



NATO IN THE SOUTH 2025

Strategic Reflections and
Cooperative Security

NATO in the South

Strategic Reflections and Cooperative Security

High-Level Conference

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NATO Defense College Foundation

In co-operation with
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NATO Defense College Foundation

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WELCOME REMARKS

"NATO in the South", Rome, 5 December 2025.

Source: NATO Defense College Foundation







*Il Ministro degli Affari Esteri
e della Cooperazione Internazionale*

MESSAGGIO SCRITTO DEL VICE PRESIDENTE DEL CONSIGLIO E MINISTRO DEGLI AFFARI ESTERI E DELLE COOPERAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE, ON. ANTONIO TAJANI, PER L'EVENTO "NATO IN THE SOUTH – STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS AND COOPERATIVE SECURITY"

(Roma, 5 dicembre)

Ringrazio gli organizzatori e l'Ambasciatore Minuto Rizzo per l'invito e saluto tutti i partecipanti a questa importante occasione di dialogo su un tema centrale per l'Italia, l'Europa e la NATO.

Il Fianco Sud è oggi una vera linea avanzata della sicurezza euro-atlantica. Una priorità strategica per il Governo. Proprio questa settimana ho partecipato alla riunione dei Ministri degli Esteri della NATO. In tutti i miei interventi ho insistito sull'importanza della sicurezza nel Fianco Sud, nel quadro di un approccio della nostra sicurezza che deve essere a 360 gradi.

Dall'Ucraina al Sahel, il fronte della sicurezza atlantica è uno solo, e l'Italia è ovunque in prima linea. Siamo a fianco di Kiev e degli Alleati nel Fianco Est. Lavoriamo per consolidare l'attenzione sull'area dei Balcani, per noi prioritaria, per contenere l'influenza dei nostri avversari. Siamo i principali fautori di una più strutturata azione per la stabilità del Mediterraneo allargato e dell'Africa, anche per le ricadute su sicurezza marittima, sicurezza energetica e stabilità delle infrastrutture critiche.

La cooperazione con i Paesi partner della regione è essenziale. L'impulso degli ultimi mesi va consolidato e trasformato in risultati misurabili, in vista dei prossimi appuntamenti alleati e del Vertice di Ankara.

L'apertura dell'ufficio Nato ad Amman, ospitato presso la nostra Ambasciata, e la nomina del Rappresentante Speciale per il Vicinato Meridionale sono avanzamenti significativi. L'Italia è impegnata a sostenere questo processo. È fondamentale assicurare capacità concrete di sostegno istituzionale e operativo.

Alcuni snodi sono particolarmente cruciali, anche per la crescente assertività di attori esterni e il moltiplicarsi delle minacce ibride. Penso in particolare alla Libia e al Sahel. Aree dove l'Italia è in prima linea, anche per favorire un più coeso ed efficace impegno internazionale. Il mantenimento della nostra missione militare in Niger (la MISIN) è una concreta dimostrazione del nostro impegno.

La costruzione di un pilastro europeo credibile all'interno dell'Alleanza Atlantica rappresenta un moltiplicatore fondamentale della nostra risposta in tutti gli scenari. Anche in questo ambito il contributo dell'Italia è concreto e fattivo.

La sicurezza dell'area euro-atlantica inizia dalle nostre coste meridionali; garantirla significa proteggere le nostre società, la nostra economia, il nostro futuro. Le riflessioni odierne contribuiranno a definire il nostro impegno comune in questa direzione.

Buon lavoro a tutti!


Antonio Tajani

**Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo**

*President, NATO Defense College Foundation,
Rome*

WELCOME REMARKS

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation for the spirit in which we gather here today; a spirit of understanding and encouragement to continue this important work on security, and in particular on cooperative security, bringing people together towards a better world.

Of course, the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel remain very important objectives to be addressed. While much of our attention is currently focused on Eastern Europe (which is understandably today's agenda) we must also look ahead, keeping in mind both today's and tomorrow's priorities. So, I would just like to say a few words to welcome you here.

Notably, we are looking at the Middle East, but not only the Middle East, because there is now a direction that we call "the South", which is not precisely defined, but represents the direction of global security and what we want to achieve. And the NATO Defense College Foundation has a long record of

focusing on this part of the world. The first conference, 14 years ago, was on NATO and the Arab Spring.

So, we start from there and continue in these directions. The issues at stake, of course, are well known: political stability, strategic developments, regional cooperation, and civil society. We do not pretend to solve these problems, but we wish to address them in a spirit of understanding.

We define our objective, which is the objective of this conference, as contributing to sound analysis that can lead to a better environment in terms of security and regional cooperation. The Middle East, as well as parts of Africa, such as the Sahel, are important regions. They often make the headlines, but what is significant for us is that a process of transformation is underway: strategic developments that may lead to new and different outcomes, moving from fragmentation towards more mature regional cooperation and a vibrant society, together with more widely shared well-being and a peaceful future.

That is why I especially welcome the representatives of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, because they bring a dimension that we consider central to our issues. We aim to look at the bigger picture and not to focus on specific issues, important though we know they are, because they are already monitored by everyone and we cannot add particular value there.

I wish to underline today that NATO continues to have a specific interest in cooperative security. Two important partnerships were launched in 2004: the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), addressing 13 countries, from Mauritania on the Atlantic coast to Oman on the Indian Ocean. Some concrete results have been achieved, because the objective of these partnerships is practical cooperation, not broad political principles.

It is a formula that helps to develop good relations by promoting key projects, and its main principles are joint ownership and prior consultation; very important to be clear about. Prior consultation and joint ownership, not dictating any ideas to anyone.

We know that in recent years events in Eastern Europe have attracted the main attention of the Alliance. Nevertheless, I would draw your attention to the fact that the Washington Summit last year decided to give new impetus to this southern direction, with a special action plan and an envoy appointed to develop relations with the southern neighbourhood. I would also underline that the EU has created new structures for North Africa and the Middle East. This is a welcome development, adding to the traditional role it has played in the region for a long time.

I am personally very pleased, and all of us in the NATO Defense College Foundation are very pleased, to have so many distinguished speakers and

moderators who have accepted our invitation to Rome, coming from many different perspectives, including, of course, some personal friends. We look forward to a high-level academic discussion in a spirit of mutual respect, as is the tradition of our conferences.

To conclude, my sincere thanks go to all those who have supported us, special thanks to them, as you will see listed in the programme of the event.

Biography

After having served at the Italian Embassy in Washington DC and as Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy of Italy in Prague, Ambassador **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo** worked as Head of the External Relations Office of the EEC from 1981 to 1986. In the following years, his career focused on Europe and Space Policy. In 1997 he was appointed Diplomatic Counsellor of the Minister of Defence Beniamino Andreatta, then of his successors Carlo Scognamiglio and Sergio Mattarella. In 2000, Minuto-Rizzo held the position of Italian Ambassador to the Western European Union and to the Political and

Security Committee of the EU, of which he was among the founding members. He was Deputy Secretary General of the Atlantic Alliance between 2001 and 2007. His mandate was mostly carried out in the strategic-political industrial area and in the relations with sensitive countries such as those in the Gulf and the Southern Mediterranean. He is the author of the books: *The road to Kabul* (Il Mulino-Arel, 2009); *A political journey without maps. Diversity and future in the Greater Middle East* (Rubbettino, 2013); and *NATO and the Middle East: The Making of a Partnership* (New Academia Publishing, 2018).



Catherine Bourdès

*Director Academic Plans, Policy and
Engagement, NATO Defense College, Rome*

WELCOME REMARKS

It is an honour for me to open this meeting on behalf of the NATO Defense College. The NDC is one of the few institutions where academics, military officers and diplomats regularly meet to analyse global issues together. Our mission is not only to educate, but also to understand, anticipate and support NATO's strategic thinking. It is in this spirit that I address you today.

Our Defense College will soon celebrate its 75th anniversary. We would all wish to mark this moment in a time of peace. But, as Alcide De Gasperi reminded us, "*Peace is not a gift, it is a duty.*" Today, this duty calls for clarity and realism.

Yes, war has returned to Europe, and our attention tends to turn to the Eastern flank. But this conflict should not make us forget a fundamental reality: we live in an interconnected world. Instability in the Middle East, North Africa or the Sahel has immediate consequences for the entire Euro-Atlantic area.

This is why, at the Washington Summit in 2024, Allies reaffirmed the importance of NATO's 360-degree approach. Security cannot be viewed from only one direction. Threats from the South and threats from the East do not compete with each other: they add up and reinforce one another. Our common security depends on both.

In this context, the adoption of the Action Plan for the South was a key development. The Alliance now clearly recognises that stability in the Southern neighbourhood is a major strategic priority. This understanding is strong among the European countries of the Mediterranean (Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece). For them, the Southern neighbourhood is neither distant nor abstract. They are directly affected by the challenges coming from this region: security, economic, energy and migration issues are part of their daily reality.

Italy has long called for stronger attention to the South; *Spain* has been a driving force on maritime hybrid threats; *France* has a long history of engagement in the stabilisation of the Sahel. Their experience, proximity and regional knowledge also support a broader evolution: the gradual development of a European pillar within NATO.

European countries' ability to understand and act in their immediate neighbourhood makes them essential contributors to a comprehensive approach to Southern security. Their engagement strengthens NATO by providing informed perspectives, long-established diplomatic relationships and proven operational experience. A Europe more engaged in defence, a Europe fully interoperable with and complementary to the Alliance, is not only a political objective. It is a strategic necessity, especially in this region. The emerging European pillar brings more coherence, more capacity and more continuity to NATO's efforts in the South.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Southern neighbourhood is not a secondary concern. It is one of the essential foundations of our collective security. By renewing our political approach, strengthening cooperation with our partners, building on the expertise of European Mediterranean nations and reinforcing the European pillar within the Alliance, NATO equips itself with the tools needed for effective, sustainable and coherent action.

To return one last time to the words of De Gasperi: "*The only lasting victory is the one we build together.*" May this spirit guide our discussions today.

Biography

Brigadier General **Catherine Bourdès** graduated from the Airforce Academy in 1991 and served in the Commissariat, with deployments in Turkey, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. She held senior roles, including advisor to two successive French Ministers of Armed Forces, on Transformation, then Gender issues. Her NATO experience includes positions at SHAPE and

in NATO HQ. She holds multiple master's degrees in strategic studies, international affairs, and political sciences, and is a graduate of the French War College and of the Centre for Advanced Studies in Public Service. Brigadier General Bourdès was elected Director Academic Plans, Policy and Engagement at the NATO Defense College by the NATO Military Committee in 2025.

**Ken Kitatani**

*Board of Directors, Governance Officer,
International Council on Environmental
Economics (ICEED), New York*

WELCOME REMARKS

Your Excellencies, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to join you once again at this high-level NATO Defense College Foundation gathering, underlining our shared commitment to cooperative security across the South and the wider Euro-Atlantic space. On behalf of the International Council on Environmental Economics and Development, the ICEED, please allow me to express our appreciation for the NDCF's consistent leadership in convening dialogue that is not only analytical but operationally consequential.

It truly matters who meets in this room, and when. Today's agenda makes one point unmistakable: security in the South is no longer a regional category. It is a system-wide determinant of global stability. From the Middle East and beyond, to a 360-degree security approach, and to a credible European pillar within NATO, our sessions reflect a strategic landscape in which governance, development, energy, migration and deterrence are now inseparable.

Let me briefly note, without overstatement, one emerging danger that runs through all of these regions: a renewed and quiet uptick in nuclear proliferation activity. Not the Cold War model of bipolar acceleration, but rather discrete regional acquisition, emerging interest, parallel fuel cycles and tactical capability ambitions arising simultaneously from multiple directions. This deserves sober attention, not alarm. Calibration, not escalation.

What distinguishes this conference and the NDCF's leadership is that our horizon is not merely defensive, but preventative. We are here because the diplomacy, development frameworks and deterrence calculus of the South are no longer peripheral. They are central, immediate and structurally interlinked with the Euro-Atlantic security logic.

There is no “elsewhere” in security any longer. We at ICEED remain committed to supporting NATO and the partners represented here through three concrete pillars.

First, human security is strategic security. Instability remains the most efficient fuel for escalation anywhere.

Second, AI and emerging technology governance. Interoperability must now include predictive systems, cyber resilience and intelligent alignment; not as optional architecture, but as baseline defence practice.

And *third*, climate and resource-driven risk analysis. The fragility of water, food and energy access across the Sahel, the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf is not a humanitarian concern alone. It is a force multiplier of conflict behaviour.

As we listen to today's distinguished speakers, let us carry forward a guiding principle: shared security is no longer defined by geography, but by shared responsibility in governance, capacity and foresight. This is the era of interoperable responsibility.

President Minuto-Rizzo, I thank you once again for your leadership and for convening this dialogue at precisely the moment when clarity, not caution, must guide our collective agenda.

Biography

Director **Ken Kitatani** is the Chief of Executive Board and Committee at ICEED. He joined ICEED in 2012, was appointed Director General in 2018, and has chaired the ICEED United Nations Council since 2022. Director Kitatani serves as a Council Member at the European Council, he is member of the OECD AI Expert Committee, and a representative on the UNECE WP29 committee. Director Kitatani is also a former Co-Chair and current Advisory Board member of the Center for Earth

Ethics, sits on the boards of the UN Committee of NGOs and the Society for Conservation Biology, and is a Permanent Observer to the UNFCCC Standing Committee on Finance and the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform of the UNFCCC. Furthermore, Director Kitatani advises the Vatican's Scholas Occurrentes Foundation, the Loka Initiative at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and serves as Senior Advisor to General Russel Honoré on Indigenous Affairs.



