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SWP Comment

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Regaining NATO's Southern Neighbours

The Alliance Should Seize the Opportunity to Jointly Reshape Southern Partnerships

Jane Kinninmont and Isabelle Werenfels

NATO's 2023 summit in Vilnius was dominated by Russia's war against Ukraine. The summit in Washington, D.C., in July 2024 will be influenced by an additional major conflict in NATO's neighbourhood: the war in Gaza and the related heightened tensions in the Middle East. These have also negatively impacted attitudes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region towards many of the Alliance's members. The Vilnius summit decision to reflect deeply on NATO's southern neighbourhood turned out to be timely. An independent expert group appointed by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg contributed towards this reflection process. The group, which included the two authors of this paper, found there are shared security interests between NATO and countries in the south, including on counterterrorism and maritime security. Yet, security perceptions are far from identical, especially when it comes to the role of strategic competition. NATO needs to adapt its mindset to take advantage of opportunities for problem-solving cooperation with partners who may not share its views about international order, and who have concerns about the risk of importing a new Cold War.

In 2023 the Vilnius summit, in line with NATO's "360-degree approach", called for a "comprehensive and deep reflection" on the Alliance's relations with its southern partners. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg tasked an independent expert group to write a report, which was published in May 2024. It is intended not only to inform the Washington summit, but also as a first step in a long-term process to deepen relations with countries in NATO's various southern neighbourhoods, namely in North Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East and the Gulf region.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, NATO's primary focus has been firmly on its Eastern Neighbourhood,

reverting to its traditional orientation towards the Euro-Atlantic area after some years during which Afghanistan, Libya and an upsurge in terrorism had drawn its attention in other directions. NATO once again regards Russia as the most significant and direct threat to peace in the Euro-Atlantic area, and terrorism as the most direct asymmetric threat. NATO Allies are significantly increasing their defence spending with a focus on the eastern flank.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that the security of the different neighbourhoods is increasingly interlinked. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had repercussions on sub-Saharan Africa and the



MENA region, including on food and energy security. Yet, Western countries have also found it relatively difficult to build solidarity with their partners in the Middle East and Africa regarding support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. At the same time, Russia's partnership with Iran has deepened as Russia draws on Iranian drone supplies to assist in its invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, in NATO's southern neighbourhood, Russian narratives have gained traction, and Moscow's influence in the Sahel and Libya has been steadily growing.

Meanwhile the Alliance has recognised China as a strategic competitor, underlining the importance of NATO's interests and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. China is also influential with some Southern partners. Recent opinion polling in five Arab countries suggests that populations in southern partner countries such as Jordan and Mauritania tend to view China as having better policies for maintaining security in the MENA region than the United States.

Chinese and Russian interests in the Middle East and Africa (and elsewhere) are by no means identical, but Russia and China have deepened their cooperation in challenging US dominance in a number of international domains – in particular, the Russian leadership has adopted rhetoric of a global struggle against the West.

Despite the grand and globalising narratives, the issues at stake in the different neighbourhoods and partner countries are interlinked, but not identical. They need to be approached with a clear-eyed understanding of contexts, nuances and differences. The expert report speaks of southern neighbourhoods in the plural to account for their diversity.

Also, the developments of recent years illustrate the importance of having the bandwidth to assess and tackle issues in different regions simultaneously, and to seek to prevent crises and resolve conflicts before they escalate. Notably, the upsurge in extreme violence in the Middle East since 7 October followed years of warnings that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would descend into a major war if left unaddressed. Its greater

repercussions, not least on maritime corridors, demonstrate how the security of the Euro-Atlantic area is closely interlinked with the security of its southern partners. Strengthening security requires a long-term and institutionalised commitment to cooperation and partnership, not only a response to crises when they flare up.

The approach should also be based on an appreciation of what the southern neighbours have to offer the world (in terms of knowledge and culture as well as trade and economic growth), and not depict them simply as sources of threats.

Based on their respective expertise and perspectives on NATO's neighbourhoods, the authors of this SWP Comment focus here on a few key takeaways from this wide-ranging process.

