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***From the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East:
can the NATO's IP4 Partnership Model work?***

By Karel Franco Valansi

Recent proposals to broaden the Abraham Accords have renewed discussion of regional security cooperation in the Middle East. In May 2026, US President Donald Trump publicly called on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan to join the Abraham Accords, in a social media

post following phone calls with regional leaders, describing the initiative as an “unparalleled world coalition” (Chiacu and Pamuk 2026). This proposal, although framed in diplomatic and political terms, raises a more structural question: can NATO’s Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) partnership model of selective, issue-based cooperation be adapted to the Abraham Accord countries?

The question matters because the Middle East has repeatedly struggled to institutionalize durable and inclusive security arrangements. Existing frameworks such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League have not developed into effective collective security mechanisms, while more ambitious proposals such as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) have also failed to materialize (Oztig 2021).

As a result, regional security cooperation remains fragmented, highly issue-specific and heavily dependent on external powers, especially the United States. In this environment, regional actors have increasingly adopted hedging strategies, diversifying their partnerships rather than relying on a single guarantor (Kuik 2008).

Against this backdrop, the Abraham Accords represent a growing pattern of minilateral (Panda and Ohn 2024; Moises 2009), function-based cooperation among a limited number of actors, rather than a comprehensive collective security system. This logic resembles NATO’s broader shift toward tailored partnerships with selected non-member states. The IP4 framework (NATO 2026), in particular, reflects NATO’s move toward flexible cooperation beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. The key analytical question, therefore, is not whether the Abraham Accords can become a Middle Eastern version of IP4, but whether the principles underlying IP4 are transferable to the Middle East.

The Middle East has long been characterized by weak regional institutionalization and competing security visions. Attempts to create stable security structures have repeatedly faced political fragmentation, regime rivalry, and divergent threat perceptions. The GCC has remained largely subregional and narrowly institutionalized, while the Arab League has historically lacked the authority and cohesion to function as an effective collective security organization (Barnett 1999; Gause 2010).

The proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance, announced in 2017 and sometimes referred to as an “Arab NATO,” illustrates both the persistence of regional balancing logic and the difficulty of translating that logic into institutional form. Although MESA sought to align GCC states, Egypt, and Jordan around a common counter-Iran agenda, it never matured into a credible security architecture. The failure of such initiatives reflects a broader pattern: Middle Eastern states often prefer ad hoc cooperation and flexible coalitions over binding multilateral commitments. This

preference is reinforced by uncertainty about US regional commitments and by the desire of local states to preserve strategic autonomy.

In this context, hedging has become a defining feature of regional behaviour. Rather than aligning exclusively with one bloc, states combine security ties with the United States and Europe with economic and political engagement involving Russia, China, and other external actors (Kuik 2008; Goh 2005). Cooperation, therefore, tends to emerge around specific threats or functional priorities, such as missile defence, maritime security, counterterrorism, and critical infrastructure protection. This pattern creates fertile ground for minilateral arrangements, but it also limits the prospects for formal collective defence structures.

The Abraham Accords as Functional Cooperation

The Abraham Accords (2020) were originally designed as a normalization framework between Israel and several Arab countries. This was built on a longer pattern in Israel's strategic thinking of cultivating ties with so-called "moderate" Arab states (Voller 2015). Over time, however, their significance has expanded beyond diplomatic recognition. The Accords have increasingly facilitated cooperation in defence, maritime security, cybersecurity, technology, trade, food security, and critical infrastructure (Al-Eshaq and Bakir 2026). They have not created a collective security arrangement, but they have generated a practical network of coordination among states with overlapping strategic interests.

A major driver of this evolution has been the shared perception of Iran as a destabilizing regional actor. At the same time, broader geopolitical and economic considerations have reinforced the Accords' relevance. Israel's inclusion in the US Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility in 2021 marked a significant institutional development, as it created new opportunities for military coordination with Arab partners (Kapach 2026). In parallel, initiatives such as I2U2 (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the U.S.) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) have extended the logic of cooperation beyond traditional matters into infrastructure, technology, and connectivity (Devi and Singh 2025; Hameed 2024).

The Abraham Accords might, therefore, be understood less as a formal alliance and more as an adaptable platform for functional cooperation. Their resilience lies in their informality. As they do not rest on treaty-based collective defence obligations, they can accommodate changing political conditions and varied domestic sensitivities. This flexibility makes them analytically comparable to minilateral security arrangements elsewhere, even if political and strategic environments differ substantially.

Recent political initiatives reinforce this interpretation. The Trump administration's reported effort to widen the Accords' membership suggests continued US interest in building a broader network of normalized and cooperative relations in the Middle East. In parallel, the proposed Abraham Accords Defense Cooperation Act (Walter 2026) indicated that Congress and the Department of Defense are exploring more structured forms of cooperation, particularly in air defence, counter-drone capabilities, and joint military exercises. If implemented, such measures would formalize cooperation without creating treaty obligations, echoing the logic of nonbinding but operational partnerships.

NATO and the IP4 Framework

NATO's partnership policy has changed substantially over the past two decades. Traditional mechanisms such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperative Initiative were important for dialogue and confidence building, but they remained geographically bounded and institutionally limited. By contrast, NATO's engagement with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea reflects a broader evolution toward a flexible, issue-specific, and transregional partnership.