Carlo Musso

*Head, Strategic Studies, Leonardo S.P.A.,
Rome*

WELCOME REMARKS

Warm thanks to Ambassador Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo, Dr Alessandro Politi and the NATO Defense College Foundation team for organising this conference and inviting me to offer a brief opening greeting.

The events of recent years have demonstrated how, in the current international context, it is increasingly difficult to separate what is happening to the East of Europe from what is happening to the South. It is almost impossible to draw a line between defence and security, and extremely dangerous to divide the spheres of action of the European Union and NATO.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the crisis in the Middle East are interconnected in one way or another, and even a mere shift of focus from one front to the other can have significant implications for the evolution of both situations. For this reason, it is important to develop a comprehensive strategy that takes both scenarios into account.

The development of new technologies, particularly unmanned systems, and the realities of hybrid warfare and disinformation (of which we are finally becoming fully aware, as Admiral Cavodragone rightly pointed out a few days ago) have further blurred the distinction between internal security and defence, leading to the concept of global security that encompasses both.

The United States' position towards NATO has changed. Let me remind you of a couple of facts: the absence of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio from the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting two days ago in Berlin (the first such absence in 20 years) and the recent statement by US Treasury Secretary Scott Besant on [Fox Business](#), quote: "Now Putin has started making incursions into the NATO borders. The one thing I can tell you is the US is not going to get involved with troops or any of that. We will sell European weapons and then the Europeans can pass them on to Ukraine."

For this and other reasons, the US cannot currently be considered reliable, and this reality requires even stronger and more effective cooperation between NATO's European pillar, including Canada, and the EU.

The NDCF, as always, has a clear vision of global developments and has included all these issues in today's discussion. It is clear that the way in which the various dimensions unfold (the course of the war in Ukraine and stabilisation in the Middle East, the ever-increasing integration of the systems needed to ensure Western security, and the evolution of military procurement within NATO and the EU) will also have a significant impact on the defence and security industry.

For this reason, Leonardo not only closely monitors the development of the strategic situation to ensure it is ready to offer the necessary solutions at the right time, but also intends to make a valuable contribution to understanding the dynamics at play and defining appropriate responses.

I hope that today's discussion will contribute to a clearer and more shared vision of what is happening in the world, and help everyone, according to their responsibilities, to make the best decisions for the future of Europe, NATO and the world.

Biography

Mr **Carlo Musso** holds a degree in Theoretical Physics from the University of Genoa and began his career at the National Research Council (CNR). He later joined the Italian Space Agency (ASI), where he coordinated scientific programmes. Mr Musso has been a contract professor at the LUISS

Business School, a member of the executive committee of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), and a collaborator of the US-Italy Fulbright Commission. He is currently Head of Studies at Leonardo and a Board Member of the NATO Defense College Foundation.

A low-angle photograph of several tall flagpoles flying various national flags against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The flags include those of Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom. In the background, the modern glass and steel facade of the NATO headquarters building is visible. The text is overlaid on a dark blue gradient at the bottom of the image.

Is NATO's current partnership
framework sufficient to address rapidly
evolving geopolitical realities, or does it
require **structural rethinking**?

A low-angle photograph of the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, a modern glass-fronted building. Several tall flagpoles are in the foreground, flying the flags of various NATO member states, including Greece, Germany, France, Finland, Denmark, Canada, and the United States. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

SESSION I

Shifting Allied Priorities in the Euro-Atlantic Space: The Middle East Beyond the Present

The NATO headquarters in Brussels, at the center of shifting Euro-Atlantic strategic priorities.

Source: NATO

“The Middle East has long been viewed through the lens of crisis management. Yet today, we must go further than simply responding to emergencies. We need a vision for ending cycles of insecurity, not merely containing them.”



CHAIR

Ahmad Masa'deh

*Former Secretary General, the Union for the
Mediterranean, Amman*

Biography

H.E. Dr **Ahmad Masa'deh** is a Statesman Scholar with a distinguished career spanning public service, international relations, and legal practice. He has held prominent roles as Minister of Public Sector Reform and Jordan's Ambassador to the EU, Belgium, Norway, Luxembourg, and NATO. In 2010, he was elected as the Secretary-General of the Union for the Mediterranean. Dr Masa'deh's legal career is equally impressive. He has been a practicing lawyer since 1993 and is recognised for his expertise in infrastructure, energy, investment, insurance, and international arbitration,

representing clients in high-profile cases and offering expert counsel on complex legal matters. In addition to his professional accomplishments, Dr Masa'deh has contributed to academia as an Assistant Professor at the University of Jordan. Dr Masa'deh holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Law, further underscoring his commitment to excellence and thought leadership in his field. Through his extensive political, diplomatic, legal, and academic experience, Dr Masa'deh continues to make significant contributions to fostering international cooperation and advancing legal and governance standards globally.



Ian Lesser

Distinguished Fellow and Advisor to the President, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels

THE SHIFTING US PRIORITIES AND EVOLVING STRATEGY IN THE REGION

It is quite an extraordinary moment to be having this discussion. It always seems to be an extraordinary moment to be having this discussion. But it is particularly interesting, if you are going to speak for a couple of minutes about the US perspective, because coincidentally just this morning the United States released its [National Security Strategy document](#), which is quite extraordinary and has already generated a great deal of discussion, especially in Europe. It has some bearing on our conversation, actually.

It talks a great deal about the US looking south. Now, it does not mean this south; it means the Western Hemisphere. But in fact it sets up an interesting discussion about how the US, Europe and southern partners around the Mediterranean will think about their respective “souths”. Let me make three brief points. The first concerns your point about disengagement. I think it is a myth; if we take it in its extreme form, of the US disengaging both physically and

diplomatically from the region, then it is something of a myth, particularly if we think about the Mediterranean.

Indeed, many people expected President Trump to be something of an isolationist, with little interest in foreign policy. He is turning out to be a foreign policy president. One may like the direction of the policy or not, but he is activist, not isolationist, perhaps even hyper-unilateralist. Disengagement or withdrawal has not been the order of the day, especially in this region. Now, we could also discuss (again, in connection with what is happening on the European continent vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia) whether the US will remain present, and whether NATO will remain in the same way in the years ahead. Perhaps not.

But if we simply look around the region at what the administration has been doing (again, one may approve of it or not) Gaza, the Abraham Accords going back to the first administration, Iran, engagement with Türkiye, Syria, normalisation efforts, action in the Red Sea, this does not look to me like disengagement. Indeed, there is a larger naval and air presence in the Mediterranean today than there has been for decades. Some of it has moved to the Caribbean in recent weeks, but that is a different matter. The transformation in the relationship with Greece and Cyprus in terms of security cooperation (across multiple administrations, obviously) has continued. So I do not see disengagement.

If we think about the US in this region historically, and it has a long history, it has always involved a mix of different elements. By the way, American engagement in this region is over 200 years old; in fact, even older at this point. It was one of the first regions in which the US became engaged internationally.

But it has always been a mixture: relations connected to European security on the one hand; connections to areas beyond the Mediterranean per se (the Black Sea, the Gulf, sub-Saharan Africa) on the other; and, of course, developments within the region itself. Crises which perhaps should not be the sole focus, but which nonetheless compel American attention.

The idea of bringing about a comprehensive peace in the Middle East remains the ultimate diplomatic prize for any American administration. Again, the path taken may or may not be one we approve of. But if you look at the Sharm el-Sheikh experience, for example, it is not an example of disengagement; it is something else. On the whole, and if you read this new National Security Strategy, the European security dimension, the NATO dimension, clearly does not have the priority it once had, certainly compared with decades ago. There is a different view of the world now. It is a lower priority.

Has the United States said radical things about NATO since the second Trump administration came into office? Not particularly. The burden-sharing issue is more or less priced in. The style may be somewhat harsh, but it is broadly

accepted. The bigger questions are really over-the-horizon ones: how much will the US be present in Europe over the coming decades, especially in terms of deterring Russia? I think that is a very significant open question.

There was a comment from Sakhir the other day suggesting that the presence of US forces was not necessarily essential to European security. I am not so sure about that. That could be a separate discussion, but I do not think one can rely solely on strategic-level nuclear deterrence provided by America without maintaining a significant conventional presence in Europe as a tripwire.

Will the US be supportive of NATO doing more in terms of its Mediterranean partnerships? Yes, I think so. But we must accept that most engagement with southern partners (for the US and, incidentally, for others within NATO) is bilateral. So there is an interesting question about how much of that could be incorporated into NATO frameworks. How much of it would you want to give a NATO “hat” to, and how much not? Again, that remains an open question.

Finally, to conclude, I think one of the issues that this and other administrations will be particularly interested in is connectivity, linking north and south, east and west through the Mediterranean, and how that infrastructure is protected, including the role of the private sector, and so forth. We can see this in various initiatives, even extending to India through IMEC. These are matters of real interest to this administration, but probably to any American administration.

And just one final thought, again linking to this question of the nexus between east and south: one could imagine a future in which there is significantly less US presence in Europe in terms of European security, but where much of what remains is concentrated in the south, in the Mediterranean. That would have real implications.

Biography

Dr **Ian Lesser** is a Distinguished Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), where he leads the organisation’s Brussels office and directs GMF South. He also served as Acting President of GMF from 2020 to 2021. In addition, Dr Lesser holds the Chair in Transatlantic Trade and Economy at the College of Europe in Bruges. Between 1994 and 1995, he was a member of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff at the US

Department of State. Dr Lesser holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford and has undertaken studies at the University of Pennsylvania, the London School of Economics, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He also sits on the advisory boards of the NATO Defense College Foundation, the Antwerp–American Foundation, Atlantic Dialogues, and the Delphi Economic Forum, and has been a Senior Fellow of the Onassis Foundation and the Luso-American Development Foundation.



Mahmoud Karem

*President, Egyptian National Council for
Human Rights, Cairo*

REGIONAL INTEGRATION PROSPECTS AFTER THE SHARM EL-SHEIKH AGREEMENT

I wish to begin by thanking our Ambassador and great leader, Ambassador Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo, for inviting us and for leading this excellent work throughout.

I would like to begin by setting the context and referring to the terms of reference. What do we really see in our part of the world? Who are the key players in this regard? And, ultimately, how are we going to harness the efforts of these key actors for the welfare and benefit of the South? In my opinion, there are *four key players*.

The *first* is the EU, which in October 2025 launched the [Pact for the Mediterranean](#) with Southern Mediterranean Countries. It underscored issues such as security, development, border management and illegal immigration, and it is not limited to North–South Mediterranean relations, but is open to cooperation with the Gulf, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Western Balkans and

Türkiye. This is indeed interesting. However, the first action plan for this Pact will be developed in the first quarter of 2026, specifying which countries and stakeholders will lead which initiatives. We need recommendations before this action plan is formulated. Therefore, I invite the NATO Defence College Foundation to work on these initiatives and to submit proposals before the action plan is finalised.

The *second* key development is the Washington Summit, which appointed a Special Representative and established a liaison office in Amman, Jordan.

The *third* is the Mediterranean Charter launched by the Union for the Mediterranean. This was put into action to commemorate 30 years of the Barcelona Process. The framework aims to strengthen complementarity between Mediterranean countries across three pillars: human development, economy, and security and immigration. Noteworthy is the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean University, which incidentally my country offered to host.

The *fourth* key actor is the League of Arab States. Why is it important? Because data compilation is necessary, given that a large number of League members are Mediterranean countries and have been part and parcel of the Mediterranean Dialogue for many years.

I recall that for many years the League of Arab States' Department for Humanitarian Assistance sent diplomats to train within the EU Crisis Management and Conflict Situations Division of the EEAS, as well as with the Crisis Response Centre (CRC) and the Emergency Response Coordination Centre. The question, therefore, is how we can emulate these structural models with our neighbours in the South. Once these structural models are put in place and fully implemented, we can move towards deeper integration and mutual cooperation. I therefore call for the establishment of an institutional framework for cooperation with the League of Arab States.

Fortunately, we have a distinguished and senior official from the Arab States present with us, and we can discuss this further. However, several questions remain. Is NATO diplomacy, public diplomacy and the Science for Peace projects sufficient to perform these tasks? Do we need a higher-profile role for NATO's Special Representative, with an expanded mandate? How can the Jordan Centre become a harbinger and interlocutor between North and South and help bridge the gap with the ICC in this regard?

There are challenges, many of which have already been mentioned. One of them is illegal immigration, for which there are practical solutions. Some solutions have recently come from Italy, which signed a partnership programme with Egypt to establish 89 new technical and vocational training centres and 18 applied technology schools in Egypt. These institutions train specific workers

for specific jobs requested in Italy. If we need doctors, for example, we may not need an anesthesiologist, but rather a paediatrician. This is precisely what the Italian–Egyptian programme is addressing.

I remain concerned about the integration of illegal immigration with the concept of transboundary crime. The nexus with organised crime and terrorism is evident in this regard. Artificial intelligence and hybrid threats are additional areas that require attention.

