

## How to revitalize the dialogue between NATO and the Maghreb countries

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At a time when the Atlantic Alliance has just adopted in Lisbon its new strategic concept which acknowledges the importance of the partnerships linking it to its partners<sup>2</sup>, it is worth asking a few questions about ways of giving fresh impetus to the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), especially with the Maghreb countries<sup>3</sup>. Why this focus on North Africa<sup>4</sup>? For two reasons. First of all because cooperation between the Alliance and the Maghreb<sup>5</sup> countries has not yet reached the same level as cooperation with the Mashreq countries, despite some positive signs that this could change for the better in the near future. Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia have in fact reached agreement with NATO on individual cooperation plans (ICP) which it is hoped will enable them to put in place those partnership actions best suited to their needs, while at the same time rationalizing the Alliance's assistance effort. Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia have also signed agreements with NATO on the protection of classified information which make it possible for them to have access to a more ambitious level of cooperation.

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<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 25 of the Lisbon Summit communiqué (20 November 2010) states that "Peace and stability in the Mediterranean region are essential for Euro-Atlantic security. We intend to further develop the Mediterranean Dialogue by raising its political and practical dimensions, in order to build mutual confidence and to deal together with the common security challenges in this region".

<sup>3</sup> NATO has concluded in 1994 a Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) partnership programme with Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel and Lebanon. This partnership aims to reinforce security, stability and mutual understanding between NATO and MD countries.

<sup>4</sup> North Africa is constituted by Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

<sup>5</sup> Egypt, Jordan and Israel have all agreed individual cooperation plans with NATO. These three countries have initiated the creation of regional centres of excellence, open both to Alliance member countries and to other countries in the region, such as the Cairo Center for Training on Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping in Africa in Egypt and the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center in Jordan. Last but not least, the three countries cooperate among themselves through the exchange of information.



Secondly, because the level of inter-Maghreb cooperation and confidence falls far short of that between the three Eastern Mediterranean MD member countries (Egypt, Jordan and Israel). Nevertheless, for the last two years cooperation appears to have become bogged down in routine, and a number of obstacles still remain: the multiplicity of regional cooperation frameworks, differing views on what constitutes the Mediterranean area, the pursuit of competing bilateral agendas, inner-Maghreb rivalries and the lack of any progress towards a solution of the conflict in Western Sahara between Morocco and the Polisario Front<sup>6</sup>. The Israeli Palestinian conflict – so crucial for the future of relations between the West and the Arab-Muslim world – remains at an impasse. The financial crisis besetting the Alliance forces it moreover to give greater importance to a partnership like the MD. And yet NATO and the Maghreb countries do have some common interests in facing certain challenges they share: providing for the stability of the region, ensuring that political and religious extremism do not spread any further, combating terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fostering energy security between the two sides and the two ends of the Mediterranean, and lastly reinforcing security in the Sahel region, which is rapidly becoming a vast area of lawlessness where terrorism and trafficking of all kinds flourish. The importance of what is at stake should convince both the leaders of NATO member countries and their opposite numbers in the Maghreb countries of the need to give fresh impetus to the Mediterranean Dialogue. A number of suggestions in this direction, reflecting the findings of the Round Table on this topic organized in Rome

on the 17th September 2010 by the NATO Defense College, are listed here to provide food for thought. A number of these ideas and suggestions were already envisaged for a while, both in the academic and policy-making spheres.

### **1 – Maintain the present Mediterranean Dialogue format while encouraging maximum flexibility**

For some years now numerous experts have been asking the question: is a sub-regional approach desirable in the Mediterranean Dialogue? In other words, should the Mediterranean Dialogue be split into two regional sub-groups, the first based around the Maghreb (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria and Tunisia), and the second around the Mashreq (Egypt, Israel and Jordan), in order to take into account the geographical and political specificities of the southern shore of the Mediterranean? The current state of play in the debate does not yet make it possible to resolve this question. The experts are more or less equally divided between those supporting the proposal and those opposing it, and there are cogent arguments on both sides.