The IP4 framework is significant because it illustrates NATO's willingness to cooperate with capable partners outside the Euro-Atlantic area on shared challenges such as cyber defence, maritime security, critical infrastructure protection, emerging technologies, and resilience. This approach does not extend Article 5 guarantees, nor does it create a collective defence structure. Instead, it allows NATO to deepen practical cooperation while preserving institutional flexibility (Grgić 2024; NATO 2024, 2022).

The adaptation of the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) might further reinforce this logic. Under this framework, NATO can calibrate cooperation according to each partner's priorities, capacities, and political preferences. This makes the partnership architecture more modular and adaptive than earlier models. It also reflects a broader transformation in alliance practice, in which operational collaboration increasingly takes precedence over formal enlargement or rigid institutional design (NATO 2024).

The IP4 model is, therefore, best understood as an example of selective partnership among strategically relevant states that do not seek formal alliance membership. Its value lies not in geographical proximity, but in the combination of capability, political compatibility, and shared security concerns.

Comparing the Two Models

The main analytical value of comparing the IP4 and Abraham Accords lies in their common logic of functional cooperation without collective defence commitment. Both frameworks emerged in response to strategic environments in which states faced overlapping threats but did not want or could not sustain a formal alliance structure. In both cases, cooperation developed around practical areas such as security coordination, resilience, technology, and connectivity.

At a deeper level, both models reflect a shift in international security governance from fixed blocs toward adaptable networks. This shift is consistent with wider patterns in contemporary geopolitics, where flexible coalitions often prove more viable than permanent institutions in fragmented strategic environments. From this perspective, the Abraham Accords and IP4 are not equivalent structures, but they do share an underlying organizational logic.

At the same time, important differences limit direct transferability. IP4 members generally maintain relatively stable strategic alignment with NATO and with one another, whereas Abraham Accords countries continue to pursue more diverse foreign policies and maintain ties with a wider range of external actors, including China and Russia. In the Middle East, domestic legitimacy concerns, unresolved interstate disputes, the renewed Israeli-US-Iran war, and the serious developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict impose constraints that have no direct equivalent in the Indo-Pacific context. Moreover, the Accords countries are internally more heterogeneous in capability and threat exposure than IP4, a variation of NATO's tailored-partnership model would need to accommodate. These conditions make the Middle East environment less conducive to the kind of stable and relatively cohesive partnership structure represented by IP4.

For that reason, IP4 should not be treated as a template to be replicated in the Middle East. Rather, it should be understood as a useful benchmark for identifying the principles that make flexible partnerships viable: limited, issue-based cooperation, political adaptability, and the absence of treaty-bound defence commitments.

NATO's Southern Neighbourhood

NATO's growing attention to its Southern Neighbourhood adds further relevance to this discussion. Alliance documents have increasingly emphasized instability, terrorism, irregular migration, and the protection of critical infrastructure as interconnected challenges emanating from the South (NATO 2026, 2024, 2022). Several Abraham Accords countries already maintain

bilateral relations with NATO through existing mechanisms, but these relationships remain fragmented rather than collectively organized.

In this context, the Abraham Accords could serve as a platform for more adaptable cooperation between NATO and regional partners. Such cooperation would not require the creation of a new regional security architecture. Instead, it could build on existing mechanisms to support issue-specific engagement in areas where interests overlap. This approach would be consistent with NATO's broader shift toward tailored partnership models and would allow the Alliance to respond more effectively to transregional security challenges.

The advantage of this approach is that it avoids over-institutionalization while still enabling practical cooperation. For NATO, the strategic challenge is not to replicate a regional bloc model, but to identify partners with sufficient political will and operational capacity to engage on selected priorities.

Conclusion

The IP4 model is not directly transferable to the Middle East, but it offers important lessons for understanding how NATO might engage with Abraham Accords countries. The key lesson is not institutional replication, but functional adaptation. Flexible cooperation, selective engagement, and the absence of formal alliance commitments make it possible to build practical partnerships in fragmented security environments.

The Abraham Accords should, therefore, be seen not as a Middle Eastern equivalent of IP4, but as a potential network through which NATO could apply elements of the same partnership logic. Existing NATO mechanisms already provide a basis for this kind of engagement, and they could be used to deepen cooperation without requiring a formal alliance or politically burdensome treaty commitments.

Ultimately, the significance of the Abraham Accords for NATO lies not in their transformation into a new security bloc, but in what they reveal about the future of security cooperation: more flexible, more selective, and more functional. In an increasingly fragmented security environment, these principles may prove more durable than the search for a comprehensive regional architecture.

This has direct implications for the current push to expand the Accords' membership. Framed as a broad diplomatic coalition rather than a set of functional partnerships, the proposal risks the same fate as MESA: political ambition without the issue-specific cooperation that has made the

Accords resilient. For NATO, this is the more relevant marker to watch than membership size: a framework anchored in functional cooperation is one the Alliance could engage on IP4 style terms, while one built primarily on political normalization offers less for NATO's tailored-partnership model to work with.

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