On digital connectivity, let me give another example of cooperation upon which NATO and others could build: the recently launched maritime cable [2Africa](#), involving several European companies. This is highly significant, as it will serve more than three billion beneficiaries, extend along the banks of the Suez Canal, and generate 37 billion dollars for African GDP. Here we have a concrete area for cooperation.

Climate change must also be mentioned. Let me add business and human rights, which are extremely important. Europe has taken significant steps within the framework of taxonomy and labour and environmental performance standards. This should encourage all of us to amend our national legislation and adopt stronger frameworks for business and human rights. Water desalination is another much-needed area, as is energy cooperation. In our region we benefit from strong solar potential and wind resources, but we require foreign direct investment from the North. Another good example is the large-scale Benban solar park in Egypt, which exports surplus renewable energy to Europe.

Turning now to Gaza, it is important to say a few words. The current challenge is to stabilise the ceasefire and prevent violations that could lead to its collapse. There is close cooperation among four key countries under the leadership of the United States. We need the full implementation of the peace agreement and must proceed to the second phase of the plan. President Trump announced today that he intends to move forward even before Christmas, including allowing humanitarian assistance into Gaza. At the same time, we need full implementation of the latest UN Security Council resolution, enabling the International Stabilisation Force to carry out its mandate.

Egypt is currently preparing for the International Conference on the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Gaza, together with all partners, especially the US, which will co-chair the conference as an integral part of President Trump's peace plan.

On the operational side, I refer in particular to the training of the Palestinian police through EUBAM in Rafah, as well as the additional training taking place in Egypt within our academies for the same force. The UN Security Council has identified three mechanisms in its resolution: peace arrangements, the

International Stabilisation Force, and the Executive Palestinian Committee, all of which are transitional until December.

Perhaps NATO could consider establishing field hospitals in Gaza. Perhaps NATO could assist in training these security forces, in cooperation with key countries such as Jordan and Egypt.

Biography

Ambassador Dr **Mahmoud Karem** was appointed Acting President of Egypt's National Council for Human Rights (NCHR). Over the course of his career, Ambassador Karem has served as Egypt's ambassador to the European Union, NATO, Japan and Belgium. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he held several senior posts, including that of Assistant Minister for International and Asian Affairs.

Internationally, Ambassador Karem has represented Egypt at the UN Security Council, within the Non-Aligned Movement, and at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. He was also appointed by the UN Secretary-General to a number of expert groups focusing on disarmament and international security. Domestically, he previously served as Secretary-General of the NCHR between 2010 and 2012.



Silvia Colombo

*Senior Researcher and Faculty Advisor,
NATO Defense College, Rome*

NATO'S RESTRUCTURING OF THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

I will address this question: to what extent cooperative security has been successful. I believe that there is an ongoing reflection within NATO that started a couple of years ago, at least with regard to NATO's approach towards its Southern neighbourhood. I also found this point very interesting: whose south are we talking about? How does Europe look at its south in parallel with what the US is thinking when it comes to its own south, and how do the two connect?

Leaving this issue aside, I will make three points regarding what I identify as three main shortcomings, and possible ways to overcome them, when it comes to NATO's engagement with the South. I will address the *why*, thus tackling the geopolitical realities reflected in the title of the panel, *Shifting Allied Priorities in the Euro-Atlantic Space: The Middle East Beyond the Present*, which I believe encourages us to look somewhat towards the future.

What I want to say here is that NATO has developed a robust framework of engagement with its southern neighbourhood. It is based on cooperative security and on partnerships, namely the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). However, we can argue that geopolitical realities and shifts have changed dramatically over the past few years, and it is difficult to keep pace with them.

NATO has tried to do so, both in its latest strategic document, the [2022 Strategic Concept](#), where the South is mentioned, albeit relatively briefly, in relation to a multifaceted catalogue of challenges. At the same time, this same document underscores how the main focus is on collective security and defence. Of course, there is also the issue of terrorism, the second major asymmetrical threat to the Alliance, which again sheds light on dynamics in the South.

However, if we look at 2025, we can say that many things have changed, and that the pace of change is something we are not really able to cope with. If we think of the Gulf, which has become a sort of centre of gravity in these new geopolitical realities, we can talk about multi-alignment, strategic competition, and pragmatic cooperation between Iran and some of the Gulf monarchies.

Syria was mentioned, which opens many opportunities for regional partners, but also for many European and NATO members. Of course, there is the need to sustain the ceasefire and work towards reconstruction, not only in Syria but now in particular in Gaza. I would also like to mention the southern periphery of Europe, particularly North Africa, which is deeply connected to developments across Africa.

These geopolitical realities require NATO to continue focusing on this region, because we know that the Middle East and North Africa have increasingly become a terrain for competition by its competitors and adversaries. Both Russia and China are present and are trying to step up their role in these countries. This is the *why*: NATO has not yet been fully able, let us say, to develop a strategic approach to the region that takes these new shifting realities into account.

The second shortcoming concerns the *what*. What are we talking about when we talk about engagement and cooperative security? Here I would like to refer to the fact that NATO has shifted from a demand-driven approach to an interest-driven approach. The question, however, is again: who defines these interests when it comes to the South? I would like to point to two forms of divergence: both an internal divergence and an internal-versus-external divergence. In other words, the fact that sometimes we do not share, as NATO or as NATO Allies, the same priorities as our partners in the region.

I can speak about this also on the basis of the intense discussions and dialogue we regularly have with our partner countries from the Middle East and

North Africa who attend our courses. We try to foster a two-way street, but we understand very well that sometimes there are roadblocks. There are issues that are very important to us, while their priorities may be different. Of course, they speak a great deal about maritime security, human security, and cyber issues, as well as about Lebanon and Gaza. Yet there is very little that we can do, or that we have done, in relation to some of these challenges.

There is also an intra-NATO set of political divergences. I cannot speak about this in much detail, but of course the minimum common denominator, consensus, is a strength of NATO. At the same time, however, it can also be a constraint to a certain extent. Sometimes difficult political discussions simply do not take place because there is no appetite to risk creating divisions within the Alliance. So how can we move beyond that? I think it is very important for NATO to think creatively about new ways of engaging its partners in co-designing its policies and approaches, and to really make use of political dialogue. Because NATO is a defensive political-military alliance, political dialogue should truly be at the forefront and should be the driving factor in preparing the ground for practical cooperation, technical cooperation, and military-to-military cooperation.

This leads me to the third and final point, which is the *how*: a shortcoming in the way in which NATO operationalises its partnerships. Of course, there is a great deal of emphasis on technical cooperation. There is a full list, a menu for partners, including defence capacity-building and individually tailored partnership priorities. Of course, there is participation in training activities, joint exercises, and the sharing of intelligence as far as possible. However, we must also consider the fact that there is sometimes a lack of absorption capacity on the part of our partners. At times we flood them with too many initiatives. The EU is doing the same, so there is a risk of duplication.

Another question arises as to the extent to which NATO has the right tools to address the challenges and opportunities coming from the South. Here I can see some positive developments. The new Southern Neighbourhood Action Plan and the newly mutually agreed document on shared joint security priorities between NATO and its southern partners allow for greater flexibility, moving somewhat beyond the bureaucratic processes that partnerships have entailed so far.

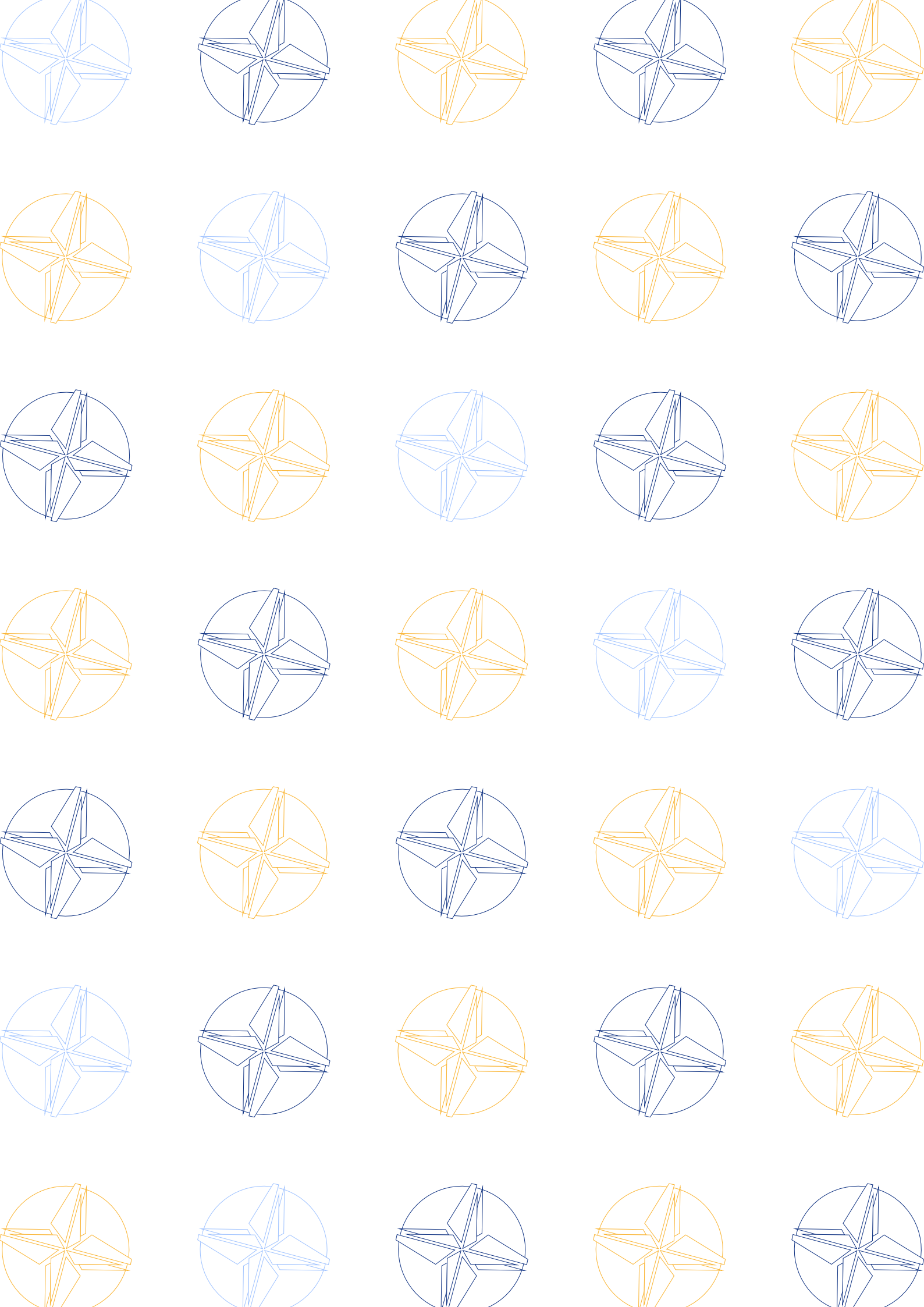
I believe that one of NATO's greatest assets, and one it should use more actively to address many of the challenges previously mentioned, from migration to climate-related issues, is the promotion of intra-regional cooperation. This means not only working bilaterally between NATO and each individual partner, but also engaging NATO and the Gulf region (the region of the ICI, where this is already happening) as well as doing more in the Mediterranean, despite all the difficulties.

Finally, the last point, which I believe is the overarching element, is the need to invest much more in strategic communications and in changing the perception of NATO in the region. This would help address the mismatch and ensure that NATO remains a relevant actor in this very complex and strategic region.

Biography

Dr **Silvia Colombo** is a Researcher and Faculty Advisor at the NATO Defense College in Rome. She also serves as an Associate Fellow in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Dr Colombo's research primarily centres on contemporary politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with a particular focus on EU and US

foreign policies towards the Middle East, their roles in regional conflicts, and the implications for NATO. Additionally, she has a keen research interest in the relationship between the European Union and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Dr Colombo earned her PhD in Comparative Politics from the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa in London.





How can NATO and its partners
better integrate **governance**,
development, and **security** rather than
treating them as separate domains?

A satellite map of the Mediterranean Sea and surrounding landmasses. The sea is a deep blue, contrasting with the green and brown land. The map shows the coastlines of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

SESSION II

A 360-Degree Approach to the South: Security, Governance and Balance

The Mediterranean Sea at the center of interconnected security, governance, and regional balance.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

“This region is a crossroads of trade routes, energy supplies and digital links, but endless recent threats have reminded us that instability here can ripple back to us in fortress Europe.”



CHAIR

Matthew Robinson

Director, Euro-Gulf Information Centre, Rome

Biography

Mr **Matthew Robinson** is the Director of the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC). He oversees the organisation's strategic direction, manages its various boards and affiliated organisations, and directs EGIC's operations across its centres in Rome, Brussels, Stockholm, and Prague. Mr Robinson plays a key role in enhancing EGIC's public image through publications, events,

and activities. Mr Robinson held several advisory roles at the European Parliament. With a multidisciplinary academic background and a decade of experience spanning international relations, policy advisory, and legal research, Mr Robinson continues to drive thought leadership and strategic engagement at the intersection of European and Gulf relations.



Niagalé Bagayoko

*Chair, African Security Sector Network (ASSN),
Paris*

EMERGING SECURITY DYNAMICS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN AFRICA

I would like to speak about the Sahel and the West African region, focusing on the current situation as well as developments over the past decade. I think there is a need to recognise that what has been experienced by external partners (particularly European ones, and France in particular, but also the EU as such) has been what a very well-known French anthropologist has called a “revenge of the context”.