Shifting the mindset

NATO's partnerships with southern countries have been longstanding. The Mediterranean Dialogue format, initiated in 1994, includes seven MENA states (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia), and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, dating back to 2004, includes four Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). Yet, due in part to regional conflicts and diverging security interests, also among partners, the degree of cooperation has largely remained below the expectations of NATO and its partners, and there has been a call for new ideas.

The NATO partners consulted during the reflection process noted that they are not always well understood, and that in their regions NATO is associated with its prior contentious military interventions. Yet, what both NATO and its partners are seeking is how to better jointly address common security needs, namely through security cooperation that is supported by political dialogue. The report sought to provide realistic recommendations that are informed, among other things, by resource constraints at a time when the demands on the budgets of NATO and its Allies are multiplying. The

recommendations are therefore primarily focused on using existing NATO tools more efficiently and embedding the cooperation in a new mindset. Hence, the group's published report offers a number of guiding principles. These include:

Non-exclusivity. NATO's partners have made it clear that they do not want to be drawn into a "new Cold War" and be treated like mere figures on a larger geopolitical chessboard. NATO should thus avoid pushing its partners to decide between the Alliance and its strategic competitors, but rather win them over with a better offer. NATO Mission Iraq, established in 2018, is a good example of building relations of trust – in a country where Iran has substantial influence – through a long-term, non-combatant advisory and training mission located in the country. Navigating non-exclusivity will require different approaches depending on the specific geopolitical constellations in any context.

Values and credibility. The "rules-based international order" framing used by NATO often does not resonate in the southern neighbourhood, where questions are raised about how consistently multilateralism and international law are applied in practice. This is a broader issue for Western institutions across their engagement with the rest of the world: It is not to say Western organisations should put their values aside, but they should not assume others see them as having the moral high ground in the first place.

The Alliance's credibility among Southern partners also hinges upon its members taking more consistent approaches to international and humanitarian law in different conflicts and regions. Moreover, NATO's credibility depends on its reliability. Delivering upon promises is key. It is unfortunate when successful cooperation projects are discontinued, as was the case, for example, with NATO's demining cooperation with Egypt, which provided value-added also for the local population.

Cooperative spirit and enhanced representation. Jointly identifying shared interests, a common sense of purpose and more ownership are essential for building more trustful

relations between NATO and its Southern partners. This includes engaging with them as active security contributors that NATO can also learn from. The need for better representation of Southern partners at NATO summits and symposia, particularly events with a partnership angle, goes without saying. But it is also essential to ensure that partners are included in the conceptualisation of NATO events and policies that are pertinent to them. This could help avoid mishaps such as planning events with partner participation during Muslim holidays.

Generally, it is in NATO's interest to enhance a profound understanding of and sensitivity for the very different local contexts in its southern neighbourhoods. For instance, some countries, particularly in the Gulf, have few qualms about NATO cooperation, while governments and armies in some North African countries prefer lower levels of visibility due to the non-favourable opinions of the public.

Flexibility and synergies. As NATO's southern neighbourhoods are so diverse and substantial conflicts exist among partners, the Alliance has to be flexible with regard to cooperation formats. Thematic formats are particularly promising and also allow for countries in the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative to exchange with NATO partners from other regions and address common challenges, such as counter-terrorism, cyber security, the securing of food corridors or the repercussions of climate change on armed forces. Thematic dialogues such as on Women, Peace and Security or disaster management could be low-threshold entry points for potential new interlocutors, namely in sub-Saharan Africa.

Finally, NATO needs to focus on its added value and not spread itself too thin. It should renew its political will for cooperation with the European Union (EU), which has many additional tools to bring to bear for stabilisation, including the all-important economic dimension. It can also act as a supporting partner for initiatives led by others and should explore greater cooperation with the United Nations and regional orga-

nisations such as the African Union, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council in various domains, including disaster management and climate security.

Actions over words

Exchanges with NATO's Southern partners in the course of the reflection process highlighted three things: their very positive reactions to being actively consulted, their concrete expectations from NATO and their own threat perceptions. What emerged strongly was their desire for de-escalation, their concerns about Western double standards and the related difficulties in justifying NATO cooperation domestically, unless there are visible benefits for the populations.

