

# **NATO and the Greater Middle East: a challenge for multilateral dialogue and a need for a public diplomacy function**

Donatella Scatamacchia

(Edited by J. Lindsay Kellock)

Since the end of its role as a collective Euro-centric defense alliance during the years of bi-polar confrontation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has sought an identity that will guarantee its future survival. The organization's new objective is to transform, through global cooperation, from a collective defense organization to a collective security organization.

Now that NATO has evolved to become a global security provider, the traditional lines of security, deterrence, defense and stability creation have blurred. NATO must re-define its role in an international security environment, while ensuring positive support for the objectives arising from its New Strategic Concept. The focus will highlight NATO's role in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East. In the specific context of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), the Strategic Concept would focus on NATO's role in the Greater Middle East and a policy based on common threats and shared interests. Such a policy would require public diplomacy action in both initiatives. In the Greater Middle East, NATO is engaged in two partnerships: the first, in the fourteen-year-old Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), which includes Algeria, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia, and second, in the six-year-old Istanbul Cooperation Initiative

(ICI): which includes four of the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states, i.e. Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. In each, the geopolitical context, the era and the premises of each diverge.

## **The Mediterranean Dialogue**

The Mediterranean Dialogue was established in the post-Cold-War era, when the Transatlantic Alliance faced two main issues. First, in the Mediterranean region, it must meet the challenge to define a new framework for coalition making, given that the previous framework had been defined by the Soviet threat. NATO's main objective was to build a framework on a shared understanding of threats, to pave the way to global cooperation. Accordingly, NATO sought to avoid new polarizations, while seeking cooperation between former adversaries. This was done through the creation of new country-to-country relationships, both in co-operative relationships, such as in the case of the Partnerships for Peace, and in the establishment of special relationships that will serve to export stability to new member countries.

The second issue relates to a realistic recognition of certain features of the Mediterranean geopolitical region and the growth of its importance in terms of security.

As an area “in the middle of land”, still known as the cradle of civilisation, it was also viewed as a geo-political unitary region. However, following the end of the Cold War, new challenges for the States arose from the birth of a new global order. A resulting “fluidity” in the Mediterranean is reflected in a variety of problems. These have caused a level of instability and insecurity that call for a re-evaluation of the region as a security priority. Numerous factors can explain why and in what ways the Mediterranean matters to NATO. These include: the unresolved Palestine-Israeli conflict; uncontrolled immigration from North Africa into European Union (EU); illegal drug and arms trafficking; the risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the importance of Mediterranean transit points. All are critical to the energy security of the West and to the general stability of maritime trade routes. These factors have led NATO to change its approach to the region’s security needs and to acknowledge the Mediterranean aggregate as a principal framework in which to test own unity and efficiency.

### **The Istanbul Initiative**

The Mediterranean Dialogue, established within the context of a shift in international relations, and a moderately peaceful political climate, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) began in a climate of acute tension, created by military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and a intensifying Iranian nuclear crisis.

Through the ICI, the Alliance tried to allay the fears of the Gulf oil monarchies that NATO had undue influence over the region. They also established bilateral cooperation,

focused on such topics as defence reform, interoperability, the fight against terrorism, intelligence-sharing, limitation of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, monitoring and assistance with border security, and assistance with civil emergency planning.

NATO also sought to create strong ties with the Countries of the Middle East, based on reciprocal trust and cooperation. However, despite the similarity of its objectives for both regions, that is, to promote governance and regional security, it is important to note that the MD and the ICI exist in separate geopolitical contexts, and that these differ in many respects. The MD offers a choice between multilateral and bilateral approaches; the ICI offers only a bilateral approach, despite the multilateral dimension of the partnerships.

Since the creation of the MD, the Countries of the south shore of the Mediterranean Sea and NATO have increased the number of their joint activities. Today, these activities cover a number of areas of cooperation, from ordinary military contact through exchanges of information on maritime security and anti-terrorism, and access to educational programs provided by Alliance institutions, to joint crisis management exercises.

As for the ICI, its aim is to cooperate in defined technical areas, rather than to establish a dialogue between civilizations. Nevertheless, there is an expanding dialogue, although the actual number of activities remains below that of the MD. If progress in practical and bilateral cooperation has already been achieved in both the

Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, the same positive achievements are relatively lacking in the multilateral dimension of the Mediterranean Dialogue.