Those who advocate the sub-regional approach involving the establishment of a Maghreb Mediterranean Dialogue framework base their argument on the cultural, historical and linguistic specificities (particularly the fact of belonging to the Francophone area) which define the Maghreb region as a cohesive entity which enjoys very close relations with Europe and faces challenges that are quite different from those faced by the Mashreq. These advocates of Maghreb specificity stress the lack of any

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Razoux: « The Mediterranean Dialogue at a crossroads », *Research Paper n° 35*, NATO Defense College (NDC), Rome, April 2008.



substantial existential threat in North Africa and point out that the principle of self-differentiation favoured by the Alliance encourages such an approach. They also argue that the political process within the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue is currently hampered by the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since the Israeli military intervention against Gaza in the winter of 2008-2009 and the allegedly provocative statements by Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, a number of Arab countries have been blocking the Mediterranean Dialogue multilateral consultation process. This is why, they argue, NATO would have everything to gain by setting up an ad hoc cooperation framework with the Maghreb countries in order to get around the Israeli-Palestinian question, which remains politically a highly sensitive issue in North Africa. By doing so, NATO would avoid the deadlock which the European Union has to face in its dealings with the countries of the southern Mediterranean, be it within the framework of the Barcelona Process or the Mediterranean Union. In parallel to this, the Alliance could develop another framework of sub-regional cooperation with Israel and the two Arab countries (Egypt and Jordan) which have peace agreements with Israel. Those who support the idea of a « Maghreb » sub-regional approach do nevertheless highlight the need for the Alliance to provide its partners with a framework agreement which would give greater political visibility than that of the Mediterranean Dialogue. They also argue that a sub-regional approach would call for a greater degree of consultation between NATO and the European Union, but also the enlargement of cooperation to include « soft security » issues such as food security,

energy security and drinking water security.

Opponents of this approach point out that such an initiative would merely duplicate that of the « 5 + 5 »<sup>7</sup> and weaken the multilateral nature of the Mediterranean Dialogue, and would very soon come up against the latent antagonisms that are a feature of relations among the Maghreb countries. They argue that the real problems the Maghreb countries have to face do not primarily concern security, but the lack of any sound political and economic governance, which causes the frustration on which insecurity can flourish. Furthermore, by evading the Israeli-Palestinian question, this approach would merely make the Palestinian Authority's position a little weaker and delay even further a negotiated resolution of the conflict. Above all, this approach would jeopardize any chances of bringing Libya into the Mediterranean Dialogue, since Libya, forming as it does a natural bridge between North Africa and the Middle East, would oscillate between the two sub-groups, thus reducing the usefulness of its joining a partnership with NATO.

To complicate things even further, other North Africa specialists make the point that the framework of cooperation between the Maghreb countries and Western countries – whether the latter be members of NATO and/or the European Union – is not the most appropriate. In their view it would be advisable to replace it with a broader-based cooperation framework embracing all the countries of North West Africa, the Sahel and the Sahara. As they see it, the debate on the sub-regional approach is therefore biased.

In the light of these considerations, and in the absence of

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<sup>7</sup> In 2003, five States on the northern shore of the western Mediterranean (France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Malta) agreed with the five States on the southern shore (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) to establish a framework of technical (not political) cooperation in the security and defence area.



any consensus on the future format of the Mediterranean Dialogue, it would seem wise to maintain the present format, but giving priority to those formulae which can offer maximum flexibility. One of these would be that of organizing, at the request of certain partner countries, political level meetings (of Defence and/or Foreign Ministers) in the « 28 (Allies) + n (partners concerned) » format.

