

NATO in the Gulf: Partnership Without a Cause?

by Jean-Loup Samaan¹

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Eight years after NATO initiated its engagement with Gulf countries through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), the results have been modest, not to say disappointing. True, some recent achievements are worth mentioning: the participation in 2011 of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in Operation Unified Protector in Libya, or the appointment, the same year, of the first UAE Ambassador to NATO, which represented an unprecedented and innovative way to strengthen the partnership.

However despite these examples, the ICI as a whole is today experiencing the same problems it faced when it was launched in 2004. The criticisms expressed by its stakeholders, such as the absence of a comprehensive and truly regional approach or the lack of consistency in the political and military agenda are, in fact, very similar to the initial lukewarm assessments published in the first years of the ICI.²

Furthermore, this failure is paradoxical, even troubling, when one considers the genuine strategic relevance of the ICI. Indeed the Gulf is, and, for the near future, is likely to remain a critical region for NATO. It encapsulates all the major security challenges the Alliance aims to tackle: maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz, the risks of proliferation of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems with the associated current Iranian conundrum, as well as state failure and, in Yemen, its by-product, terrorism. Moreover, in times of financial austerity in NATO countries, the partnership approach increasingly appears the most appropriate way to share the burden between Allied members and local partners, thus creating a pragmatic division of labour.

Taking into consideration all these elements, how can one explain the underachievement of the ICI? Moving forward, how could NATO overcome the existing obstacles and revamp the partnership to address future security challenges? Based on interviews with decision-makers and



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² See for instance Matteo Legrenzi, "NATO in the Gulf: Who Is Doing Whom A Favor?", Middle East Policy, Spring 2007, vol.14, n°1, pp.69-75.



researchers from Gulf Cooperation Council countries, this paper answers these questions by shedding light on the current and emerging strategic trends shaping the security system in the Gulf. It then focuses on some of the lessons from eight years of ICI. Finally it suggests an agenda for future cooperation.

1. The current state of Gulf security environment

The monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council face tremendous challenges, both external and domestic. The mobilisations of the Arab Spring, the final withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the protracted crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions have become decisive factors of change for the regional balance of power. Additionally, the end of Ali Abdullah Saleh's reign in Yemen – commonly perceived as Saudi Arabia's backyard – brings into the question the ability of the new government in Sanaa to avoid a security vacuum while facing deep pockets of insurgency (Ansar al Shariaah) and terrorism (Al Qaeda) on its soil.

While each of these trends has implications for the region, a closer look at how the Gulf monarchies react to them reveals many differences and divergences and underlines one first key lesson for NATO's engagement with the GCC: contrary to some academic views, the Arabian Gulf barely qualifies as a cohesive regional security community and consequently its security environment engenders different and sometimes contradictory policies from the actors involved.

The effects of the Arab Spring. Although the GCC monarchies did not experience the same scale of turmoil as some in North Africa and the Levant, they have not been immune to the waves of social protest that grew in earnest in early 2011 following the demise of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's and Hosni Mubarak's regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The most critical situation remains the one in Bahrain where a Sunni minority, the Al-Khalifa dynasty, has been ruling the country for more than 200 years. In the last two decades, there have been frequent demonstrations by the Shiite majority for political reforms that have never been delivered. In a sense, the Arab Spring of 2011 was not a sudden wake-up call for

the impoverished Shiite population of Bahrain but rather a new level of escalation in the long clash between the kingdom's rulers and its citizens.

This new phase was followed, in mid-march 2011, by a GCC military intervention, requested by the Bahrain authorities, to put down the protests. The Peninsula Shield deployment in Manama was led and mostly manned by Saudi Arabia (although the UAE provided hundreds of law enforcers). However these reprisals for the social discontent have only exacerbated the rift, leaving no real political leeway to solve the crisis. Without any space left for peaceful negotiations, Bahrain's future is uncertain.

While Bahrain's situation remains the most critical as of mid-2012, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman are also facing challenges, although these have not yet put into question the survival of their regimes. It started with armed clashes which erupted in the summer of 2012 in Eastern Saudi Arabia – home of its minority Shiite population as well as the location of major oil fields. Not only did these clashes call to mind the difficult state of the Shiite minority in the country, they also revealed that in the long term, it will be difficult for Riyadh to buy the social peace as it believed it could, following the \$37 billion stimulus package announced in February 2011.

During the spring of 2011, demonstrations were held in Oman with a social agenda focused on unemployment and the fight against corruption. The Sultanate reacted rapidly announcing a series of measures (unemployment allowances, the creation of 50 000 new jobs in the public sector, increases in salaries and retirement pensions). Since then, even though discontent has not completely disappeared, the intensity of the protests has waned.

