Chapter 4

NATO and the Middle East

Mehmet Yegin

NATO is currently looking for ways to adapt to the changing security environment over the next decade. In these efforts, the NATO 2030 Reflection Group Report is instrumental in initiating a comprehensive discussion. NATO’s relationship with the Middle East is a key part of the discussion as the region is crucial for the Alliance’s security. Shifts in the region necessitate the Alliance develop new approaches to remain relevant in the near future.

There are pressing political and security developments in the Middle East that complicate NATO protecting its interest of defending alliance territory and projecting stability in the region. Primarily, the region is facing more of the presence of emerging major powers—particularly Russia and China—while witnessing a smaller footprint from the United States. This change is compelling NATO to be more active in the region before the US completes its pivot away, particularly in terms of Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs and the ongoing civil war in Syria to avoid inheriting these problems.

Furthermore, the Alliance also needs to put its house in order, increase democratic resilience and achieve cohesion among its Allies regarding the Middle East. For example, democratic backsliding and populism in Turkey—the only Ally located in the Middle East—have brought a perspective focusing exclusively on the political survival of the leader (on democratic backsliding, see the chapter by Flockhart). Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has pursued rapprochement with Russia and military activism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and this activism has caused tensions with fellow NATO Allies, including France, Greece, and the United States. Thus, the problem of democratic backsliding is not only a matter of values but also strategy. Lastly, NATO’s partnerships need to be more effective and diverse based on shared interests and threat perceptions of the Alliance and
partners in the region, and capacity-building programs need to be extended according to changing and emerging threats in the region.

This chapter analyzes the relations and interactions between NATO and the Middle East in three parts. First, it scrutinizes NATO’s interests in the Middle East. Second, it examines major power involvement in the region and local challenges that NATO faces in pursuit of these interests. This chapter concludes by explaining and outlining the possible policies and steps for NATO to manage and solve these problems in the Middle East.

**NATO’s Interests in the Middle East**

The Middle East is an unstable region that is neighbor to much of NATO territory by sea through the Mediterranean, and it also crosses beyond the Alliance’s borders by land and covers the Anatolian part of Turkey. The Alliance’s primary objective in the region is to protect NATO territory from an outside attack in the context of Article 5. Its second objective is to project stability and prevent spillover effects of instability from the Middle East. According to NATO’s official documents, issues in this context are diverse and started with terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) after the Cold War and included rogue states, ballistic missiles, and failed states with massive immigration in time. Due to the increasing presence of Russia and China in the region, there is an emerging objective to deter or contain these countries’ (un)intentional intensification of instability that affects NATO members and uses of the region as a base to threaten the Alliance.

In order to project stability in the region, NATO works with its partners and conducts capacity building programs. NATO’s partnerships, including the Mediterranean Dialogue and to a limited degree the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, were relatively successful in serving as platforms of dialogue and security cooperation. Nevertheless, NATO partnerships were formed in the post-Cold War unipolar context when the Alliance was unrivaled, as an extension of the main body of member countries. NATO has not formalized these partnerships, and therefore the arrangements do not entail a clear nor
binding responsibility for both the Alliance and the partner states.\textsuperscript{6} NATO partnerships are neither designed for a multi-polar world nor for competing with other major powers and security organizations. In this line, the presence of an alternative security organization, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which seems to offer more benefits and a clear path for membership through dialogue, observer, and member statuses, may cause problems for the Alliance as countries are more drawn to the Russian- and Chinese-led organization. NATO partnerships and capacity-building projects in the region necessitate particular attention to increase their effectiveness and make them resilient against the enticing offers from competing major powers.

**Major Power Involvement in the Middle East**

Although the nature of their involvement and foreign policy toolkits are visibly different, Russian and Chinese engagement in the Middle East has intensified in recent years. This involvement concerns NATO with the risks of worsening instability and the use of the region as a base to threaten the Alliance. Though Russia and the USSR have a long history in the region, Moscow’s involvement in the region has taken a situational approach, e.g., by taking advantage of the power vacuum created by the United States to increase its own influence. The piecemeal, opportunistic way in which Russia approaches the region suggests that it does not have a grand strategy for the Middle East.\textsuperscript{7} Rather, Russia positions itself as an alternative to the West and offers relationships and support to counterbalance Western interventions. Moscow adopts hard power tools such as military force, arms deals, and energy agreements, and aims to maintain relations with all parties without restricting itself with obligations to remain impartial in conflicts.