This anthropologist is Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. It is important to realise that, almost everywhere in the world, and not only in the Sahel region, external intervention has been failing, and is in fact worsening the situation. What we have seen in the Sahel region is very similar to what happened previously in Afghanistan or in Syria, and perhaps, if we look further back, to what has been continuously occurring in the so-called Global South since the Vietnam War. In essence, I believe that there is an urgent need today to change the lens through

which we view partner countries, and this is particularly true for the Sahel region.

I strongly believe that there is a pressing need to develop new methodologies to analyse what is at stake today, which is completely different from what external partners are projecting onto their partner countries. The perspective that has been developed around stabilisation, and indeed the concept of stabilisation more broadly, has been deeply misleading, and there has been considerable misunderstanding as to what should fall under this label. Today, there is a need to bring back historical, sociological, and anthropological studies in order to gain a better understanding of geopolitical dynamics. Without thorough knowledge of local dynamics and environments, there is little chance that the so-called strategic dialogue can be developed effectively.

I think that forging new approaches would, for instance, make it possible to examine the *three* major trends that have characterised the Sahel region, and which have in fact been largely overlooked by foreign partners, who have more often than not focused exclusively on the “war on terror” in the region, whereas the situation is far more complex. The three core dynamics that should be examined are the following.

First, *religion* which is certainly not limited to jihadism. While jihadism is present in the Sahel region, there is first a need to understand that the various jihadi insurgencies, what is at stake here are indeed insurgencies, are in competition with one another. This is the case, for example, with groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda as opposed to those affiliated with the Islamic State, which are also rooted in local community disputes that must be properly understood.

In addition, political Islam plays a significant role in the region. It has been a major force in countries such as Niger and Mali. The role of political Islam, and the broader Islamisation of society, constitute a major trend and a reality that must be acknowledged and examined. At the same time, it is important not to overlook the fact that there are also multi-confessional states in the region, such as Burkina Faso. In a country like Burkina Faso, for instance, actors such as new evangelical churches could, in the coming years, become serious security challenges.

The second major trend is *proletarianisation* and *militarism*. While we have all observed the presence of armed groups in the region, there is a need to recognise that militarism has been the dominant form of governance since independence, whereas democracy has been the exception rather than the norm.

Finally, the third trend is *nationalism*, which in the region is often referred to as neo-pan-Africanism. What is neo-pan-Africanism? It is essentially the local African expression of the broader wave of nationalism, patriotism, and

sovereignty that is sweeping across the world today, and which in fact began to emerge more than a decade ago but has largely been ignored.

I therefore believe that there is a need to consider that stability in the region may emerge through an alliance between these three forces: conservative religion, militarism, and nationalism. Such an alliance could produce a form of stability based on authoritarianism and conservatism, rather than on liberal democratic norms and standards.

Biographies

Dr **Niagalé Bagayoko** is a political scientist. She has done extensive field research on security systems in African Francophone countries, Western security policies (France, United States, European Union) in Africa and African conflict-management mechanisms, focusing on the interface between security and development. She has taught at the Institut d'Etudes

Politiques (Science Po) in Paris. From 2010 to 2015, she managed the "peacekeeping and peacebuilding programme" at the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF) and was a member of the Scientific Committee of the French IRSEM (Institut de recherches stratégiques de l'Ecole militaire). She is now the Chair of the African Security Sector Network (ASSN).



Nigar Göksel

*Project Director, Turkey/Cyprus,
International Crisis Group, Istanbul*

REGIONAL SECURITY IN FLUX BETWEEN REGIONAL ACTORS AND EXTERNAL POWERS

I am going to talk about the rapid flux in the security landscape and the new interplay between regional actors, including Türkiye, the Gulf countries, Israel, Egypt, and others, and how their interaction is shaping the security ecosystem.

I will try to offer a few examples that illustrate how quickly these alignments are shifting, which is a distinctive feature of the flux: both how disorientingly fast alignments are changing, and how cross-regional they have become.

Türkiye, of course, sits between NATO's southern and eastern flanks and has long straddled different regions. But, it is not the only actor operating in a cross-regional manner. The leverage of different regional actors can be complementary, and to the extent they can collaborate, stability becomes more attainable. However, the potential for this differs from case to case, and needs to be assessed per conflict.

Let me start with Syria. In the past, one might have imagined the presence of UN blue helmets and Western advisers engaging on governance structures.

Today, however, security assistance, public service capacity-building, and much of the funding come mostly from regional players.

That said, the United States continues to play a critical role: it maintains a -deterrence posture in the northeast, and - uses its diplomatic leverage towards SDF-government negotiations, while Western conditionality and economic leverage such as for sanctions relief, can influence the conduct of Damascus. While the US remains engaged, regional actors are increasingly central with roles that vary significantly across contexts.

Türkiye's engagement in Syria was, for a long time, primarily aimed at preventing missiles, militants, and refugees from crossing its borders. At present, however, Türkiye's interest is in stabilising Syria, which also requires the involvement of Gulf actors. While this reflects a shared objective, there are also concerns among some regional actors about Türkiye's growing influence in Syria, particularly in the relative absence, for now, of Iran and Russia.

Further afield in Africa, Türkiye's engagements are shaped more by economic interests, though these are also closely intertwined with security considerations. Türkiye may enter a country through investment or infrastructure contracts, market access, or other commercial opportunities, including drone sales. Subsequently, to protect these investments, it often becomes a security actor. Alternatively, it may provide military support to a regime, thereby enabling its contractors to secure more favourable deals.

Drone sales, in particular, create both security dependence and commercial profit. These dimensions are therefore deeply interconnected.

Another feature of the regional security flux is what one of my colleagues has described as an "adultery of partnerships". When Türkiye intervened in Libya in 2019 to protect Tripoli from the LNA advance, this triggered strong pushback from the UAE and Egypt who both supported Haftar's eastern based forces. However, the pendulum has now swung such that Türkiye's growing presence in the East may be causing unease in Cairo. Yet looking further south to Sudan, Türkiye and Egypt are broadly aligned in their support for the Sudanese Armed Forces, while the UAE supposedly backs the RSF. This illustrates a pragmatic flexibility: cooperation in one arena can coexist with rivalry in another.

Mindful of time, I will briefly turn to external actors.

The US remains a primary security actor, certainly for the Gulf countries and also for Türkiye. It has leverage and deterrence power. Apparently of 28 Gulf-mediated initiatives last year, 16 involved the US at some stage, either by providing diplomatic weight or enforcement capacity.

For Türkiye, too, the US plays a decisive role across the Levant, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea, the theatres most critical to Ankara's security.

Another important external actor is Russia. For years, Moscow exerted sustained pressure on Türkiye with a decisive role in whether and when the Assad regime would advance on civilian areas south of Idlib. Any such offensive could have pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees towards Türkiye's borders, posing a major security and political threat. That leverage has effectively disappeared.

However, there are growing concerns that once the war in Ukraine ends, Russia may redirect its attention to the Levant and North Africa. In Türkiye, there are also concerns that Israel may see value in Russia acting as a counterbalance to Türkiye's rising influence in certain arenas. While Türkiye's closure of the Straits to warship transit has reduced Russia's military manoeuvre in and out of the Black Sea, this restriction will eventually be lifted once Russia's war in Ukraine ends.

I will conclude with three brief forward-looking reflections. *First*, the way regional actors interact will depend heavily on whether major powers US, Russia and China are actively engaged, and on how those major powers relate to one another.

Second, regional stability will depend on the extent to which mid-sized actors work at cross purposes, as opposed to finding ways to complement one another. In this regard, Türkiye's Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, has been signalling that Türkiye does not intend to cross Arab red lines, instead emphasising shared gains and responsibilities. In this volatile and crowded space, how these actors interact will play decisive role in regional stability.

Finally, as the number of conflicts in which these regional actors are involved—whether to de-escalate, mediate or project power grows, their institutional capacity is at times struggling to keep pace. Bureaucratic expertise and analytical ecosystems are not always developing as quickly as diplomatic initiatives and security capabilities. For Türkiye, this is compounded by constraints related to limited economic resources.

Biographies

Ms **Nigar Göksel** is Project Director for Türkiye/Cyprus at Crisis Group, a role she has held since April 2015. Based in Istanbul, she leads research, reporting and advocacy on regional and domestic security issues in Türkiye, as well as on conflicts involving Türkiye and its neighbours across the Eastern Mediterranean, South Caucasus, Black

Sea and MENA regions. She previously served as Editor-in-Chief of Turkish Policy Quarterly, Senior Analyst for Turkey and the South Caucasus at the ESI, and Turkey Representative for the IREX. Earlier in her career, Ms Göksel worked at TESEV and the ARI Movement. She began her professional career in Washington, DC, working at the Embassy of Azerbaijan and TÜSİAD-US.



Dahan Ahmed Mahmoud

*Executive Director, Mauritanian Institute for
Strategic Studies, Nouakchott*

NORTH AFRICA IN SEARCH OF STABILITY

Let me begin with a truth often avoided in this formal discussion: the Maghreb and the Sahel are tired of being NATO's crisis backyard. For decades, we have been analysed, mapped, formalised, problematised, yet seldom consulted. We are expected to absorb shocks, absorb migration flows, absorb instability, while NATO mainly views us through the prism of risk for Europe.

But a 360-degree approach requires a shift in perspective. You have to stop observing the South through a lens from Brussels and begin understanding us not as an area, a problem area, but as a constellation of strategic decision-making centres.

I speak from Mauritania, a stable democracy at the crossroads of the Maghreb, the Sahel, and the Atlantic, and a committed partner in the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) since 1995. For us, the South is not a concept; it is our immediate reality, and this reality is changing.

The deterioration of security in the Sahel is not only the result of armed groups; it reflects governance gaps aggravated by external strategies that did not match local political dynamics. The end of [Operation Barkhane](#), the expulsion of French forces, and the shift towards Russia and others are not merely geopolitical moves; they are a referendum on dissatisfaction with how European partners have operated. These shifts express a deeper frustration with European partnerships and the way they have been conducted. If NATO wants credibility, it must acknowledge this, because insecurity in our region is political, social, economic, and environmental.

And let me be direct: security in the Sahel and in this region without governance is a mirage. Training armies while social contracts erode is not state-building. Stabilisation without dignity freezes conflict; it does not solve it. For Mauritania, stability in the Sahel is a matter of national responsibility and national survival. That is why we see potential for deeper cooperation with NATO, but only if this cooperation is co-designed, not imposed. To truly make the 360-degree approach work, three shifts are essential.

The first is *co-design*, not consultation. The second is to *strengthen governance resilience* and *recognise shared responsibility*. Governance fragilities in our region are real, but they are not solely the product of local systems. Some external actors, including European commercial and security actors, have often amplified distortions, fed opaque networks, or incentivised practices that undermine institutions. A credible partnership must acknowledge this. The support we need is one that tackles corruption, strengthens trade capacity, transparency, economic inclusion, and climate resilience, without paternalism or double standards.

The third shift is to *treat the South as a strategic actor*. Countries in the Maghreb and the Sahel choose their partners based on sovereignty, respect, and practical results, whether those partners are Europe, Russia, China, Turkey, or others. You have to integrate into your analysis that the South is not merely a place where others come to play. We have our own strategies and our own priorities.

Just two final points. The first is this: if Europe wants to strengthen its pillar within NATO, this is good for us, but it must come with a change in behaviour towards the South. A stronger Europe repeating old patterns will fail. A stronger Europe willing to listen can reshape the relationship.

The second point is that the security of Europe is linked to the security of Africa. The security of the Maghreb is linked to the security of the Sahel, and the security of the Sahel is linked to Europe. So you have to build your security vis-à-vis the South not against the South, but with the South. That is what we ask.

Biographies

Director **Dahan Ahmed Mahmoud** is a professor of International Relations and a former Foreign Minister of Mauritania. Since 2011, he has led the Mauritanian Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank focused on regional

and global affairs. A multilingual and distinguished speaker, as well as an experienced academic, he frequently engages in debates on international relations, regional conflicts, and cultural dynamics across the Arab and African worlds.

**Oumar Ba**

*Professor, CEDS Paris and Sciences Po,
Bordeaux*

SAHEL AND AFRICA: LINKS AND EFFECTS ON NATO'S SECURITY

I am from Senegal, from West Africa, and I have been asked to speak and to discuss the topic of the Sahel and Africa, its effects, and its links with NATO's security. To begin with, I would like to emphasise that the Sahel is part of Africa. It is a kind of horizontal belt of land stretching from Mauritania and the north of Senegal to the Horn of Africa, including Sudan and other countries. Its main characteristic is that, in the Sahel, we are witnessing a resurgence of *coups d'état*, combined with forms of terrorism. These infra-ethnic actors contest the legitimacy and legality of authorities and governments, and they also weaken the role of cultural and religious actors and leaders. We observe a spectrum of contestation through the use of violence, including private violence against civilians, soldiers, and state forces.

On the other hand, I note that this rise in *coups d'état* has led to the disintegration of [ECOWAS](#), which was the main regional economic community

in West Africa. This disintegration has also led to the emergence of a new confederation of states, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, referred to as the Alliance of Liptako-Gourma and the Confederation of Sahel States.