Domains that partners repeatedly cited as priorities were counterterrorism, cyber and hybrid threats, and defence capacity-building (DCB). It is important to emphasise that neither NATO nor the Southern partners want or anticipate military intervention. Instead, the discussion is around building up local capabilities to provide security. This approach is somewhat complicated by the variety of conflicts in the region and the fact that partners are sometimes involved on different sides of these, whether in the Middle East, the Sahel, North Africa (namely Libya) or sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Sudan). Yet, there are numerous issues pertinent to all partners, which are reflected in the expert report's recommendations.

First and foremost, NATO needs a "*face for the south*", that is, a high-level position exclusively dedicated to relations with the south as well as for harmonising NATO's internal efforts – political and military – with regard to the south. This includes optimally tying together the activities of NATO's Hub for the south in Naples; NATO's main instruments for outreach to the Southern partners and potential new interlocutors; as well as NATO's Contact Point Embassies in partner countries into the broader approach towards the south. Regular high- and working-level personal contacts, mutual visits and context-specific knowledge are essen-

tial for building sustainable relations that are crisis-proof.

To enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of DCB, NATO could consider setting up a *standing mission for training and capacity-building* that is ready to support partners upon demand. This would require swiftly increasing common funding for DCB, which still relies in large part on voluntary contributions from Allies, but these fluctuate due to a number of factors, including individual Allies' changing political and security interests in partner countries.

The expert report identifies several key domains for problem-solving-oriented cooperation. As well as the obvious area of counter-terrorism cooperation, there are a number of other domains where there are strong shared interests, both with governments and populations:

- Enhancing *maritime security* in its multiple dimensions, with activities ranging from securing supply chains (including food corridors) to protecting undersea data cables (a growing concern for NATO and partners alike) and tackling illicit fishing.
- Strengthening partners' *resilience* against crises, including building and sharing expertise in early-warning systems, building capacity to respond to future extreme weather events or earthquakes, and supporting partners to render critical infrastructures less vulnerable.
- Using NATO's growing expertise on *climate change and security* to help militaries to mitigate and adapt to the multiple effects of climate change on armed forces (ranging from logistics to equipment, and also entailing energy transitions in the security sector). This is one of the domains in which the Alliance has far more to offer to militaries in terms of technology and research than its strategic competitors.
- The report also touches on strengthening *arms control*, notably by stemming the tide of small arms and light weapons in cooperation with African countries. NATO can also work with partners to emphasise norms of nuclear non-proliferation,

which are under pressure in the Middle East due to the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and the concerns that Iran's neighbours have about its advancing capabilities in nuclear technologies. Demining was also flagged by some as a priority, and among other things is linked to food security because it brings more land back into use.

Across all of its domains, NATO has increased its own focus on *women, peace and security* and on *human security*, all of which are highly relevant to security and stabilisation in the southern neighbourhoods (recognised, notably, by the African Union). This is particularly important, as engaging closely with the security establishments in authoritarian contexts is not necessarily a recipe for stability, especially where security forces may be involved in internal conflict dynamics. NATO thus needs to make sure that cooperation in the above domains is designed to benefit populations. For instance, maritime security cooperation should not only protect international trade, but also include strengthening coastguards to tackle illicit fishing, which disrupts local livelihoods.

In each country context, NATO should also identify how to take forward principles on the governance of armed forces. At the same time, Allies need to ensure that their interventions “do no harm” in terms of inadvertently contributing to conflict dynamics or repression. The best way to understand how not to do any harm is by engaging with a broad spectrum of stakeholders – including civil society and scholars who are from those regions – to understand how cooperation may affect different local societies in different ways, and to understand what is feasible in terms of good governance.

Facing the root causes of conflicts

The fight against mis- and disinformation is an increasingly central priority for NATO and its Allies, just as it is for the EU. Yet, it is not just a matter of correcting facts: Allies need to be aware that the narratives of strategic competitors often gain traction by play-

ing on real and existing grievances in the southern neighbourhoods. These range from traumatic colonial histories and experiences of military interventions by NATO Allies to the live conflicts in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian one. Related to this conflict are perceptions of Western double standards concerning the protection of civilians and international humanitarian law.