China’s approach in the region, on the other hand, seems to have been based on genuine long-term plans which have been dominated by economic tools. In contrast to Russia, Beijing is relatively new in the region, and China does not portray itself as an alternative or rival to any other major powers—at least for now—and avoids alienating any regional power for another. As a result, although there is skepticism towards Beijing’s future intentions, this does not prevent many countries
from cooperating with China. Regional actors are enthusiastic about receiving investments and funding for major infrastructure projects and taking on roles in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR).

**Russian Expansion to the South**

The resurgence of Russian activism in the Middle East coincided with US reluctance to continue dedicating high levels of resources in the region, especially following the 2011 Arab Spring. The power vacuum left as the United States began to signal a shift away from the region provided Russia with an opportunity to project power without significant confrontation. Russia’s military involvement in the Syrian crisis in 2015 particularly attracted attention. While Moscow intervened in Syria with a declared goal of fighting terrorism, its intervention subsequently changed the course of events in favor of Bashar al-Assad. More troubling is that Russia used its military presence in Syria to intentionally ignite massive refugee flows that politically destabilize European Allies. Though with less commitment, Russia later intervened in Libya in favor of the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar against the Government of National Accord. These moves made Russia one of the most significant military actors on the ground and impossible to ignore.

Authoritarian regimes in the region were impressed by Russian steadfast support for Assad and Moscow’s triumph in keeping him in power. As an authoritarian power itself, Russia has the advantage of being able to empathize with them and all the more engage in active advocacy against human rights criticisms targeting these regimes. Thus, even US partners sought to develop dialogue with Moscow as the new power broker in the Middle East for possible future assistance. Saudi Arabia and Egypt increased high-level visits with Russia and inked multi-billion-dollar arms deals despite US objections. The same mentality was at play in Erdoğan’s insistence on procurement of the Russian S-400 weapons systems despite US sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and removal from the F-35 fighter jet program.
Russia aims to expand its relations with countries in the region via long-term energy projects and naval bases. The Mersin-Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the TurkStream gas pipeline are two such large projects with multi-billion-dollar investments creating long-term interdependence between Ankara and Moscow. Russia also maintains nuclear power, oil, and gas investment agreements with Egypt and Algeria. Moscow seeks to further expand its naval bases beyond Tartus in the Mediterranean and Red Seas. This objective is part of Russian naval strategy to create anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) bubbles based on Mediterranean coasts to, in wartime, throttle and block the logistical flow of its adversaries. Russian A2/AD bubbles are a threat to the freedom of navigation of the NATO members and the ignition of refugee flows is a political attack on the Alliance. Moscow is using its presence in the Middle East to threaten the Alliance, and NATO should deter and contain such actions.

*China’s Long Game*

In comparison to Russia, China has a smaller footprint in the Middle East and its strategy emphasizes a lower profile. In pursuing an approach of “competition without confrontation,” China aims to minimize entanglement with regional and international powers. Contrary to the Russian approach, which is about proving parity with the West, necessitating visibility and occasionally daring moves to garner attention, China intentionally avoids making headlines and signs deals with regional countries away from public attention. Furthermore, China does not project itself as an alternative to other global powers, instead pursuing a non-interference policy towards domestic matters of regional countries and eschewing intervening on behalf of the authoritarian regimes in contrast to Russia.

The notion that the Middle East could lose importance with a decreasing oil supply does not apply to China, a dynamic that bodes well for the oil-exporting countries. The Middle East provides 40 percent of Beijing’s oil imports, a significant percentage for a country importing 90 percent of energy supplies. In addition, many countries in the region do not share Western suspicion towards the Chinese tech giant Huawei. For example, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iraq, and Turkey—who are all US
partners to a certain degree—are working with Huawei to build their 5G networks, while having little or no concern about China as a future cyber (super-) power. Chinese funds are desirable—particularly for authoritarian elites—as China’s ‘no strings attached’ approach to funding contrasts with Western conditionality, particularly concerning transparency and human rights. China even enjoys a favorable reputation among the democratic Israeli public.