If we consider the three dimensions I have mentioned, we can observe a form of fragilisation of regional integration on the one hand, and a weakening of the liberal model of democratisation on the other. In addition, there is another layer of complexity that destabilises both African governance structures and the African peace and security architecture. This is due to the involvement of great powers, which seek to monopolise intra-African conflicts and to polarise them within broader, multi-level global competitions for influence.

Another consequence, in my view, is that Africa's situation in the Sahel is also linked to the framework of the [African Union](#). The AU has specific provisions, and if one looks at [Articles 25 and 30](#) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, two consequences become clear. In the event of a coup d'état, the country concerned is automatically sanctioned and is suspended from voting and participating in the deliberations of continental institutions. This creates a blockage in the capacity of the organisation to engage in dialogue and to de-escalate political crises in the Sahel region.

At the same time, it can be observed that NATO has sought to build a strong partnership with the AU in order to stabilise the continent and strengthen peace and security in Africa. In 2014, a protocol was signed to support Africa, particularly the [Peace and Security Council](#), under the leadership of the former Commissioner from Algeria. This aimed to strengthen monitoring capabilities and support the African Standby Force ([ASF](#)). Earlier, in 2005–2006, NATO also assisted Africa by providing logistical and transport support, helping to deploy troops during the crisis in [Darfur](#), Sudan.

It is important to underline this cooperation. However, NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 was highly controversial, particularly regarding the interpretation of United Nations Security Council [Resolution 1973](#). Since that time, there has been a degree of misunderstanding between NATO and many African countries.

Biographies

Oumar Ba is a Professor at the Centre for Diplomatic and Strategic Studies (CEDS) in Paris, and an associate expert with the Africa in the World Laboratory (LAM) at the Bordeaux Institute of Political Studies and the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). He also serves as an Associate Research Fellow at CAP AFRIQUES at the University of Quebec in Montreal, and as Special Representative of the Centre for Geopolitics at HEC Paris

and SENGHOR University. Professor Ba is a specialist in political science, geopolitics and geostrategy, diplomacy, international law, international relations, and development studies, he is actively engaged in issues related to energy dynamics in Africa and globally. He regularly contributes as a speaker at NATO, the Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) at Mohammed VI University, and other international organisations.

The background of the image is a blue fabric with several yellow five-pointed stars, resembling the flag of the European Union. In the upper right corner, there is a piece of camouflage fabric in shades of green, brown, and tan. Below the camouflage, a pair of black leather military boots with laces is visible. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

How can NATO and the EU
better **coordinate their roles** in
reconstruction, security provision,
and regional engagement?



SESSION III

Towards a Credible European Pillar within NATO: Capabilities for the Three Core Tasks

Where Europe's spirit meets its strength.

Source: iStock

“The three core tasks of NATO:
deterrence and defence,
crisis prevention and management
and, of course, *cooperative security*.
You could say that
the Southern Neighbourhood
encapsulates all of these problems
and challenges at the same time.”



CHAIR

Teri Schultz

*Freelance Journalist and NATO Correspondent,
Brussels*

Biography

Ms **Teri Schultz** has been covering the EU, NATO, and the BeNeLux region since 2007. She has a particular interest in Afghanistan, having made six reporting trips there, and in Russia and the Nordic region, having lived and worked in Moscow and Helsinki. Ms Schultz helps teach media literacy

and counter-disinformation to schoolchildren with the Lie Detectors organisation and has held journalism fellowships in Russia and Pakistan. She holds a master's degree in international relations from the University of Helsinki and a bachelor's degree in journalism from New Mexico State University.

**Giovanni Romani**

*Head, Middle East and North Africa Section,
Political Affairs and Security Policy Division,
NATO HQ, Brussels*

DEVELOPING NATO'S SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD NEW POLICY

It is really a pleasure for me to participate in this discussion. It is always timely to have this conversation about the South. It is paramount to the Euro-Atlantic region. It is also timely because the US security strategy has just been released, but it is also, for me, a personal opportunity to listen and gather suggestions.

Let me outline some of the background context regarding NATO's approach to the Southern Neighbourhood, which is a renewed approach. *First of all*, from a NATO perspective, security is global. There is no such thing as siloed regional security, and security challenges are not only growing in complexity, but are also increasingly interconnected. We can refer to Russia's use of Iranian drones against Ukraine, the Houthis' disruption of global trade, the war in Ukraine and how it has caused increases in food and fuel prices in the Middle East and Africa, or how the fall of the Assad regime in Syria was partially enabled by Moscow's

focus on its war of aggression against Ukraine, as well as the weakening of Iranian proxies in the region.

At the same time, the Southern Neighbourhood is an area of intense strategic competition. Actors such as Russia, Iran and, to some extent, the PRC are increasingly positioning themselves as alternatives to the West and, in some cases, destabilising regional and global security. It is a domino-like system, and you have already heard about the 360-degree approach to security. The partners, there are 12 for NATO on the southern flank, are our first line of defence. Therefore, for NATO, supporting our partners is a way of strengthening our own security.

It is not only a challenge, because the Southern Neighbourhood also provides opportunities for cooperation on issues of mutual interest. Many NATO partners are active security providers: they have contributed and continue to contribute to regional security, they help us with situational awareness, and they participate in operations, missions and activities. In accordance with NATO's core task of cooperative security, our goal is to foster greater security and stability in the region in areas where NATO has expertise and can provide added value. This can range from interoperability to defence and security capacity building, because, fundamentally, what we are talking about is teaming up with our partners to work together.

You have heard reference to the Southern Neighbourhood Action Plan. It is not a strategy; it is an action plan. It was approved at the Washington Summit together with the appointment of Javier Colomina as the first Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood. Let me provide some further detail on this plan, since you have heard about it and I would like to explain what it actually entails. We are now in the second year of implementation. It is essentially based on *four pillars*.

The *first* focuses on *political dialogue* at all levels. This is about consulting more with our partners, listening more attentively and engaging more. The Secretary General visited Iraq earlier this year. The Special Representative has undertaken multiple visits and continues to do so; he is currently on his way to Qatar for the Doha Forum. We are meeting partners at all levels. We held a South-focused session with the King of Jordan at the Foreign Ministerial in December last year, and we have regular North Atlantic Council meetings with our southern partners; the most recent one took place last week. We have also recently endorsed the agenda for tackling shared security challenges, which was negotiated jointly with our partners.

This agenda identifies priority areas for mutual benefit. We have been encouraged to develop thematic dialogues, to break down barriers within existing

partnerships, and we hope this will increasingly lead to flexible formats and the development of concrete flagship projects. So the first element is dialogue.

The *second* element is to step up our efforts in terms of *practical cooperation*, focusing on what we do best. NATO should not be seen as a Swiss Army knife: it is not. NATO has a clear identity centred on defence and security intelligence. We may venture into other areas, but there is always a security dimension attached. We can certainly make an effective contribution in capacity building, training and education; areas that are part of our core mandate. The South is highly heterogeneous, which is why we have individually tailored partnership programmes. These function as a kind of contract between NATO and individual partners, setting out strategic objectives, interest-driven priorities and partnership goals. Of course, this is based on mutual interest, where NATO's interests overlap with those of the partner.

We are currently deploying [Defence and Related Security Capacity Building](#) (DCB) initiatives in four countries in the South: Jordan, Mauritania, Tunisia and Iraq. DCB is probably the most ambitious instrument we have to support our partners. Beyond current commitments, we are also exploring triangular cooperation. In some areas it is difficult for NATO to intervene directly, but we can act through partners and international organisations. This is what we mean by triangular cooperation.

The *third* element of the action plan concerns *presence and visibility*. We established a NATO liaison office in Jordan in September. Let me stress that this is not a regional office; it is a bilateral office between NATO and Jordan. This complements our existing presence in Kuwait, an education and training centre, as well as the NATO Mission in Iraq and our military mission to the African Union in Addis Ababa. Presence and visibility, frankly, remain one of NATO's weak points. We do not have a significant footprint, unlike, for example, the European Union, which is very present on the ground.

The *fourth* pillar focuses on *deepening synergies* with other international and regional organisations, certainly the EU, the UN, but also the African Union, and organisations represented here such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, which are key partners for us. We do not want to act in isolation; we want to work in coordination with international organisations. Let me stress that the EU, in particular, is an essential partner for NATO, with many members in common.

Our cooperation has expanded steadily, and we are committed to remaining complementary in our respective initiatives. We recently held a meeting between NATO Allies and the leadership of DG MENA and the European External Action Service.

To conclude, this action plan complements existing NATO partnerships. We have 30 years of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and 20 years of the ICI with Gulf partners. In addition, there is the NATO Mission in Iraq, a highly successful non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission that has helped Iraq to stabilise, combat terrorism and prevent the return of ISIS/Daesh.

In essence, our approach to partnerships is based on local ownership, joint identification of areas of cooperation, and a focus on what we do best, where we can add value. The partner remains in the driving seat, and everything is done at the partner's request, as is the case with the NATO Mission in Iraq. We would withdraw from Iraq tomorrow if the Iraqi government were to request the end of the mission. With that, thank you for the opportunity to present NATO's current approach.

Biography

Mr **Giovanni Romani** is the head of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) section within the Political Affairs and Security Policy (PASP) Division of NATO in Brussels, Belgium. Mr Romani served in the Italian Navy from 1985 to 2006, specialising in telecommunications, combat operations, electronic warfare, and intelligence. He was a combat operations, electronic warfare and intelligence officer in several Italian and US ships, having taken part in

Operations "Sharp Guard" and "Sharp Fence" in former Yugoslavia. Mr Romani ended his active duty career in 2006 as the Executive Officer of the Italian Navy Destroyer, Francesco Mimbelli. He has led different sectors of NATO such as the Naval Armaments Unit, Land and Maritime Capabilities section, and the Capability Delivery Section until taking on his current position. He has degrees from the University of Pisa, the University of Trieste and the Naval War College in Leghorn.



Morgane Buttiens

*Policy Officer, Economic recovery,
Resilience and Security, DG MENA, Brussels*

EU AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

I would like to start by mentioning that the security of the EU, but also of NATO, is closely interlinked with the security and stability of the Southern Neighbourhood. The cross-border nature of many security threats really requires joint action, and it is in this context that the EU and NATO can play a complementary and mutually reinforcing role in supporting national peace and stability in the region. However, I think it is quite important to mention that we need to move beyond this idea of crisis management in the region and really look at the opportunities it offers, the untapped potential, and see the region as a very close partner, in this case for the EU. It is also in our interest to enhance this cooperation.

Over the past year, the EU has taken several steps to strengthen this partnership with the region. First, we have the appointment of the first-ever Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Dubravka Šuica, whose nomination has also led to the

creation of my Directorate-General, the Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA). This is quite a novelty within the EU. The creation of this DG has also led to the publication of the [Pact for the Mediterranean](#), which was launched last week in Barcelona on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the [Barcelona Process](#). In addition, in the first half of 2026, we will present a new Middle East strategy. So, a great deal has developed on our side quite recently.

Let me return to the Pact for the Mediterranean. We see this as an ambitious strategy aimed at deepening EU cooperation with its southern Mediterranean partners and at turning the region into a common Mediterranean space. The Pact outlines a practical framework for cooperation, and I would like to stress the practical dimension, which will put forward a set of flagship initiatives with the potential to deliver tangible results.

If I may, I would also draw a parallel with the NATO Action Plan. For us, the Pact is the result of a highly collaborative and inclusive approach. We have discussed it with all ten of our partners in the region and conducted broad consultations with various stakeholders and regional entities. It has therefore been a very extensive process involving wide-ranging consultations.

The Pact is structured around *three pillars*. The *first* focuses on *people*, as we see individuals in the region as the main driving force for change. The *second* pillar concerns building a *stronger and more sustainable economy*. The *third* pillar relates to *security*.

I should note that for the EU, the concept of security is quite broad. It includes, of course, counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism, but also maritime security, the protection and resilience of critical infrastructure, hybrid threats, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference ([FIMI](#)), and peace mediation. So it is indeed a comprehensive approach.

Within the Pact, we have identified 17 flagship initiatives and around 100 actions. Under the third pillar on security, we have specific flagship initiatives, including one on peace and security, one on operationalising cooperation in justice and law enforcement, one on border management, and another on migration.

Returning to the link with what Giovanni Romani mentioned, and to strengthen the connection with NATO: within the Pact, our initiative on peace and security clearly recognises NATO as a strong partner for the EU in the region. I should add that the EU and NATO are already cooperating effectively in the region. We have our Common Security and Defence Policy ([CSDP](#)) missions and operations, and NATO also has its mission in Iraq. In Brussels, we regularly hold staff-to-staff talks where we exchange views, including on countries where

NATO runs defence capacity-building programmes, such as Tunisia, Jordan and Iraq.

Looking ahead, I believe there are further opportunities for cooperation. We were recently at NATO, where we exchanged views on the region. The prospective opening of a NATO liaison office in Amman could also create additional avenues for collaboration. So I would simply like to underline that cooperation is already strong and that we are looking forward to developing it further in the future.

Biography

Ms **Morgane Buttiens** is a policy officer at the European Commission, currently working within the Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA). In this role, she focuses on issues related to security, crisis management and cooperation with partner countries in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood. Her work reflects a strong emphasis on multilateral coordination and on strengthening partnerships between the EU, international organisations and regional actors. Ms Buttiens has

also been actively involved in policy dialogues and expert discussions on the evolving security landscape of the Southern Neighbourhood, including EU-NATO cooperation, resilience-building and the integration of development and security approaches. Her professional experience is characterised by a focus on external action, security policy and international cooperation, contributing to the EU's broader strategic engagement in the Mediterranean and neighbouring regions.