Allies need to develop an understanding that perspectives on global and local conflicts may differ substantially from their own (i.e. “where you stand depends on where you sit”), and that it is not simply an issue of developing a better narrative.

There is also a “battle of offers”. For example, many Southern interlocutors are attracted to China's offers for very practical reasons, such as the ability to source equipment more quickly. China also projects itself as a power that is interested in delivering economic prosperity while not taking sides in regional conflicts. For Allies, being able to support better security will not only require making the “better offer” but also addressing the root causes of conflicts. This is not primarily NATO's task, and the Alliance is not directly involved in conflict mediation. However, it has in the past affirmed its support for political solutions to the conflicts in the region – notably when it launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2004 – and the report recommends that it should reaffirm its support for international diplomacy to bring about a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine, as well as conflict resolution in Libya and Syria.

Meanwhile, the root causes of conflicts in the Sahel region – including the communal and political violence as well as the meddling by external actors, all of which are feeding violent extremism, organised crime and forced displacement – exacerbated by the effects of climate change and desertification, cannot be easily addressed by the Alliance, nor other Western actors. Yet, NATO can explore new partnerships in bordering regions that are also concerned with destabilisation in the Sahel. It could also support mappings to identify blind spots in the existing aid packages being



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provided to the region by Allies and international organisations. And it has the possibility to open its training facilities to civil society actors, journalists and think tankers from the Sahel countries.

In the same vein, NATO could propose a High-Level Regional Security and Stability Dialogue or dialogues between relevant international and regional organisations to understand the possible levels of support for the efforts of organisations that are more focused on addressing the root causes of the conflicts that produce much of the violence and insecurity in the south.

Beyond the summit

The Washington summit offers an opportunity to send a message to existing and potential new Southern partners that they matter to NATO, and that the Alliance wants to engage with them in new ways. But even more important is that the Southern partners do not fall down NATO's list of priorities after the summit. The focus on the south needs to be institutionalised. And while some measures can be taken immediately and/or have quick effects, others will take patience.

- An important short-term signal to the southern neighbourhood would be for the incoming Secretary General, Mark Rutte, to make it an early priority to visit the different regions where NATO has Southern partners. High-level political dialogue should take place more regularly and also involve the proposed special envoy for the southern neighbourhood.
- In order to strengthen the quality and depth of the partnerships, there is a need to develop mechanisms that will allow NATO and partners to regularly assess and measure the results of their cooperation, including input from non-governmental stakeholders. This also implies optimising NATO's internal structures and ensuring adequate resources from the common budget.

- Working on NATO's image in the southern neighbourhood is a long-term project. It requires building up a better institutional understanding of diverse local contexts as well as more targeted communications in the specific contexts by systematically drawing on local expertise from the southern neighbourhood.
- NATO should also keep an eye open for new interlocutors who have an interest in engaging with NATO. The Alliance can seek to build from existing partnerships to open cooperation activities to third countries, namely in sub-Saharan Africa and the Gulf.
- NATO should ensure that new interlocutors (and even existing partners) can more easily understand what NATO has to offer them. The spectrum of tools theoretically available also to non-partners – ranging from low-threshold cooperation via NATO-affiliated Centres of Excellence to DCB – is enormous and complex to navigate for those not familiar with NATO.

At the end of the day, the most promising way to strengthen the standing of the Alliance in its southern neighbourhoods is by building more trustful, credible and resilient relations with partners than NATO's strategic competitors. NATO should aim at building trust by listening to partners' needs more actively, by more broadly cooperating in domains where NATO can offer added value, and by demonstrating that the Alliance is a reliable and transparent partner that delivers.

Obviously, reaching such an institutionalised relationship of mutual benefit to NATO and those it cooperates with will also strongly depend on the partners' choices. Yet, NATO can influence these choices by demonstrating that it delivers substantial and tangible benefits to security in the broader sense of the term to those partners that (pro-)actively seek to build a two-way sustainable relationship with the Alliance.

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