## 2 – Pursue the open door policy towards Libya

If the experts do not all agree on the usefulness of adopting a sub-regional approach to the Mediterranean Dialogue, most of them are in agreement as to the need for Libya to be integrated into this partnership just as soon as the Libyan leaders request it. This should be one of the Mediterranean Dialogue's priorities, and this is why it is so important that the Atlantic Alliance authorities pursue their open door policy towards Libya, by stepping up their diplomatic initiatives. The integration of this country would effectively make it possible to establish a territorial link between the two geographical components (North Africa and the Middle East) of the partnership. Libya would resume in full its role as a « bridge » between the Maghreb and the Mashreq, and all the Allies and partners would have a solid point d'appui from which to contribute to the security of the Sahel region and the stabilization of the African continent. From the military point of view, nothing more stands in the way of Libya's joining the Mediterranean Dialogue now that the country has rejoined the concert of Nations. The only obstacle to this enlargement seems to be the Libyan leader's desire to remain for the moment on the sidelines of the Alliance. But he is no stranger to

unexpected reversals, and who is to say that he will not eventually decide to join the partnership, which would enable him to deal more effectively with the destabilizing factors threatening his country ? Even if the leader of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya were to persist in his position, all the indications are that his potential successors, being much more open towards the West, would certainly adopt a more conciliatory stance.

## 3 – Pursue the commitment to interoperability of the armed forces of the Maghreb countries

Technical military cooperation is one of the pillars of the Mediterranean Dialogue. As many experts have pointed out, NATO is perceived by the States on the southern shore as first and foremost a service provider rather than a security provider. It was their interest in this technical cooperation, which favours interoperability with the forces of NATO member countries, that convinced military leaders in the Maghreb countries to support their political leaders' moves to join the partnership. This is all the more reason to pursue this technical cooperation, in order to maintain the confidence of the Maghreb military, who wield great influence in three of the four countries in the region. Another advantage of military cooperation lies in the fact that it prepares the armed forces of the Maghreb countries to cooperate more closely with the Alliance armies, in order to be able to make a more active contribution to NATO operations (those who have not already done so) once they receive the green light from their political authorities. Aside from the desire for interoperability with the armed forces of NATO member countries, this technical military cooperation should aim primarily at increasing



interoperability among the forces of the Maghreb countries themselves. They are equipped with material of varying origin, and they follow very different procedures. Their only kind of « interoperability » at the moment consists of the exchange of information, and cooperation in combating terrorism. In all other areas the forces of the Maghreb countries are not yet able to operate together, even if they have begun to harmonize some procedures thanks to the exercises organized within the « 5 + 5 » framework. It would therefore be very much in NATO's interest to favour « horizontal » interoperability among the armed forces of the Maghreb countries, in order not only to be able to consider more ambitious forms of technical cooperation in the future, but above all to help strengthen confidence and dialogue among the Maghreb partners on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

#### **4 – Enlarge the sphere of military cooperation to include maritime security and energy security**

Seen both from Brussels and from the Maghreb capitals, these two fields are closely related. NATO and some of the Mediterranean Dialogue countries are already contributing to Operation « Active Endeavour », established in 2001 to control sea and air traffic in the Mediterranean area in order to combat international terrorism<sup>8</sup>. The Maghreb countries are either net exporters of energy or they provide for the transit of energy towards Europe. The NATO Mediterranean countries are their natural customers<sup>9</sup>. It is

logical therefore that both sides should agree to provide maximum security for these energy supplies. This field of cooperation is assuming greater relevance every day as the risks of maritime piracy and naval terrorism multiply, not to mention the increasingly « maritime » dimension of organized crime. In line with this reasoning, some experts on both shores of the Mediterranean have launched the idea of establishing a permanent inter-Maghreb maritime force tasked to act in those areas that are of common interest to the Maghreb countries: the fight against piracy, terrorism and trafficking of all kinds, assistance in the event of natural disasters and providing security for energy supplies. The idea merits serious study. NATO, which has concrete experience in this field<sup>10</sup>, could certainly make a useful contribution.

#### **5 – Enhance the multilateral and political dimension of the Mediterranean Dialogue in order to promote South-South dialogue**

The political context at the time when the Mediterranean Dialogue was established in 1993 has now changed radically: the world is no longer living through the fall of the Soviet Bloc and post-Cold War euphoria; the United States is no longer the only super-power capable of imposing peace; force ratios have changed; the Oslo process, which underlay the participation of Arab countries in the partnership in exchange for recognition by Israel of a viable Palestinian State, seems a dead letter<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Rachid El Houdaigui, « L'opération Active Endeavour et son impact sur le Dialogue méditerranéen de l'OTAN », *Occasional Paper n° 22*, NDC, Rome, June 2007.