Katarzyna Sidło

Senior Policy Analyst, MENA, EUISS, Paris

SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD WITH NATO: BETWEEN CALIBRATED ENGAGEMENT AND SECURITY THREATS

In my intervention, I will try to link the two, the Eastern and the Southern flanks of NATO. I was asked to talk about calibrated engagement and security threats, and what I wanted to briefly focus on is predominantly how perceptions of security threats do not fully align both within NATO and between NATO and our partners.

This is absolutely not new, and it has been mentioned by speakers today and during previous conferences here at the NATO Defense College Foundation. However, I still think that there are some recent developments that justify discussing this in a bit more detail. The first is the already mentioned launch today of the new US security strategy, which not only positions itself vis-à-vis the EU and the conflict, or the war, in Ukraine in a particular way, but also, and I stress that these are my personal thoughts and not an official position, gives me the impression that the US position is increasingly more aligned with that

of sovereign partners when it comes to Russian aggression in Ukraine than with the EU position.

So there is, in some ways, a lack of alignment in how the perception of the Russian threat is framed within NATO itself. This is also linked to the broader issue of how the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept expresses the belief that NATO Allies and EU Member States share the same values and common goals in upholding the rules-based international order. This, is an area where I increasingly perceive a misalignment, both in terms of threat perception and ambition.

This leads me to the second field in which we observe misalignment in the perception of security threats, namely within the MENA region. This is linked to the September 2025 attack on Qatar. From my observations, there appears to be a shift, particularly within the GCC countries, but also more broadly across the region, in how Iran and its network have been, and still are, perceived as the main or one of the principal sources of instability. Increasingly, this also seems to be reflected in Israel's perception following the attack on Qatar. I think it is important for NATO to consider how this shift in threat perception among our partners may affect future cooperation.

Not to focus solely on the negative, I do think there are a number of areas where our strategic interests and perceptions of security threats do align. These were also mentioned earlier today during the conference. Maritime security is certainly one — as Morgane noted in the pact — and this is an area on which Gulf partners have been focusing, and which has also been repeatedly emphasised by the US and underlined in the new US security strategy, particularly in the MENA section. Therefore, maritime security is an area where more calibrated engagement could indeed be envisaged.

Another area is AI. Here, there is definitely scope for calibrated engagement, but also the potential to introduce a slightly different EU perspective, one that is more human-centred and more focused on ethical considerations, which in many ways could directly translate into security issues as well.

Finally, just to conclude, I do think this is a very good moment to have these discussions. As Morgane Buttiens mentioned, the Middle East strategy will be developed and published in the first half of 2026, and it will be more of a security strategy than the pact. This therefore represents a valuable opportunity to reflect on how the EU–Middle East strategy could be more closely linked to a NATO strategy for the Southern Partnership.

Biography

Dr **Katarzyna Sidło** is a Senior Policy Analyst for the Middle East and North Africa at the EU Institute for Security Studies. She also holds the position of a recurring visiting professor at ASERI - Graduate School of Economics and International Relations at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, Italy. Previously, Katarzyna was the Director

of MENA Department at CASE - Center for Social and Economic Research, and a visiting scholar at Ilia State University, Tbilisi and at the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her research examines geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics in the MENA region, with a particular focus on EU-MENA relations.



Lina Khatib

*Associate Fellow, Chatham House and Visiting
Scholar, Harvard Kennedy School*

REGIONAL SECURITY: ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Today, I am going to talk about regional scenarios and NATO capabilities, in particular with regard to the Southern Neighbourhood, but also the European pillar. I am going to focus on opportunities and challenges when it comes to scenarios in the southern region. In terms of opportunities, there is actually diminishing influence for Iran in the Southern Neighbourhood, and that presents an opportunity.

When it comes to regional scenarios and challenges, one of the major issues (one I am particularly interested in, which is of importance to NATO) is the existing Russian air and sea lift linking the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel.

Both the opportunity regarding Iran and the challenge regarding Russia are rooted in key realities in the South. The first key reality is that theatres are actually interconnected. The second is that both challenges and opportunities

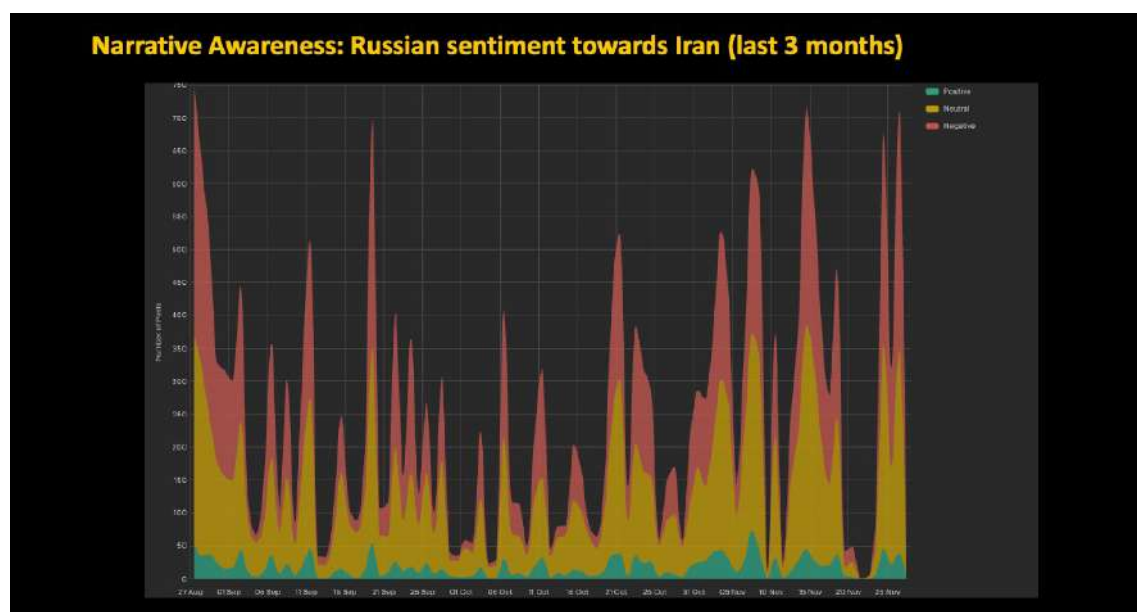
cannot be managed with military tools alone. What NATO really needs is an integrated approach combining political, civilian, informational, and military capabilities.

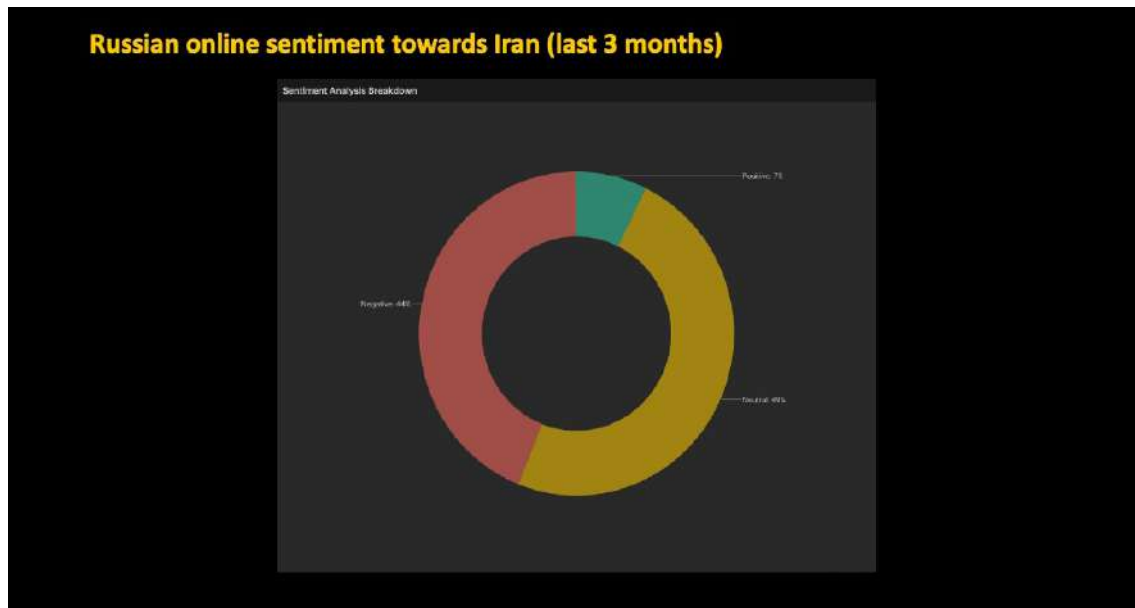
In terms of NATO's core tasks: when it comes to deterrence and defence, some of the areas that NATO's European pillar can strengthen include narrative awareness and situational awareness, for example through a European-led architecture on these issues, as well as strengthening C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance).

When it comes to crisis prevention and management, one of the areas the European pillar can enhance is the development of an early warning system, which by design would be civil-military. For example, this could involve civil-military fusion cells and increased cooperation between the EU and NATO.

In terms of cooperative security, partnerships are the building blocks. Here, I am calling for greater political engagement and enhanced defence capacity-building with NATO's partners in the South.

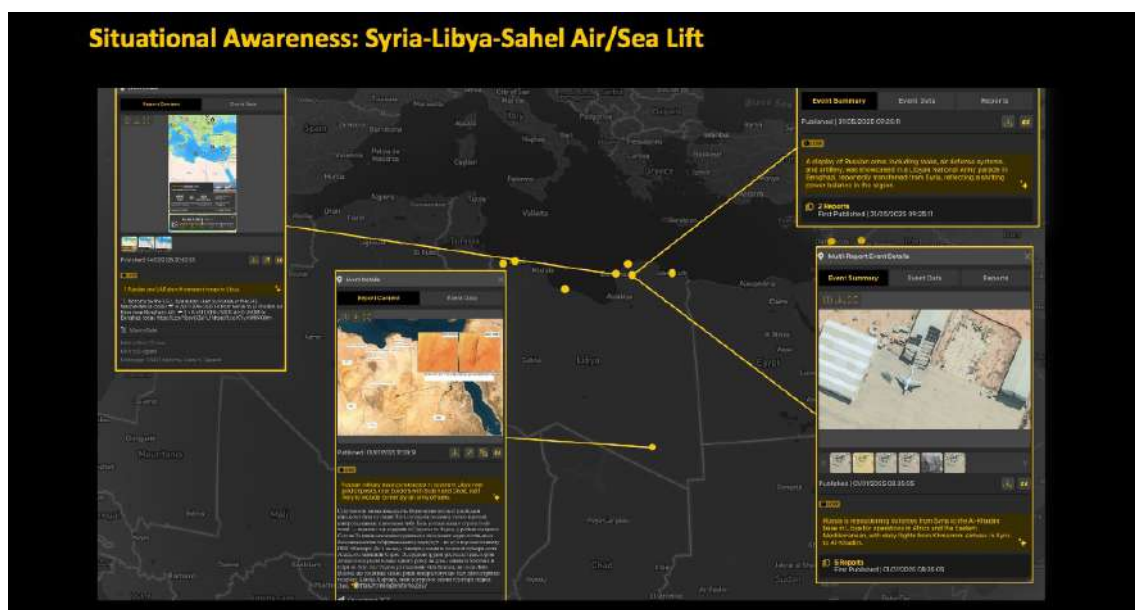
Now I will move to some concrete examples. I cannot go into everything in detail, but I would like to provide a few illustrations of what I mean by narrative awareness and situational awareness. I will be using data from ExTrac, a decision intelligence company that has its own AI platform for geopolitical and security analysis. One of the things tracked is Russian sentiment towards Iran. This is just to show how that sentiment has evolved over the last three months. The colour at the very bottom, the bluish-green shade, represents positive sentiment. As you can see, over the past three months, if we collate Russian online sentiment regarding Iran, only 7% is positive.





Why is this important? Because the narratives circulating on Russia can be counterintuitive. There has been a dominant assumption that Russia and Iran are closely aligned and highly coordinated. However, analysis suggests that this is not entirely the case, and that there may be an opportunity here, as Iran appears to be more isolated than is often assumed.

Another example relates to situational analysis of Russia's air and sea lift linking Syria, Libya, and the Sahel. One of the things tracked is Russian military movements in this region. The elements you see here represent some of the events that have taken place.



What is observed includes several noteworthy developments. For instance, in October 2025, Russian flights between Libya and Syria resumed. In November, Russia announced plans for observation posts in southern Syria and indicated that its military deployment there will be larger than even during the Assad era.

When analysing online sentiment and messaging from Russian-aligned sources, we find that Russia views Libya as a buffer against what it perceives as European influence. It is also framing its Mediterranean presence as enabling strategic influence over NATO's southern flank. This is a direct quote from one of the sources analysed.

On the right, you can see examples of Russian-aligned sources explicitly discussing the strategic importance of Syria for Africa and for Russian geopolitical ambitions in the southern neighbourhood. There are many such examples, these are simply illustrative.