There is ongoing competition among Middle Eastern countries to take a more prominent role in China’s BRI and MSR. China has not finalized these megaprojects in detail, and some countries are pushing to have a more central role in planning. For instance, Turkey is pushing for the Middle Corridor as an alternative to the Russian (North) and Iranian (South) corridors for the section of the BRI connecting Europe to the east through Transcaucasia (Georgia and Azerbaijan) and Central Asia. Unlike other regional powers that support China’s official line, Turkey has been an exception in making official statements concerning the treatment of Uighurs and Muslims until 2009. Nevertheless, Ankara no longer raise the matter and even recently signed an extradition deal with China affecting Uighurs living in Turkey.

Evaluating the Chinese presence in the Middle East merely in economic terms would be misleading. Chinese acquisition of a military base in Djibouti that can host an aircraft carrier has caught international attention. As a long-term project, China pursues “strategic fulcrums” in the Middle East that will serve as “conduits of Chinese influence” in the economy and military as well as in ideological and political terms. The primary candidates for these strategic fulcrums are Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and Algeria. Four out of these six states, however, are major regional US partners. Furthermore, China envisions an expanding role for SCO to deal with disputes in the region. Iran already has a member status in the SCO, Turkey is a dialogue partner, and other countries in the region want to follow suit. Because of the ongoing tensions between the US and China, it is likely they will also compete about advancing their alliances and partnership systems in this region. This prospective competition should be taken into consideration with NATO future planning, especially in approaching individual countries in the Middle East.
Regional Developments in the Middle East

In addition to the need to respond to great power involvement in the Middle East, there are several challenges stemming from inside the Middle East requiring a NATO response, including nuclear proliferation, threats from ballistic missiles, non-state armed proxies and terrorism, and migration flows. There are also challenges caused by certain states in the region, particularly those in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as Libya.

Iran’s Nuclear and Ballistic Missile Program

The P5+1, which was comprised of four NATO members (France, Germany, the UK, and the United States), Russia, and China, signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran in order to prevent Tehran from building a nuclear bomb until at least 2030. Nonetheless, the Trump administration declared unilateral withdrawal from the agreement in the pursuit of making a better deal that would cover Iran’s ballistic missile program and non-state armed proxies. In 2019, regional tensions between Iran (and its proxies) and the United States increased, leading Iran to announce it would recommence enriching uranium.

The 2020 presidential elections in the US have brought another chance to reinstate the JCPOA as the new Biden administration appears willing to revive the diplomatic dialogue. The signals from Iran have also raised expectations, since Iranian officials cautiously took steps in line with the JCPOA mandates that could be interpreted as goodwill and willingness towards further negotiation instead of developing the bomb. Nevertheless, the process has its ups and downs, as Iran first suspended an additional protocol that allows International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to have expanded access to the facilities in February 2021 and then reinstated it again in May. The incoming Ebrahim Raisi administration may also bring risks. Nonetheless, the talks continue with progress that parties are optimistic about the restoration of JCPOA before the next president takes office in Iran.

Halting the Iranian ballistic program is not as likely as the revival of the nuclear deal. Iran relies heavily on its missiles for its air defense and regards the program as legitimate and indispensable.
ally, the options such as throttling its supplies, cyberattacks, and sending defective parts would thus have only limited impact on the process since Iran is nearly self-sufficient in producing its ballistic missiles.\textsuperscript{34} Last but not least, Iran already has missiles with Maneuvering Reentry Vehicles (MaRV) payload that can change trajectory aerodynamically and in time, expected to develop new generation missiles that are extremely hard to intercept with the defensive missiles.\textsuperscript{35} Presence of these missiles itself may trigger proliferation in the region. A failure to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons or new generation missiles may cause proliferation, instability, and direct military confrontation. In such a scenario, NATO would be obliged to respond with a policy to contain Iran with nuclear weapons, create deterrence to dissuade Iran from threatening NATO and its interests in the region, and assure its Allies and partner countries to prevent further proliferation.\textsuperscript{36} All three goals would bring heavy burdens to the Alliance.