In Kuwait, although there have been no dramatic cases of discontent in the last two years, the authorities seem to be experiencing institutional fatigue, as illustrated by the growing inability of the executive and legislative branches to maintain stable relations. Since Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al Sabah became the Emir in 2006, there have been no less than four legislative elections and nine ministerial cabinets that all seemed incapable to address the demands of citizens. The result is a steady rise of Islamism and tribalism in political life that do not threaten the existence of the regime but might substantially hinder the political process.³

³ "Kuwait's political turmoil threatens progress", Strategic Comments, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 27 April 2012; "Kuwait's Political Crisis: Current Concerns and Future Anxieties", Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 19 July 2012.



Meanwhile both Qatar and the UAE have only had to deal with a few low-scale demonstrations. The economic wealth ensured by the Emirates' natural resources has allowed them to avoid discontent: Qatar, the richest Gulf country in terms of per capita GDP, has invested substantially in the social and economic sectors that benefit its citizens, while implementing modest internal political reforms (new Constitution in 2003, local elections). In the UAE too, the authorities have overcome potential opposition by investing heavily in sectors like education, infrastructure, healthcare and energy.

Iraq, Yemen and the risk of a security vacuum.

While facing these domestic challenges, the rulers of the Gulf monarchies and their close advisers are following developments in Iraq and Yemen with great concern. The future direction of Iraq, following the withdrawal of US military forces on 20th December last year, is a source of major anxiety among the Gulf countries, in particular for Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In Kuwait, policymakers still have vivid memories of Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990 and explicitly rank Iraq as their top security priority.⁴ Usually now forgotten in the West, the 1990 invasion remains the central driver of Kuwaiti security strategy for the current generation of decision-makers in the policy and military spheres. This has led its government to pursue its annual demands for reparations although Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled almost a decade ago and economically Kuwait does not need them - Iraq still owes \$25 billion according to the initial agreements. This Kuwaiti inflexibility might create a vicious circle as the Iraqis are recovering from the civil war that followed the 2003 military campaign with difficulty, and resent the Kuwaitis for persisting with these claims.⁵ In the case of Saudi Arabia, bilateral relations with Iraq have been fuelled by mutual distrust.⁶ Although the Saudi authorities appointed an Ambassador to Iraq in early 2012 - the first in 22 years - this decision is

unlikely to change the common perception in Riyadh that the government of Nuri al Maliki in Baghdad is untrustworthy and highly influenced, if not controlled, by Iran.⁷

In Yemen, the demise of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the simultaneous exacerbation of fighting in the southern and northern parts of the country are also sources of anxiety for Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is still the most influential external actor on Yemeni soil and considers the country as its backyard: in other words, long-term instability in Sanaa threatens the security of Saudi Arabia's own southern provinces, as the countries share a 1100 mile- long border. According to Saudi Interior Ministry officials, terrorist networks based in Yemen have helped Al Qaeda operatives smuggle arms into the Kingdom and launch operations.⁸ This is the reason why for the last few months the Saudis have been working closely with US forces in multiple counter-terrorism operations (including drone attacks) in Yemen.

The Iranian matrix. But apart from the Gulf's fears of security vacuums in Iraq and Yemen, these issues are increasingly seen through a common prism: the Iranian threat. It has become such a fixation for policymakers that it can be characterized as a matrix through which all the troubles in the Gulf (discontent in Bahrain, insurgency in Yemen) can be analyzed. This threat is - objectively speaking - considerably inflated by GCC officials, as Gulf monarchies' military capabilities dwarf those of Iran.⁹ However, it is now barely possible to consider Gulf security policies without taking into account the perception of an Iranian hegemonic agenda in the region and the consequences of this perception for the GCC monarchies' foreign and security policies. But while the Iranian matrix is a common denominator in GCC capitals, each country reacts differently. So far the most active actors on the issue have been Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. According to the US State Department cables leaked on the Wikile-

⁴ Interviews with policy and military officials, Kuwait City, June 2012.

⁵ David Roberts, "Kuwait's war of words with Iraq", Middle East Channel, *Foreign Policy*, 20 July 2011; David Roberts, "Kuwait" in: Christopher Davidson, *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, London, Hurst, 2011, pp.110-111

⁶ As revealed in the US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks: Michael Gordon, "Meddling Neighbors Undercut Iraq Stability", *New York Times*, 5 December 2010.

⁷ Jack Healy, "Saudis Pick First Envoy to Baghdad in 20 Years", *New York Times*, 21 February 2012.