Syria-Libya-Sahel Air/Sea Lift

- October 2025: Russian flights between Libya and Syria resumed
- November 2025: Russia announced plans for observation posts in southern Syria and larger-than-Assad-era military deployment in Syria
- Russia sees Libya as a buffer against "European Influence"
- Russia is framing its Mediterranean presence as enabling "strategic influence over NATO's southern flank"

Published | 22/10/2025 04:10:42

Well, no bases in Syria, no Africa. No Africa, well, you know what I mean. We'll have to negotiate.

Ну нет баз в Сирии нет Африки. Нет Африки ну сами понимаете. Тут придется договариваться.

Болталка

Chatrooms & Forums

General Discussion

Russia | General

Data Source Alignment

Wagner

Published | 16/10/2025 08:00:28

Say hello to logistics in Africa 🤖 No Khmeimim, no Africa, no geopolitics in this region. And we REALLY needed Syria geopolitically 🤖 We need to understand these processes; we would have been shocked by the current geopolitical situation if we hadn't come to Syria 🤖

Передайте привет логистике в Африку 🤖 нет Хмеймим - нет Африки, нет геополитики в этом регионе. И Сирия в геополитическом плане нам ОООООЧЕНЬ была нужна 🤖 надо понимать такие процессы, мы бы охуели от сложившейся геополитической обстановки, не придя в Сирию 🤖

Болталка

Chatrooms & Forums

General Discussion

Russia | General

Data Source Alignment

Wagner

Published | 15/10/2025 15:11:19

We really need bases in the SAR as a transit point for shipments to Africa 🤖

Нам очень нужны базы в САР как перевалочная база для отправки в Африку 🤖

Болталка

Chatrooms & Forums

General Discussion

Russia | General

Data Source Alignment

Wagner

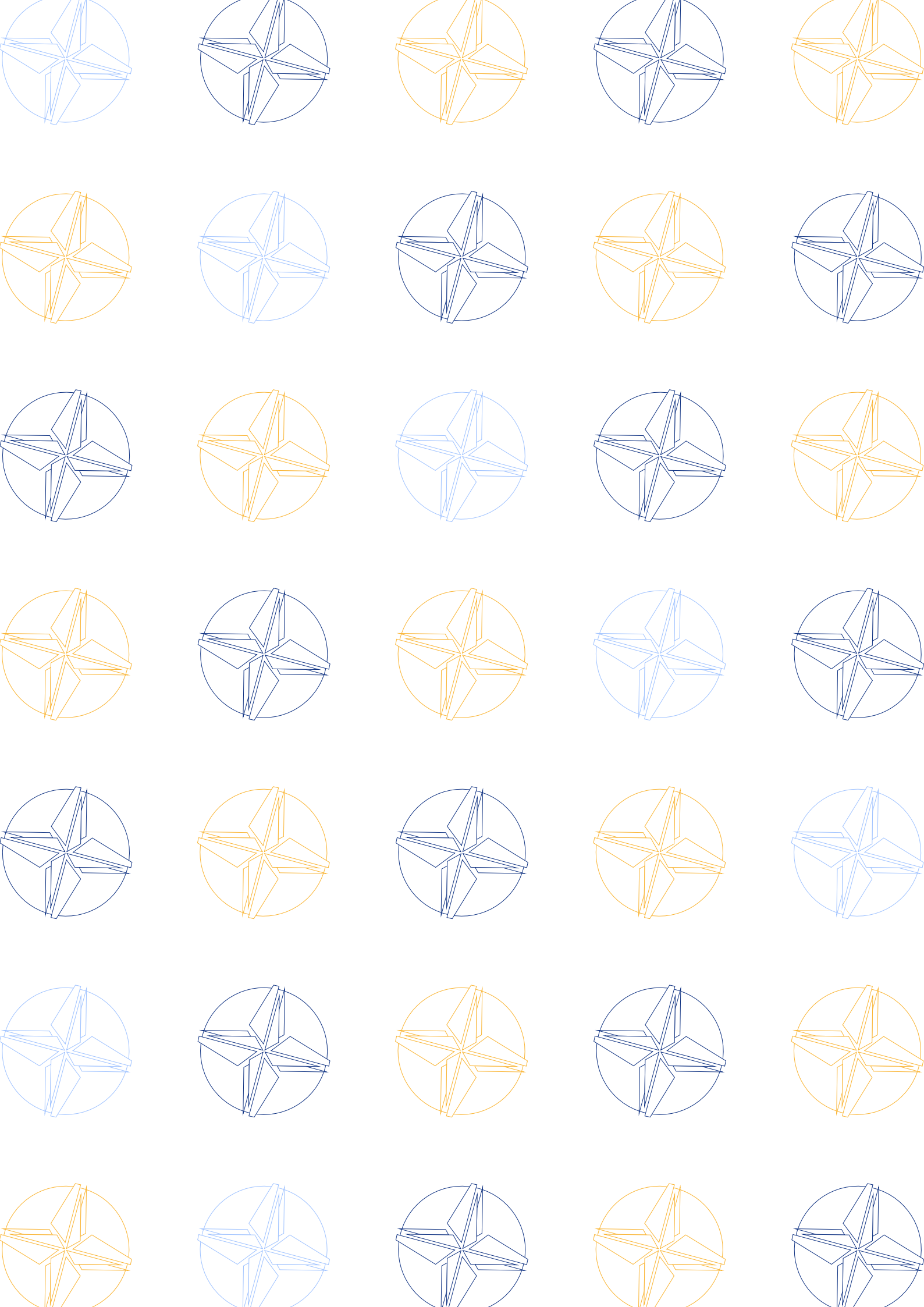
What we learn from this is that not only can narratives be counterintuitive, but actual developments on the ground can be as well. I emphasise Russia's air and sea lift across the Mediterranean and into Africa because there is a prevailing discourse that Russia has drawn down in Syria and is no longer influential there, or that Syria is no longer strategically important.

However, findings suggest otherwise. Russia appears to view both Syria and Libya as springboards for further deployment into Africa. In conclusion, regional scenarios present both challenges and opportunities. Ultimately, NATO could benefit from strengthening the capabilities of its European pillar, where it already has significant strengths, in order to address both.

Biography

Dr **Lina Khatib** is a visiting scholar with the Harvard Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and an Associate Fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme. Her previous roles include serving as director of the SOAS Middle East Institute and Professor of Practice at the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS University of London; director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House; and

director of the Carnegie Middle East Center at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Dr Khatib also co-founded and previously led the Program on Arab Reform and Development at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law and was a senior associate at the Arab Reform Initiative and Principal Analyst at ExTrac. She has published several books and is a frequent writer and commentator on geopolitics and current affairs in the Middle East.

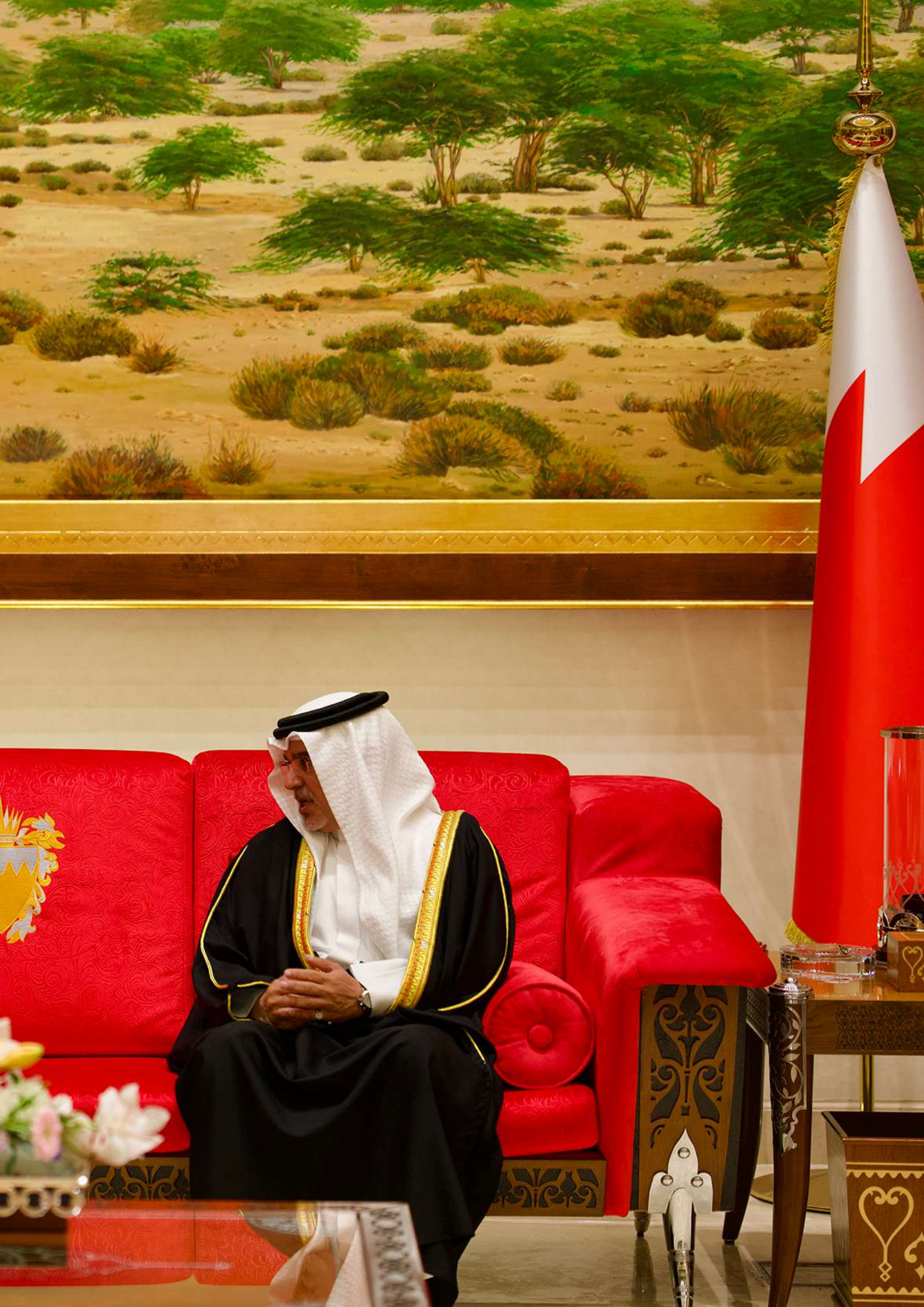


CONCLUDING REMARKS

Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni meets Gulf leaders during the GCC Summit, reflecting a growing convergence between European and Gulf perspectives.

Source: giorgiameloni.it





**Abdulaziz Aluwaisheg**

*Assistant Secretary for Political Affairs and
Negotiations, Gulf Cooperation Council, Riyadh*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Georgia Meloni was in the Gulf two days ago, and she presented some very good ideas that, interestingly, coincided with the points I was planning to raise here. I was pleased, in fact, that Italy is thinking along the same lines as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regarding South–North dialogue, and in particular the dialogue between NATO and the Gulf. She identified three areas: Gaza and Palestine, Iran, and counter-terrorism. I would also like to add maritime security.

These are the four areas that, in my view, lend themselves to cooperation between NATO and the GCC. At the end of her remarks, she also suggested an idea that I will return to later, which might represent a new way of organising discussions around these issues.

On the first point, Gaza–Palestine, when I spoke here a year ago the situation was very different. I believe there is now some hope. The peace deal approved

by the Security Council, and in particular the commitment by the United States to see this through, marks a clear shift from last year, when the US was not interested in bringing the conflict to an end during the final months of the Biden administration. This is a new and welcome development.

At the core of the peace plan is the International Security Force, which is expected to include around 20.000 troops from approximately two dozen countries. Several countries have already expressed interest, and more have been identified as potential contributors. It will be a significant logistical challenge to bring this together, essentially to establish a joint command at short notice. Few organisations besides NATO have nearly eight years of experience in joint command structures. Therefore, whether NATO engages with this force in a formal institutional capacity, which is probably unlikely, or instead provides expertise, logistical support, and operational guidance, its contribution could be crucial. This force will need to be operational immediately.

The United States Central Command ([CENTCOM](#)) is already working on this, establishing structures in southern Israel. However, coordinating troop contributions and forces from across the world will be extremely complex. Time is of the essence, as there are at least two groups that are not interested in seeing this peace agreement implemented: right-wing elements within the Israeli government, and hardliners in Iran. Both are likely to exploit any delays, and we are already seeing signs of this.

That said, ceasefire violations should not be exaggerated. If we compare the figures with last year, when approximately 100 people were being killed daily, with the period since 10 October, the beginning of the ceasefire, fewer than 400 people have been killed. This is still a tragic number, but it amounts to roughly six or seven deaths per day. Just recently, Israeli forces burned people alive in their tents, an appalling incident. Nevertheless, the ceasefire has had a measurable effect in reducing the human toll of the Israeli offensive in Gaza. The genocide is currently on hold, but for how long remains uncertain. The agreement must be implemented swiftly, or there is a real risk of a return to large-scale violence.

The second area Meloni mentioned is Iran, with a particular focus on the nuclear issue. This is another domain where NATO could play a role, given its extensive experience in counter-proliferation. This is a key concern not only for the Gulf countries but for the international community as a whole.

Counter-terrorism is another critically important area. If we consider the situation in Syria, it too is markedly different from a year ago. There is now a new government that is fully committed to combating terrorism and drug trafficking. It appears to have genuine intent, but it requires the means to

deliver on its promises. While it is making commendable efforts, NATO could assist by providing expertise in counter-terrorism, possibly along the lines of its engagement in Iraq.