\textit{Syrian Civil War}

In Syria, the active battle has lost its intensity; yet the main actors engaged on the ground have not indicated their readiness to move forward into rapid recovery and transitional justice.\textsuperscript{37} Bashar al-Assad was able to take control of the majority of the country’s territory with the help of Russia and Iran,\textsuperscript{38} and though ISIS lost its momentum as well as some territorial areas, the terrorist organization’s command and control remains unbroken.\textsuperscript{39} With the number of Syrian refugees reaching an estimated eight million, there are not yet the necessary conditions for refugees to return to their home country and, even more, the regime’s reconstruction plans bluntly exclude them.\textsuperscript{40} According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 6.2 million internally displaced people in Syria—nearly half of them children—and the country’s already shattered economy has suffered from sanctions with the situation further exacerbated by the COVID-19 health crisis.\textsuperscript{41}

The parameters on the ground suggest that the Assad regime is not likely to collapse, and economic sanctions or reconstruction incentives will not change his hold on power.\textsuperscript{42} Furthermore, the Syrian regime and Russia want to move forward towards Idlib, which risks both military confrontations with Turkey and massive refugee flows.\textsuperscript{43} Turkey
has already used Article 4 five times to address its concerns about Syria. Even though its jet was shot down and more than three dozen troops were killed, Article 5 was not invoked.\textsuperscript{44} NATO has to pursue a fine line to avoid losing credibility or entrapment in an escalated military confrontation.

\textit{Turkey and the East Mediterranean Crisis}

Turkey’s position in the Middle East has transformed from a non-aligned trading state into a highly isolated country over the last two decades. This transformation has diminished Ankara’s role as a champion of stability in the Middle East. In the 2000s, Ankara opened channels of communications between the West and Syria. Pursuing policy equidistance with conflicting parties in the region, Turkey assumed the roles of facilitator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran nuclear crisis.\textsuperscript{45} However, with Turkey’s entanglement in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and in the inter-Arab division over the Muslim Brotherhood, it subsequently lost this unique diplomatic capability.

Tensions between Turkey and Israel started with the collapse of Turkey’s mediation role due to the 2008-2009 Israeli Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which escalated with diplomatic crises at Davos, including the humiliation of the Turkish Ambassador, peaking in the Gaza flotilla crisis in which a raid by Israeli troops killed eight Turkish citizens.\textsuperscript{46} Turkish-Israeli relations never fully recovered—even after the apology from the Israeli Prime Minister—and this has seriously hindered NATO-Israeli cooperation. Another turning point occurred when Turkey sided with the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring and maintained its position even after the 2013 Egyptian coup. Ankara sought to dominate the region and create an axis with Muslim Brotherhood-led countries after the uprisings, but the project failed and the monarchies struck back, isolating Turkey in the region.\textsuperscript{47} Turkey currently has close relations only with Qatar but there is still enmity between Turkey and Egypt, as well as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all of which but Saudi Arabia participate in NATO’s partnerships such as the Mediterranean Dialogue or Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Greece capitalized on Turkey’s alienation from Israel and Egypt, using this to launch an anti-Turkey camp concerning the production
of hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean (see also the chapter by Kunz in this volume). This anti-Turkey group was formalized as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, further isolating Ankara. The forum was first initiated by Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt and has expanded to include France, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. The problematic relationship between Turkey and Greece dates back to before their accession to NATO and was re-invigorated by the unresolved Cyprus issue and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) extension of territorial waters from six nautical miles to twelve in the Aegean Sea. The newly found hydrocarbon resources have inflamed this tension due to their conflicting positions on the continental shelf and exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Turkey is not a party to UNCLOS and actively rejects the convention’s territorial sea regulations and EEZ demarcations. The persistent objections are symbolic actions intended to prevent UNCLOS from becoming the law of the Aegis, but they also contain further risk of escalation.

Turkey and the Government of National Accord on behalf of Libya, signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean. Relying on this agreement, Ankara claims the legal position to block the EastMed pipeline. Ankara’s involvement in Libya also caused France to vocally and militarily stand against Turkey. The price tag of these developments in the East Mediterranean for NATO triggers unnecessary divergences and tensions among Allies, increases instability in the region, and provides opportunities for Russia to become involved. The problems between Turkey and other NATO partners from both the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, such as Egypt and the UAE, also hamper deeper cooperation between the Alliance and countries in the region.

