire for a stronger alliance with NATO is the transformation of the Gulf's evolving self-conception as a security provider instead of recipient. In the last decade, [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#) have acquired significant expertise in engaging in expeditionary operations across Yemen. Both nations have made substantial investments in developing domestic defense sectors. For instance, Saudi Arabia's [SAMI](#) aims to localize 50% of defense expenditures within the country by 2030. Before 2018, under 4% of Saudi Arabia's defense expenditure was allocated to domestic sources; by 2024-2025,

this percentage is projected to rise to 19-25%. The [EDGE Group](#), located in the UAE, is likewise allocating resources to enhance local industrial competencies for the manufacture of sophisticated armaments. Recent research indicates that Saudi Arabia has shifted from expeditionary warfare paradigms to those prioritizing deterrence, judicious use of force, and the attainment of specific political objectives. The terminology employed by observers to characterize Riyadh's maneuvers indicates a developmental phase for Riyadh as an independent entity not relying on external security provisions. In light of the recent advancements in defense modernization initiatives among the Gulf states, many of the existing GCC initiatives undermine the assumptions regarding the necessity of a deeper alliance with NATO to fulfill an unaddressed capability need.

Ultimately, disparities within the GCC indicate that 'Gulf appetite' ought not to be regarded as a homogeneous variable. Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE have all consented to join ICI. Saudi Arabia and Oman abstained, and for different reasons. Riyadh's abstention is less of a rejection of NATO than a preference for leading rather than joining. Saudi Arabia continues to seek anchoring any regional security arrangements rather than join as a mere signatory member. This, combined with the Kingdom's outsized economic and geopolitical weight, renders the absence particularly consequential. Oman's abstention rests on a different logic, reflected in the country's long-standing tradition of strategic autonomy, mediation, and neutrality that predates ICI and shapes Muscat's approach to nearly every regional alliance, not just NATO.

Scenarios

Rather than viewing the quest for new structural partnership as a binary choice between "more NATO" and "less," this brief presents three key



phases of how the relationship with the GCC could possibly unfold.

- **Level One - *Status Quo Erosion*:** No official resolutions would have been established concerning the ICI; yet, the ICI will persist as technically 'active' albeit predominantly dormant, with sporadic high-level declarations at summits, informal interactions among working groups, and no substantive alterations in content. For the last decade, the relationship conformed to this framework: a communiqué line reaffirming the partnership, a periodic NATO+4 ministerial, and training courses and the Regional Centre in Kuwait. All the above remain activities that keep the initiative on technical life support, without necessarily adding to it. If prevailing patterns are not mitigated, the most probable result is Status Quo Drift. Two decades of recurrent diagnoses lacking resolutions, as previously mentioned, illustrate that drift is the approach necessitating minimal institutional exertion. The risky outcome of this tier is irrelevance: the ICI becomes a line item revisited at each summit without being fixed.
- **Level two - *Functional-Only Cooperation*:** NATO and Gulf nations discreetly strengthen collaboration over specific operational elements like maritime security, cyber defense, counterterrorism, and disaster response. Given the momentum built in Ankara at the 2026 NATO summit, it could be said that this tier is now less hypothetical and is partly underway. Existing initiatives already embody this type of technical cooperation, like NATO's own Operation Sea Guardian. Scaling such frameworks deliberately would help distinguish Tier Two as a strategy rather

than a byproduct. Nevertheless, cooperation based solely on practicalities will fail to tackle the fundamental political issues or symbolic significance. Tier two represents a pragmatic expectation owing to its comparatively modest expense and the uncontentious nature for both sides: it does not necessitate Gulf capital to endorse language about mutual democratic principles they cannot genuinely uphold, nor does it compel NATO allies to resolve disparities concerning the significance of Gulf nations. Tier two is evaluated as a feasible long-term outcome. Given the inherent structural character of the aforementioned impediments, rather than merely being amendable, it is improbable that functional collaboration will seamlessly evolve into political alignment. Consequently, the two may persist autonomously indefinitely.