<sup>9</sup> According to Kingston Energy Consulting and Prospex Research, future prospects for North African gas export capacity are estimated at 47 % of anticipated Southern European imports and 28 % of European demand by 2020 ("North Africa: An energy source for Europe?", Kingston Energy Consulting & Prospex Research, December 2004, pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Frederic Ischebeck-Baum, « Counter-piracy operations: the legal regime in a nutshell », Research Paper n° 48, NDC, Rome, August 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Recent events in the region showed indeed that the so-called road map is frozen and that neither the current Israeli government, nor the Palestinian



Against this background, some pragmatic thinkers believe that it is advisable to preserve the Mediterranean Dialogue, which allows the Alliance countries to save their conscience by discreetly promoting their own interests and security agendas, while enabling the Maghreb countries to acquire valuable military cooperation cheaply. These thinkers conceive of political dialogue according to North-South logic, and settle for this banalization of the partnership, even if it means forgetting its long-term political objectives: promoting mutual understanding and contributing to regional security and stability. They note that bilateral cooperation arrangements with NATO sometimes tend to increase regional divisions by causing rivalry and competition among partners. So why gamble on a multilateral political dialogue that has to contend both with regional rivalries and with the presence of Israeli leaders with whom most people do not wish to be on speaking terms?

Other commentators more optimistically believe that this situation should encourage Maghreb leaders and the NATO authorities to establish a true political dialogue, which would of necessity have to be multilateral, to discuss the real issues; if these issues were to find a solution, or at least the beginning of a solution, there would be a beneficial effect on the whole region and hence on the partnership. This does not mean that technical military cooperation has to be sacrificed. It means quite simply that the time has come to adjust the balance of the Mediterranean Dialogue in order to restore it to its full political dimension. Those who support this argument point out that multilateralism

has been a source of progress ever since the 19th century, and that if it tries to copy the « functionalist » « 5 + 5 » logic, the Atlantic Alliance will run out of breath and will be unable to deal with the true stakes. These commentators argue that if NATO has a political ambition, it simply cannot afford not to be involved in seeking to resolve tensions in its immediate neighbourhood. That is what established its legitimacy and saved it after the end of the Cold War, when it became involved in the Balkan crisis. They also believe that the added value of NATO is that it provides a multilateral forum for political discussion, at the proper level, which will make it possible to encourage South-South dialogue<sup>12</sup>.

But in order to achieve this, several conditions have to be met. First of all, NATO and its Maghreb partners should make use of the appropriate symbols, and agree to display the visible signs of an ambitious political dialogue: a clear political declaration on the Mediterranean Dialogue objectives, endorsed by Heads of State or of Government at an Alliance summit; a programme of ministerial level meetings and the establishment of a joint coordination group between Allies and partners.

Secondly, Maghreb leaders would have to agree among themselves on one or two priority security objectives which they would like to address within the multilateral partnership framework. This would obviously imply that they also have a strong desire to identify some concrete means of achieving these objectives. The Alliance authorities, for their part, would have to agree on a common vision and a common policy (or, failing that, on visions and

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authority has the ability to overpass severe internal political difficulties to push forward the peace process. As a consequence, the Arab states which joined the MD partnership thinking that their positive attitude could help the peace process developing are today very frustrated.

<sup>12</sup> Fouad Ammor, « Le futur du Dialogue méditerranéen de l'OTAN : pour un Dialogue méditerranéen 'Plus' ? », *Fellowship Monograph n° 2*, NDC, Rome, February 2010.



policies that are mutually compatibles) with regard to the Maghreb countries. Above all, NATO and the European Union would have to suppress their rivalries in order to better coordinate their actions in the region. Perhaps they might even agree to a task-sharing arrangement?

A third condition for the success of this process would be the adoption of an inclusive approach on the Maghreb side that would mean involving the principal national actors, be they parliamentary assemblies, journalists, academics or locally elected officials, in order to make public opinion aware of the interest of the initiative, make the most of the spirit of outreach of the national authorities and improve the Alliance's image with both the elite and the public at large. Lastly, in order to succeed in establishing the dynamic of a genuine South-South dialogue, Maghreb leaders and the Alliance authorities would have to be prepared to display courage and determination.