Turkey’s current pursuit of regional hegemony, which utilizes the Muslim Brotherhood as well as military activism, is not in line with conventional Turkish foreign policy. The former mainly relies on the Islamist ideology of the ruling AKP, and the latter is aligned with Erdoğan and his new coalition partners’ perspective after the 2016 coup attempt. Thus, the militarization of Turkish foreign policy relies more on Erdoğan and his coalition partners’ ultranationalist and Eurasianists’
overreactions to their angst about the state’s perseverance, and distrust towards the Allies.\textsuperscript{53} Besides, this activism is not sustainable due to the limits of Turkish hard power and the declining support for the Erdoğan regime at home.\textsuperscript{54} Additionally, after the election of Joe Biden as US president, Erdoğan saw the limits of his brinkmanship and started signaling that he was ready for open dialogue to end isolation. In this line, Ankara initiated dialogue with Greece under the auspices of Germany.\textsuperscript{55} Turkey also suspended all Muslim Brotherhood media criticism towards Egypt as a gesture towards opening dialogue with Cairo\textsuperscript{56} and, furthermore, made high-level contacts with Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{57}

Turkey can be a significant asset for NATO in the Middle East with the precondition that it returns to democracy, resuming conventional Turkish foreign policy that relies on non-intervention and international law. A democratic Turkey would normalize its foreign policy and protect it from the influences of extremist ideologies. In such a scenario, Ankara would act with more restraint, avoid military adventurism, and promote stability in the region to reconstruct its shattered economy. It may also contribute to the capacity-building of fragile states in the region as it has already done in Afghanistan under NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM) engagements. This change may not solve the Cyprus issue and Aegean dispute overnight since these are historically rooted issues. Nonetheless, a normalized Turkey would more eagerly participate in peaceful solutions if NATO develops a positive agenda for a solution that rejects both parties’ maximalist positions. This is highly important as a base to secure cohesion and cooperation in the Mediterranean to avoid any disruption of free navigation. Additionally, a solution about Cyprus—in the long run—may mean lifting the barriers to NATO membership of this extremely strategic island in the Mediterranean.

**Policy Recommendations to NATO**

To safeguard Allies’ security and interests in the Middle East, NATO needs to develop responses to three clusters of actors: Russia and China, hostile regional actors, as well as Allies and partners. There are policy recommendations for the Alliance to manage the contemporary challenges more thoroughly.
Responding to Russia and China

In a multi-polar world order, NATO’s initial reaction should be pursuing dialogue with Russia and China on the common interests of nuclear non-proliferation and counterterrorism. NATO may also develop indirectly constraining counter-strategies based on Russia and China’s particular approaches to the region. Since Russia has exploited the absence of the US to intensify its involvement in the Middle East, NATO might consider increasing its presence in the region, which would decrease Moscow’s own maneuvering space. NATO’s presence in the region does not have to be military in nature, but rather active diplomatic initiatives and capacity building operations would suffice to limit Russian visibility. As China downplays its visibility and interference in state sovereignty, NATO’s counter-strategy may increase awareness about Beijing’s presence and the repercussions of its long-term deals on the sovereignty of the signatories in the region.

Despite its merits, a program fixated solely on blocking increasing interactions among the regional actors and major powers would yield limited success. Instead, NATO should particularly focus on its position and partnerships in the region to repair its negatively connoted image as an actor of military interventions or regime change. NATO must ensure its role in the region as an anchor for stability, as well as a reliable partner that supports state capacity and governments’ ability to provide services. To bring partners back on a positive footing with NATO, it should be more precise and coherent concerning the targets of current partnerships. It should also better coordinate with the EU and regional organizations, as well as reach out to form new partnerships on a bilateral and mini-lateral basis to endorse its presence in the region.

Dealing with Iran and Syria

NATO’s primary goal vis-a-vis Iranian ballistic missiles should be preventing them from being armed with nuclear warheads. Thus, NATO Allies should be supportive of the current diplomatic dialogue efforts to reinstate the JCPOA and should prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. The nuclear negotiations are on track and NATO’s active involvement at this stage is not plausible, but possible exchang-
es on the ballistic missile program pose an opportunity for NATO to project the Alliance’s diplomatic power to regional actors and major rival(ing) powers.