- **Level three - *A fortified political endeavor*:** This would signify novel structures/frameworks, heightened visibility of summits, and augmented political resources allocated by both parties, including, but not limited to, an "ICI 2.0" in substance, potentially incorporating Saudi Arabia and Oman, an elevated NATO-GCC summit format, and new funding for the Regional Centre's mandate. As previously indicated, due to conflicting priorities for NATO, the GCC hedging tactics, and varying interpretations of threats, tier three would remain the least probable. A political initiative can transpire irrespective of previous functional advancements; however, a significant disruption—such as a durable post-conflict agreement that transforms the regional threat landscape



after an extended war in Iran commencing in 2026—might establish a political opportunity detached from ongoing functional progress. Tier Three is more likely to remain aspirational, as the kind of outcomes it proposes still lacks the underlying conditions that would foster them.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are built to deepen functional cooperation (Tier 2) without necessarily drifting back to the current status quo inertia (Tier one) or forcing political relaunch (Tier 3.)

- *Reframe the ICI around concrete, measurable deliverables rather than political symbolism:* Efforts should first realign the objective of the ICI to focus on concrete results and practical deliverables rather than mere symbolic assertions. NATO ought to refrain from initiating a project founded on aspirational declarations (as Gulf capitals are improbable to align with such goals) and rather, reformulate the public framework of the ICI to focus on concrete and quantifiable cooperation in maritime security, cyber defense, and counter-terrorism. Success measures must be separated from any anticipation of political agreement.
 - *Formally designate individual allies as connective tissue within the relationship, not competing tracks:* The French military installation in Abu Dhabi, the British military site in Bahrain, and Italian naval operations in the region already constitute the most notable manifestation of NATO member nations' presence in the Gulf. Current efforts should focus on designating each member nation as a
- conduit within the diverse bilateral relationships instead of perceiving them as rival pathways. NATO has the capacity to establish reporting frameworks, liaison activities, and joint training protocols through these bilateral efforts to enhance collective situational awareness. Nonetheless, any operations under the NATO banner will necessitate political consensus among all member states.
- *Commission a dedicated internal review of Türkiye's bilateral Gulf relationship and how they interact with the ICI's collective objective:* effectively address the Türkiye dossier by instituting a NATO internal evaluation of how Ankara's bilateral ties with Gulf nations influence shared ICI objectives. This may result in established official de-confliction protocols or at the very least an acknowledgment that Türkiye's bilateral interactions would persist beyond the NATO structure.
 - *Coordinate rather than compete with the EU's parallel Gulf engagement:* As Brussels advances its bilateral FTAs and Structured Security Dialogue framework, NATO can aim for complementary goals instead of redundant ones — enabling trade and extensive strategic alliances to stay within the EU's domain while concentrating on achieving the aforementioned stringent security outcomes. The goal should be to prevent redundancy in the collaborative initiatives between NATO and the EU's involvement with Gulf nations.
 - *Treat the 2026 Iran conflict as a live source of intelligence on Gulf security preferences, and systematically capture*



its lessons: The 2026 Iran conflict has presented a theatre that offers contemporary insights into the security capabilities Gulf States seek from international allies—such as missile defense, maritime security collaboration, and intelligence sharing—compared to those they prefer to handle bilaterally. NATO ought to compile these insights into their secondary functional agenda, offering a more tangible opportunity for NATO to obtain such direct intelligence concerning Gulf State objectives.

All in all, these five steps establish a modest yet coherent trajectory: one that does not succumb to the delusion of an imminent ICI 2.0 nor consigns the relationship to an additional decade of dormant communiqués. What links them is a shared premise, which is that NATO and the Gulf currently share sufficient interest in functional, measurable cooperation to foster genuine progress. Political alignment may eventually occur, particularly as the aftermath of the 2026 Iran conflict will continue to alter the region's threat assessment in a manner that fosters genuine convergence rather than mere proximity. However, this would be a result of altered circumstances, rather than reformed institutions. The prudent course is to construct a lasting foundation within Tier Two until such a change occurs. The persistence of hedging, divergent threat perceptions, and competing bandwidth should not be viewed as obstacles that must be overcome, but rather as the operational conditions that any realistic partnership will be required to navigate.

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