Bearing in mind regional realities and certain persistently rooted objections, the most realistic option in the mid to long term would again appear to be that of flexibility, in other words favouring a multilateral dialogue format made to measure according to the « 28 + n » formula.

## **6 – Promote the implementation of confidence-building and security measures in the Maghreb**

If NATO has neither the means nor the will to make a more active contribution to the process of resolving the disagreements which polarize tensions in North Africa, be they the conflict in Western Sahara or the question of the

Spanish enclaves of Ceuta, Melilla and the tiny island of Leïla-Perejil<sup>13</sup>, it could on the other hand involve itself more in promoting confidence-building and security measures in the Maghreb region. Indeed for most observers it is quite clear that it is the lack of transparency and confidence, together with ancestral rivalries and problems of governance, that is hampering, or rather preventing, the development of inter-Maghreb cooperation and the consolidation of a South-South political dialogue, thus limiting the scale of the partnership with NATO.

By urging the Maghreb countries to develop confidence-building and security measures, or even by providing a framework for their efforts, the Atlantic Alliance would gain credibility and would considerably enhance its image not only with the ruling élites but also with local public opinion. This approach would of course fit very well within the framework of the multilateral political dialogue to which we have already referred. In order to achieve this ambitious objective, the Atlantic Alliance and the Maghreb countries could use the following list of twenty concrete proposals, which are concerned primarily with transparency and are based both on the findings of the above-mentioned round table, on personal reflection and on the work of Abdennour Benantar, a fellow of the NATO Defense College<sup>14</sup>. These proposals affect both the military, political and economical fields.

### In the military field:

#### **1. Initiation of exchange of information on**

<sup>13</sup> As is very clearly shown by Brahim Saïdy in his study entitled « Quel rôle pour l'OTAN dans la prévention et la gestion des crises en Méditerranée et au Moyen-Orient ? », *Fellowship Monograph n° 5*, published by the NATO Defense College, Rome, december 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Abdennour Benantar, « Contribution de l'OTAN à l'établissement de la confiance et de la sécurité au Maghreb », *Fellowship Monograph n° 3*, NDC, Rome, September 2010.



defence policy and establishment of mutually acceptable provisions for risk reduction in border areas. These measures could take the form of reciprocal information on military doctrine and the publication of white papers, so that arrangements, objectives and concepts would be known to all parties ; the lack of information on certain essential topics such as military budgets, the posture of forces and weapons programmes, breeds mistrust. These exchanges of information could eventually be accompanied by a system of on-site inspections similar to what has been organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) among their members.

**2. Intensification of contacts among the military** especially in border areas. These contacts should be at all levels in the military hierarchy and should make it possible to coordinate the positions of the Maghreb States in the run-up to meetings with NATO. In accordance with this logic, reciprocal consultation machinery could be put in place to enable joint observers to attend military manoeuvres and discuss cross-border issues

**3. Reporting of military activities and troop movements close to borders** to avoid any misinterpretation of routine movements or manoeuvres. This measure could lead to the establishment of an inter-Maghreb code of conduct.

**4. Setting up of an ad hoc fund to finance mine-clearing** along borders, following the example of the programme organized for Jordan under the aegis of

NATO.

**5. Increased attendance at courses and seminars organized by the Atlantic Alliance** particularly at the NATO Defense College<sup>15</sup> in Rome, which provides a unique and « neutral » setting where officers, diplomats and officials who would otherwise have few opportunities to meet can come together, get to know one another and exchange views on topics of common interest.

**6. Organization of joint educational and training periods** involving Maghreb countries. These are two key elements for socialization and the establishment of regular contacts among Maghreb military personnel. This cooperation logic could eventually lead to the organization of joint exercises, even on a small scale, because such manoeuvres would represent an important element for confidence-building by stimulating direct contacts and strengthening mutual interoperability.