Since the chances of hindering Iran’s ballistic missile program are low, an alternative plan for putting certain limits on this program might have a better chance. These limits could concern the range of these missiles, thus preventing a direct attack on Europe or the United States. Iranian officials signaled that they are open to negotiating the adoption of a 2000-kilometer limit for the range of their missiles. By taking these steps, NATO should maintain deterrence in the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) and extensions to cover Turkish territory. Regarding defensive capabilities, another limit could be on the capabilities of the missiles. An agreement with Iran to avoid the development of systems with aerodynamic capabilities and post-boost propulsion systems could be a significant achievement to prevent further proliferation in the region.

Concerning the Syrian conflict, NATO should increase its involvement in the matter diplomatically but back it with a credible military plan that would include options to increase costs for Assad and Russia in their noncooperation. This move may provide NATO a better position to negotiate a possible escalation in Idlib with Turkey, refugee flows, and the inclusion of all Syrians in the reconstruction plans. NATO’s additional goals should be to prevent the revival of ISIS and the further use of chemical weapons.

Bringing Turkey Back In

Ankara’s procurement of Russian S-400 missile systems and Erdoğan’s repeated declarations of intention to join the SCO have caused concerns in the Alliance. Turkey’s turn to alternative powers is based on perceived existential threats from, or aided by, its Western Allies. Since Turkey has experienced significant democratic backsliding over the last decade, the most critical matter for Erdoğan is to secure his regime’s future. The purchase of the S-400s and efforts to bring China into the game are based on the idea of counterbalancing Western influence to ensure his regime’s survival as well as his own power position.
Another perceived threat is the US alliance with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. The elite in Turkey is suspicious about US intentions concerning Turkey’s unity by forming first a coalition with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the 2003 Iraq War and another coalition with YPG against ISIS.60 NATO Allies need to either help Turkey convince the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to lay down their weapons and initiate a peace process or decide between an effective alliance with Turkey and a coalition with the YPG.

More importantly, NATO should not turn a blind eye to the erosion of the rule of law and democratic principles in Turkey. NATO should be clear about what the Alliance expects of Turkey in terms of shared values and, concurrently, Allies should push Ankara to keep these standards. Rather than public criticism of Turkey’s democratic and human rights records, these steps should be taken in private talks to prevent a backlash. Thus, promotion of democracy in Turkey and taming the executive branch’s excessive powers are necessary.61 A more democratic Turkey, regardless of its leadership, would anchor it in the NATO Alliance and keep interactions with other major powers limited to trade partnerships.

A Better Vision for Partnerships and Cooperation

The long-term NATO strategy should be to remain the primary partner to crucial actors in the region and to subordinate other major rival powers. While full membership to the Alliance is not an option for many of these countries, NATO nonetheless has to clearly communicate its objectives in the region and provide a clear vision for the future of their partnerships.62 In doing so, NATO may benefit from the experiences from the Framework Nations Concept as an agile model that brings relevant NATO member countries and partners together in flexible groupings or use NATO+n format that brings alliance members with a particular country without a regional framework.63 The Alliance may also create and offer a new higher status for appropriate countries, such as Jordan, that will not be at member level but still receive clear benefits. A possible trap in reformulating the partnerships would be evaluating the Middle East with the other partnerships with better prospects for success due to shared threat perceptions, such as Sweden and Finland, as well as Asian countries such as Australia, New
Zealand, Japan, and South Korea. Without a clear shared threat perception or interest, NATO pushing for partnerships for the sake of keeping these countries away from the emerging powers has the risk of repeating the failure of the Baghdad Pact that ended up pushing Egypt further towards Russia.

NATO’s primary subject of cooperation that goes beyond its partners in the region is counterterrorism, which will also remain crucial in the foreseeable future. In terms of active counter-terrorism operations, while the main focus is on ISIS in Syria, the growth of the Sinai branch is also reaching an alarming level. Additionally, the dangers of hybrid threats, emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), and cyber threats should also be evaluated within the context of terrorism. Particularly in offensive cyber tools, some terrorist organizations have already demonstrated major advancements (on the broader cyber threats facing the Alliance, see Blessing’s chapter in this volume). NATO should cooperate with the countries in the region to develop their defensive cyber capabilities, closely monitor the situation and prevent regional adversaries from obtaining offensive cyber tools.