Such a mission could be particularly useful because the core of the conflict between the north-east, the Kurdish forces, and Damascus revolves around counter-terrorism. The rationale for the US' presence, as well as Türkiye's, is also rooted in counter-terrorism. Each of these actors claims to be best positioned to address the threat, but NATO could support the Syrian government in becoming a credible and effective alternative, capable of replacing the Syrian Democratic Forces, Kurdish forces, and potentially even the US presence, whether in securing detention camps or preventing ISIS (Daesh) from regrouping.

Finally, on maritime security, the largest maritime coalition in the region is the Combined Maritime Forces ([CMF](#)), which now includes around 47 countries and five task forces. All Gulf countries are active members, and roughly one-third of its membership consists of NATO States. However, the CMF's capabilities, particularly in the Red Sea, remain limited.

As Meloni reminded us in Bahrain two days ago, Italy has a long history of involvement in the region. The Roman Empire maintained a military presence on what is now a Saudi island to protect trade routes from India, alongside its land-based garrisons. Today, the Red Sea is characterised by a vacuum that various actors are attempting to fill, some with constructive intentions, others less so.

This is an area that requires further development, whether through training local forces, such as in Eritrea, where there is a significant gap, or in Yemen, where Italy previously supported Coast Guard training prior to the current crisis. Alternatively, efforts could focus on strengthening the international presence by reinforcing existing task forces, particularly the most recent one dedicated to the Red Sea.

These, in my view, are the four priority areas for meaningful GCC–NATO dialogue and cooperation. As mentioned, Meloni proposed hosting a GCC–MED summit in Italy to address these and other issues. I believe this is a valuable idea. However, in preparation for such a summit, should it take place, it will be essential to organise discussions around these four key areas.

Biography

H.E. Dr **Abdulaziz Aluwaisheg** has been the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Assistant Secretary-General for Political and Negotiation Affairs since 2011. In this capacity, he is tasked with coordinating GCC foreign affairs and security policy, as well as managing

the organisation's relations with the rest of the world. His responsibilities include regional security, including WMD and missile proliferation and counterterrorism. He also oversees GCC trade negotiations and strategic partnerships with other countries, blocs and organizations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council gather in Kuwait, reaffirming the vital role of dialogue and regional cooperation.

Source: Gulf Cooperation Council





**Hossam Zaki**

*Assistant Secretary General,
League of Arab States, Cairo*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I think it is very, very difficult to speak last at a conference like this, because so many important ideas have been expressed and it is difficult to address each and every one of them. However, my thoughts are quite clear.

The League of Arab States, first of all, for those of you who may not know, has a membership of 22 countries and stretches from Mauritania and Morocco in the west to Oman and the UAE in the east. It covers quite a large area and encompasses a wide variety of countries, with differing levels of development, political engagements, political interests, political threats and neighbourhoods. You have countries bordering the Sahel, others neighbouring Iran, and others close to Europe and Türkiye. So it is a very diverse region and we have a wide range of interests. What we can say about cooperation with NATO is that we do not have a structured dialogue with NATO. We simply do not have one.

This is due, in fact, to a number of reasons. Some relate to the fact that NATO may not have the reputation that would secure unanimous approval within the Arab League for a structured dialogue. Why? Because some member states of the Arab League have been on the receiving end of interventions by NATO, and that has complicated their perception of NATO and of engaging in dialogue with it. However, this is not, and should not be, in the view of the Secretariat led by the Secretary-General, a constant obstacle to dialogue with NATO. We should think of better ways, and more ways, to engage in dialogue with NATO, preferably a structured one.

Another challenge in establishing dialogue with NATO is that our region has experienced more than a decade and a half of upheaval, aside from the Palestinian question. Many participants have spoken about Palestine and Gaza, and possible remedies for the situation. I believe we must recognise that this is an issue that will not go away unless we work together to impose a solution. By “impose a solution”, I mean working actively to ensure that the different parties agree on a resolution. At present, this is not something we are witnessing. The efforts undertaken by the United States are remarkable, and I believe they have achieved something no other country could have accomplished. However, we must also be realistic. This is a conflict that requires constant attention, sustained effort and ongoing pressure on the parties, particularly on Israel, in order to reach where it needs to go.

But there are other issues in the region as well. We have heard today, for instance, about challenges ranging from political instability to the collapse of state structures in a number of countries, including members of the Arab League. We must address these issues with the support of partners who demonstrate good faith in helping these countries emerge from their difficulties.

So the sentiment is this, and please take this sentence exactly as I intend it, Arab states do not want to feel like a *playing field*; they want to feel like *players*. This, of course, relates to the balance of power and many other factors. But there is a clear difference between being a playing field and being a player. We need to feel that we are an integral part of a meaningful dialogue that will lead to outcomes capable of improving our future. Is this possible or not? We have yet to see.

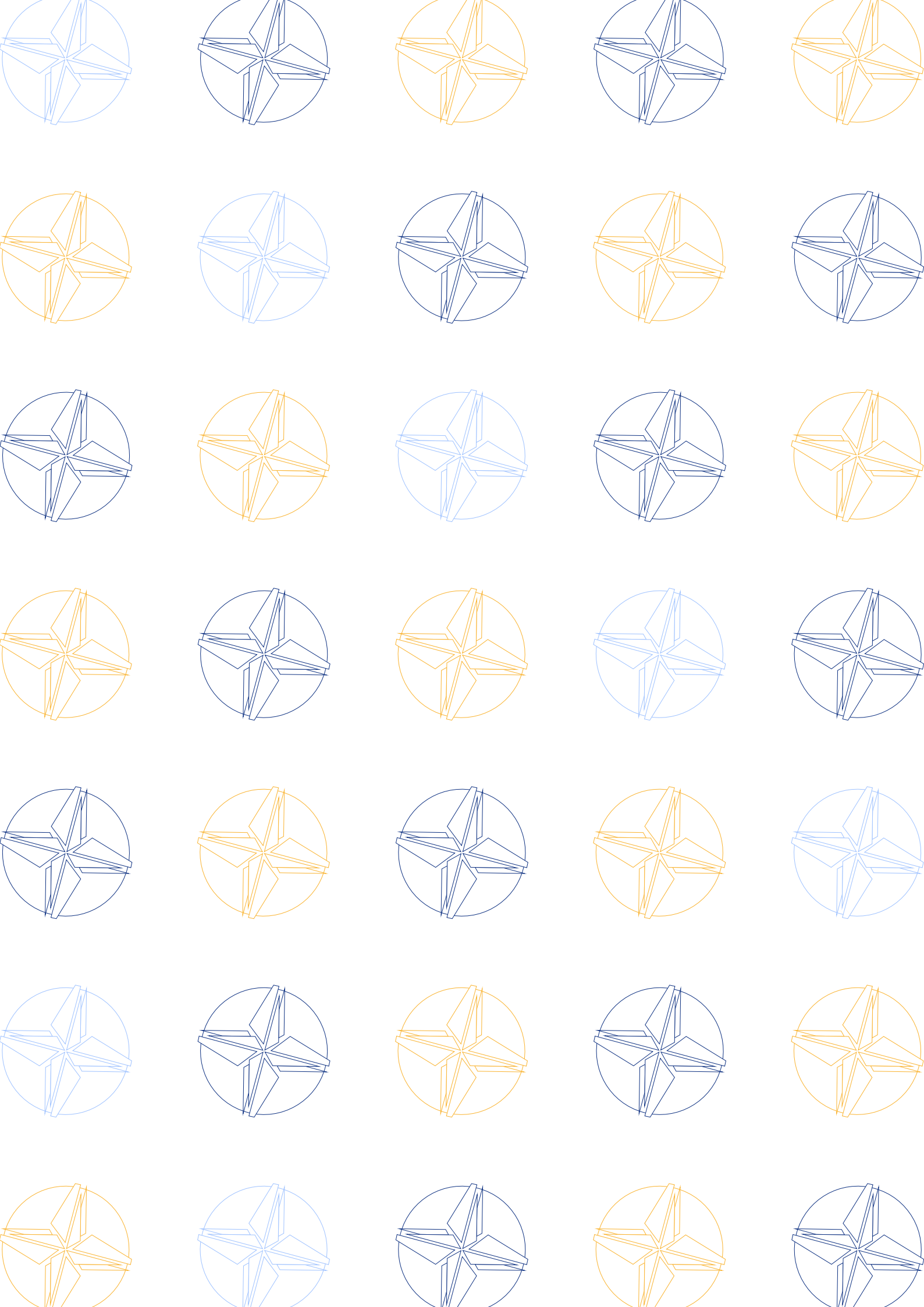
We are encouraged by the developments taking place in the GCC dialogue. The GCC is a very important component of the Arab League, and it is essential that its members continue to enjoy stability, prosperity and political influence. We must ensure that they are engaged and not isolated. At the same time, there are other actors in the region as well. We need to feel that this kind of partnership exists, and that it serves the interests of all parties.

Last but not least, the importance of establishing a structured dialogue cannot be overstated. According to the briefing notes prepared for me prior to this conference, there have been many attempts over the past 25 years, but unfortunately all have failed. Therefore, we must focus on this issue. We need to listen to one another more carefully and demonstrate a shared commitment on both sides to change this situation, ensuring that any dialogue we establish is structured, institutionalised and capable of producing positive outcomes.

Biography

H.E. **Hossam Zaki** is currently the Assistant Secretary General of the League of Arab States and Chief of Staff since July 2016. He previously served as Egypt's Ambassador to Brazil and Assistant Foreign Minister for European Affairs. H.E. Zaki has held various significant roles, including Senior Middle East Advisor for the Egyptian Foreign Minister and Deputy Chief of

Staff of the Minister. His career began as a political officer at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with postings in Addis Ababa. He has also served as Head of the Department of East Arab States and a member of the Foreign Minister's cabinet. H.E. Zaki holds a BSc in Business Administration from Helwan University and an International Diploma in Public Administration from the Ecole Nationale d'Administration.





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NATO in the South

Strategic Reflections and Cooperative Security

High-Level Conference

Organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation

*In co-operation with NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division,
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation,
International Council on Environmental Economics and Development,
Fondazione CSF, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo,
the NATO Defense College, Leonardo S.P.A., MBDA,
The Euro Gulf Information Centre,
Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean,
in media partnership with Adnkronos*

Rome, Friday, 5th of December 2025
Venue: The Hive Hotel

14,30 – 15,00 CET

PARTICIPANTS REGISTRATION

15,00 – 15,30 CET

WELCOME REMARKS

- ✦ *Antonio Tajani*, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome
- ✦ *Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo*, President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome
- ✦ *Catherine Bourdès*, Director Academic Plans, Policy and Engagement, NATO Defense College, Rome
- ✦ *Ken Kitatani*, Board of Directors, Governance Officer, International Council on Environmental Economics (ICEED), New York
- ✦ *Carlo Musso*, Head, Strategic Studies, Leonardo S.P.A., Rome

15,30 – 16,30 CET

SESSION I

**Shifting Allied Priorities in the Euro-Atlantic Space:
The Middle East Beyond the Present**

CHAIR: *Ahmad Masa'deh*, Former Secretary General, the Union for the Mediterranean, Amman

- ✦ *Ian Lesser*, Distinguished Fellow and Advisor to the President, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels
- ✦ *Mahmoud Karem*, President, Egyptian National Council for Human Rights, Cairo
- ✦ *Silvia Colombo*, Senior Researcher and Faculty Advisor, NATO Defense College, Rome

Q&A Session

16,30 – 17,30 CET

SESSION II

**A 360-Degree Approach to the South:
Security, Governance and Balance**

CHAIR: *Matthew Robinson*, Director, Euro-Gulf Information Center, Rome

- ✦ *Niagalé Bagayoko*, Chair, African Security Sector Network (ASSN), Paris
- ✦ *Nigar Göksel*, Project Director, Turkey/Cyprus, International Crisis Group, Istanbul
- ✦ *Dahan Ahmed Mahmoud*, Executive Director, Mauritanian Institute for Strategic Studies, Nouakchott
- ✦ *Oumar Ba*, Professor, CEDS Paris and Sciences Po, Bordeaux

Q&A Session

17,30 – 18,30 CET

SESSION III

**Towards a Credible European Pillar within NATO:
Capabilities for the Three Core Tasks**

CHAIR: *Teri Schultz*, Freelance Journalist and NATO Correspondent, Brussels

- ✦ *Giovanni Romani*, Head, Middle East and North Africa Section, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, NATO HQ, Brussels
- ✦ *Morgane Buttiens*, Policy Officer, Economic recovery, Resilience and Security, DG MENA, Brussels
- ✦ *Katarzyna Sidło*, Senior Policy Analyst, MENA, EUISS, Paris
- ✦ *Lina Khatib*, Associate Fellow, Chatham House and Visiting Scholar, Harvard Kennedy School

Q&A Session

18,30 – 18,50 CET

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- ✦ *Abdulaziz Aluwaisheg*, Assistant Secretary for Political Affairs and Negotiations, Gulf Cooperation Council, Riyadh
- ✦ *Hossam Zaki*, Assistant Secretary General, League of Arab States, Cairo

END OF CONFERENCE

In media partnership with





The Conference *NATO in the South: Strategic Reflections and Cooperative Security* reaffirms the importance of cooperation in navigating today's strategic challenges.

Source: NATO Defense College Foundation



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