**7. Creation of a Maghreb defence college and a network linking Maghreb research centres working on defence and security issues**

**8. Reduction of military forces in border areas** by restricting deployment exclusively to defensive troops, in order to reassure all parties concerned and reduce the risk of surprise attack. Following the same reasoning, the States concerned could agree to ban the deployment of certain kinds of weapons in border areas, or at least to limit their numbers. These States could also ban the acquisition of certain types of extremely expensive heavy weaponry (ultra-modern fighter aircraft, frigates, submarines) which

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<sup>15</sup> Either the Senior Course, the Generals, Flag Officers and Ambassadors' Course (GFOAC) or the NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC) for MD and ICI countries.





are unrelated to any identified strategic threat. Because as some experts have pointed out, weapons are both at the service of an ambition or intended to deal with a real threat.

**9. Organization of common patrolling (sea, land and air) to combat cross-border trafficking of all kinds. This measure could be accompanied by the creation of a cross-border communications network to increase confidence and pave the way for further, more ambitious, forms of cooperation. The organization of joint border patrols would bring three benefits: it would provide direct contact among the military, demonstrate that none of the parties involved has anything to hide in these areas and spread the financial burden of controlling borders.**

**10. Establishment of a Maghreb border guard and/or coast guard corps** whose mission would be surveillance both of inter-Maghreb borders and of Maghreb's external borders. Like the organization of common patrolling, this measure would help to combat border trafficking and organized crime more effectively, while at the same time reducing the cost for each of the States concerned.

**11. Creation of a Maghreb weapons register** so that each country can be aware of the weapons held by the others, which would mean a considerable increase in transparency. Such a register would be extremely useful, since, as the Maghreb countries are net importers of arms (they do not themselves produce any weapons), it would be difficult for them to cheat by not declaring weapons manufactured domestically. By the same token, the Maghreb States could agree to control the proliferation of ballistic missiles (with their significant destabilizing

**potential) in order to limit the risk of an arms race in this area.**

**12. Reorganization of armed forces** in order to reduce their numbers and free up more resources to finance other sectors which contribute to the economic and social development of the people, while at the same time reducing the frustrations and the radicalization of society. This measure could eventually lead to the partial or total professionalization of the armed forces, an area in which NATO would be happy to place its considerable experience at the disposal of the Maghreb States.

In other fields:

**13. Setting up of a « telephone hotline »** to link the leaders of the Maghreb States, in order to provide each of them with a reliable and immediate means of communication by which to preempt any misunderstandings and at the same time reduce any risk of tension.

**14. Opening of any borders** still closed, and in addition, if necessary, putting in place international observers to provide border surveillance.

**15. Signing of a multilateral non-aggression agreement** whereby the Maghreb countries would undertake not to launch any hostile military operations against one another.

**16. Revival of consultations** within the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and establishment of contacts between NATO and the AMU. Such a measure could put the Maghreb countries with their backs to the wall and force them to accept responsibility for reviving



the AMU dynamic.

**17. Creation of a joint inter-Maghreb agency for intelligence-gathering in the field of combating terrorism** so as to combine the various forms of bilateral cooperation already existing in this area between the principal Maghreb States.

**18. Creation of a Maghreb civil protection force** in order to combine national rescue and assistance assets on a regional basis to deal with natural disasters, whether they be of human origin or not. Such a force could operate both in the Maghreb and beyond, and would make a major contribution to confidence-building and the strengthening of interoperability, all the more so in view of the involvement of the military in this type of mission. This proposal, which is fully in line with the work initiated within the « 5 + 5 » framework, could benefit from NATO's acknowledged expertise in the field of civil emergency planning.

**19. Establishment of common educational programmes** on subjects that are not « politically sensitive ».

**20. Greater consultation on economic matters** in order to increase inter-Maghreb trade from today's figure of 2.5 % to 10 % in the mid term.

However naïve and unrealistic this list of twenty proposals may appear, it could constitute a useful framework for drawing up a « road map » aimed at restoring Maghreb confidence, thus helping to revitalize the Mediterranean

Dialogue and re-establish a constructive and ambitious South-South dialogue.