From this point of view and in the light of the New Strategic Concept, I think that the implementation of real political discussion within the MD and the establishment of a multilateral approach within the ICI could enhance the communication and cooperation of the partnerships. The promotion of multilateral cooperation within the ICI could facilitate the inclusion of a political dimension in relations between the West and the Gulf States and form the first step in a graduated strategy to resolve the major difficulties of the partnership.

For example, one unresolved problem is the absence from the Initiative of the two Countries, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Their presence, especially that of Saudi Arabia, could give the partnership sound guidance for constructive political dialogue and, consequently, sufficient critical mass to increase regional security. Indeed, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula fear that ICI progress may be made at the expense of the GCC and that NATO engagement in their region could reduce the importance of the GCC's political framework. The role of Saudi Arabia in promoting direct communication is crucial, given the country's relevant influence.

As for relations with the MD, it would be helpful were NATO to implement its multilateral dimension with concrete action. Following 9/11, various measures have been adopted to promote more regular and

effective consultation, more focused activities and an individualized approach to cooperation. The decision to intensify the political discussion has led to the upgrading of the Dialogue in Partnership (DP) established at the Istanbul Summit, in June 2004. Essentially, this upgrading has enhanced communication, through meetings at ambassadorial level and through the organization of *ad hoc* meetings at the ministerial level. The results include the intensification of the confidence-building process. However, many of the problems of the Mediterranean Partners are domestic, such as lack of legitimacy, religious radicalism and economic problems. Confidence-building instruments alone cannot resolve these. Urgently needed is a real synergy within the partnership to find equilibrium between hard and soft security. This synergy can be reached only via a multilateral approach and political dialogue.

The search for common threats and shared interests with NATO and the West have the potential to facilitate implementation of the multilateral framework of the partnerships, while defining the role of NATO in North Africa and Middle East. This could be complicated if we consider the following issues: first of all, the MD comprises countries of two distinct geopolitical areas, the Maghreb and the Mashrek. The concerns relevant to those countries are not necessarily identical. The Maghreb issues include economic development and civil society, while the Mashrek focuses on political issues and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Secondly, at multilateral level there exists misunderstanding on issues relevant to Mediterranean region, to NATO member

states and above all, to European members and the United States of America (USA). In any case, only a multilateral format for both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative will progress towards constructive dialogue, reciprocal confidence and security building measures that fulfill the objectives of the Partnerships.

Terrorism, religious extremism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction constitute a threat both to the southern Mediterranean and Middle-eastern countries and to NATO and the West. Consequently, the multidimensional character of the security environment in the Greater Middle East requires a comprehensive vision of security and a shared problem-solving approach. In this respect, taking immediate steps towards the engagement of the MD and ICI partner countries in Afghanistan could be helpful.

The promotion of common actions in a multilateral dimension relates to the perception of Muslim countries of the Transatlantic Alliance. Generally, a gap exists between official discourse and public perception. There is widespread distrust towards NATO on the part of both the public and the élite. The NATO image is damaged even further by the fact that the Alliance is perceived as the “military arm of the US policy in the Mediterranean”. NATO's image is further adversely affected by the US military presence in Iraq and US indulgence towards Israeli policy. Despite the most realistic vision of governments, which for strategic reasons prefer to maintain good relations with the

western Countries, their political support at NATO is limited by the negative perception of the masses and the élite. This situation leads the Arab governments to adopt, in their policies and declarations, an attitude of ambiguity in which they tend to maximize the positive aspects of the partnership like the bilateral cooperation, on the one hand, and minimize the problematic issues proper to a political and multilateral dialogue, on the other. With such a negative image that NATO has in the Middle East, the Alliance has little prospect of ever playing a constructive role in the Greater Middle East.

In this context, to win the battle of narratives, in a post-Cold-War era in which no identifiable adversary exists, NATO must create a Strategic Concept that places strong emphasis on a public diplomacy function, supported by an effective communications strategy and plan.

Public diplomacy is an essential, fundamental function of the Strategic Concept. NATO must inform the world what NATO is and what are its purposes. It must mobilize support at home and prepare the Alliance for engagement that will be as unpredictable, as it is demanding. In the case of the MD and the ICI, work could improve the perception of NATO in the region. Such work should include conducting media and information campaigns; providing more Arabic, Internet-based materials about NATO. and its activities, and by organizing regular annual seminars and debates on security and regional cooperation issues.