NATO’s programs for strengthening security forces, capacity building, and good governance are essential. However, to make them more effective, there is a need to allocate more common funding and make the programs more militarily focused where NATO has a comparative advantage. These programs can also serve to roll back Iranian-sponsored non-state armed groups. These groups—e.g., the Iran Threat Network—are critical sources of instability and pose a threat to the region. The presence of legitimate states with strengthened security forces and the ability to deliver services would constrain the maneuverability of this network. The current NATO program in Iraq and a possible extension in Lebanon would make significant contributions.

The Alliance should seriously consider climate change in the Middle East context and include it in its agenda along with the more pressing at-risk regions, such as the Arctic. This is because the Middle East is one of the regions most vulnerable to the repercussions of global warming. Climate change is one reason for emigration from the region, and it increases the risk of instability and can possibly trigger an armed conflict. NATO Allies may help the countries suffering from
global warming by introducing countermeasures and new technologies to limit its impacts.\textsuperscript{72} NATO may develop comprehensive strategy and coordinate the training missions. The Crisis Management and Disaster Response Centre of Excellence in Sofia or a possible future Center for Excellence on Climate and Security may be instrumental in conducting such activities.\textsuperscript{73}

**Conclusion**

In the next decade, the Middle East will continue to be plagued with arms proliferation, terrorism, fragile states, and migration, in addition to the new concerns of hybrid warfare, EDTs, cyber threats, and global warming. Furthermore, the power dynamics in the Middle East are changing with the increasing involvement of Russia and China, and the decreasing military and diplomatic presence foremostly of the US. Under such circumstances, NATO should remain the central platform for Allies to deal with common threats emanating from the region, providing the best setting to communicate and coordinate Allies’ individual threat perceptions. It should furthermore pursue an approach that will achieve maximum political cohesion among Allies, more efficient partnership arrangements in the Middle East, and intelligent engagement with regional issues.

Deviation from democratic values further complicates the problem and increases the risk of NATO members acting more unilaterally and using more confrontational paths to deal with intra-alliance differences. This is particularly true concerning Turkey’s recent military activism, now based on its hijacked foreign policy by a one-man rule and fringe ideologies. Thus, the efforts to solve intra-alliance disputes should go beyond mediation and facilitation. Alliance members should extend their efforts to create solidarity concerning democracy, freedom of speech, and the rule of law.

Two major powers—China and Russia—have their particular approaches to involvement in the region, and a possible response should be organized accordingly. Nevertheless, rather than spending resources on excluding these actors from the region, NATO should focus on its relations with regional powers and take steps to remain the primary
partner. In this vein, the NATO Alliance needs to clearly define, re-organize, and diversify its partnerships in the Middle East based on its own vital interests.

Overall, the Alliance should prioritize diplomacy to deal with adversaries and maintain capacity building and cooperation with key partners in the region. NATO should pursue a policy to manage rather than insist on complete solutions in both endeavors. Through diplomatic means, the Alliance should prevent the further development of Iran’s nuclear program and keep Tehran’s ballistic missile program in check. In the case of Syria, the Alliance should focus on stability, prevent the revival of ISIS and stem further flows of refugees without providing legitimacy to the Assad regime. NATO should continue cooperation against terrorism, take new threats into account, use capacity-building programs to counter Iran-sponsored non-state actors, and develop programs that help the countries in the Middle East to develop defensive cyber tools and cope with global warming.

Notes


26. Marks, “China Pursuit of “Strategic Fulcrum” in the Middle East.”

27. Ibid.


32. Ibid.


44. Ibid.


48. Günter Seufert, “Turkey shifts the focus of its foreign policy: from Syria to the eastern Mediterranean and Libya,” Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), February 2020, p. 3.


52. Günter Seufert, “Turkey shifts the focus of its foreign policy,” p. 4.


54. Ibid.


61. Mehmet Yegin and Salim Çevik, “Would a Farewell to Erdoğan mean Democracy to Turkey?” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 20 (Spring 2021), pp. 69-76.


64. Ibid.


67. Ibid.


70. Middle East Institute, The Biden Administration and the Middle East, p. 50.


72. Kaye and others, Reimagining US Strategy in the Middle East, p. 44.