In the Maghreb, one's neighbour is very often perceived as one's enemy, and this means that the re-building of confidence can only come about as a result of a political initiative at the very highest level. Such an initiative, aimed at establishing transparency and restoring confidence among neighbours, appears all the more appropriate if one considers that de facto cross-border cooperation already exists, even when borders are officially closed, and even more relevant given that the Maghreb regimes see the threat as coming first and foremost from within, not from the outside. Very often this external threat is put on for show, and the confrontation deliberately exaggerated, whereas in fact the Maghreb is a relatively stable and homogeneous region compared to the Mashreq. Moreover, unlike their leaders, the people have a strong sense of inter-Maghreb solidarity, which should encourage greater transparency.

## **7 – Contribute to the reinforcement of security in the Sahel region**

In recent months the media have been quick to condemn the insecurity and the resurgence of terrorism and crime in the Sahel region: hostage-taking, execution of westerners, armed clashes, drug seizures, discovery of arms caches<sup>16</sup>. The parties concerned are attempting for the moment to deal with this new threat by favouring bilateral cooperation (with varying results) or multilateral cooperation, but

<sup>16</sup> Laurence Ammour, « An assessment of crime related risks in the Sahel », *Research Paper n° 53*, NDC, Rome, November 2009. See also Mehdi Taje, « Vulnérabilités et facteurs d'insécurité au Sahel », a note published by the Secretariat of the OECD Sahel and West Africa Club, August 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Such as the quadripartite initiative adopted on 21st April 2010 by Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger establishing a joint operational staff at Tamanrasset to deal with the new threats in the Sahel region. This initiative however excludes Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, three major actors concerned by the fresh upsurge of insecurity in the region.



without involving all the countries concerned<sup>17</sup>, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the measures envisaged. It is true that the Sahel arouses greed : gold, oil, gas, iron, phosphate, copper, tin and uranium are all sources of wealth which feed the greed of those powers that wish to gain control of them. For their part, the drug traffickers are creating new national and regional markets in this region in order to move their products. Since they need to secure the transit of their merchandise through the Sahel region, these traffickers make use of the protection afforded, thanks to their perfect knowledge of the terrain, by terrorist groups<sup>18</sup> and various dissident movements, thereby helping to fund them.

Since these issues are interlinked, and the funding of terrorism has long since ceased to be hindered by borders, it would seem logical for NATO to take a greater interest in this matter and propose including it in the Mediterranean Dialogue. It would be especially logical in view of the fact that the natural extension of Euro-Mediterranean interests lies today across the Sahel region. Broadening the scope of the partnership between NATO and the Maghreb countries to include strengthening security in the Sahel would also make it possible to considerably increase security cooperation in the region, while at the same time involving all the Maghreb countries in the effort, since they all feel affected by this threat, which is no less real for being widespread. Insecurity in this area considerably increases corruption, weakens the control exercised by States, undermines their credibility and reinforces the prestige and the resources of the terrorist movements which both NATO and the Maghreb governments are combating with

the same vigour but each on different fronts. Therefore NATO cannot ignore this question, even if it is clear that any response to this challenge has to be global and has, again, to involve closer consultation with the European Union and with regional organizations operating in the area, be it the Arab League, the African Union or the Arab Maghreb Union. The Atlantic Alliance could have a useful role to play as the diplomatic interface in coordinating the definition of concerted security policies and facilitating their implementation. All the experts are in agreement on this point.

The Alliance's involvement on this new front would obviously not come about directly – there is no question of launching a NATO operation to provide security in the Sahel region – but through the Mediterranean Dialogue, through military and technical cooperation, but also by means of multilateral political dialogue. This issue has not yet been the subject of any official discussions, either among Allies or within the partnership framework, but it could be usefully placed on the agendas of forthcoming Mediterranean Dialogue ministerial meetings, either in a formal « 28 + 7 » format or according to the more flexible « 28 + n » formula. It would provide a rare opportunity to move this partnership forward by satisfying both those who want greater military cooperation and those who would like to see more political consultation within a multilateral framework, and at the same time it would reassure those who complain of its lack of ambition.

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<sup>18</sup> Such as the Al Qaida group in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI).