⁸ Hugh Eakin, "Saudi Arabia and the New US War in Yemen", *New York Review Blog*, 21 May 2012

⁹ See for instance the net assessment from Alexander Wilner, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance*, Washington, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011.



aks website, Saudi King Abdullah and Bahrain's King Hamed Ibn Isa Khalifa have repeatedly advocated a US pre-emptive strike against the nuclear sites.¹⁰ The case of Saudi Arabia attracts the most attention, as the rivalry between the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran is the most severe in the region. There have also been repeated affirmations that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have cut a deal under which Pakistan could station nuclear weapons in the Kingdom if Riyadh were to react to a nuclear-armed Iran.¹¹ Senior Saudi officials have been present at ballistic missile tests in Pakistan and nothing, in theory, would legally prevent the "Pakistan option" as long as these weapons were not under the control of the recipient country.¹²

For the UAE, the current conundrum over Iran's alleged intention to build a nuclear capability for military use is, in fact, only one recent illustration of its 30 year history of tension with the rulers in Tehran. In particular, the UAE authorities emphasize the issue of the three islands occupied by Iran – the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa – as a reminder of their unresolved disputes. However the UAE themselves remain torn between the security agenda driven by Abu Dhabi and the business interests developed by Dubai (which is an important trading partner for Tehran).

But other Gulf countries remain ambivalent. For instance, while Qatar hosts the US Central Command regional headquarters, in 2010 it also signed a defense cooperation agreement – though modest in content – with Iran. An external observer might be puzzled by the apparent Qatari contradiction: on one hand, high-ranking officers in Doha argue for tougher Western policies vis-à-vis Iran, while on the other, close political advisors envisage their country as a potential mediator between Iran and the West.¹⁴ Eventually this might prove to be the pattern of Qatari foreign policy: a mix of opportunism and pragmatism which, in the case of Iran, is not surprising when one considers that the countries share the largest gas field in the world

(South Pars-North Dome field).

The Sultanate of Oman is the GCC monarchy with the best - or at least the most balanced - relations with Iran. The roots of this posture may also be in Oman's cautious view of Saudi activism in the Gulf. Omani leaders have frequently expressed their disagreement with the Saudi intention to make the GCC into a security alliance targeting Iran. The Qaboos, the ruling family, does not consider its Shi'ite minority as a systematic Iranian Trojan Horse, a view that increasingly prevails in other GCC monarchies.

An overall look at the Gulf security environment allows us to understand better the spectrum of challenges these countries face, including domestic unrest, low-intensity threats such as weak States in their vicinity, as well as a potential high-intensity confrontation with Iran. But this overview also enables us to grasp the lack of real coordination among the GCC countries in the realm of security, a fact that unfortunately NATO has possibly underestimated for the last few years. Bluntly, it was barely possible for NATO to engage in cooperation with the GCC because there was scarcely any cooperation within the GCC to start with.

2. Lessons from eight years of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) was officially launched in June 2004 during the Alliance Summit hosted in the Turkish city. In the final Summit Declaration, the Heads of State asserted that complementing the existing Mediterranean Dialog, the ICI was "*offered by NATO to interested countries in the region, starting with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to foster mutually beneficial bilateral relationships and thus enhance security and stability*", by focusing "*on practical cooperation where NATO can add value has experienced*".¹⁵ The initial assumption behind the ICI was that the political realm of the partnership would not suffer the same obstacles

¹⁰ Borzou Daragahi, Paul Richter, "Iran must be stopped: Arab leaders implored U.S. to attack, Wikileaks disclosures show", *Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 2010; Lawrence Korb, Caroline Wadhams, "*Perceptions of Security in the Arab Gulf Region*", Washington, Center for American Progress, 19 May 2010.

¹¹ Christopher Clary, Mara E. Karlin, "The Pak-Saudi Nuke, and How to Stop It", *The American Interest*, June-July 2012; Stephen Blank, "Saudi Arabia's nuclear gambit", *Asia Times*, 7 November 2003.

¹² Pakistan is not a party to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and, in this scenario, the Saudi interpretation of articles I and II of the NPT would be similar to the US interpretation, unchanged since the late 1960s.

¹³ Thomas Mattair, *The Three Occupied UAE Islands: The Tunbs and Abu Musa*, Abu Dhabi, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2005.

¹⁴ Alex Vatanka, "The Odd Couple: Iran and Qatar: Two regional misfits", *The Majalla*, 22 March 2012.

¹⁵ Istanbul Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Press Release (2004)096, 28 June 2004, paragr. 37.



that the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) had encountered since its inception as the “Mediterranean Initiative” in 1994. The MD was supposed to use the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to reinforce political and security cooperation between NATO and its neighbours on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, but following the breakdown of the diplomatic talks in the first decade of the new millennium, the implementation of the MD became extremely difficult. The political environment of the ICI looked, at first sight, much more favourable to cooperation as there was no issue among the partners as contentious as the Israeli-Arab issue. The ICI was therefore designed using a reversed pattern: while the MD would focus on overcoming political obstacles *through* diplomatic dialogue, the ICI would adopt a bottom-up approach by building practical military-to-military ties to flesh out the political rapprochement. However, from the start, NATO underestimated the difficulties of cooperation in the Gulf region by considering the GCC a cohesive entity which formed a robust security system.

The initial rebuttal from Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Saudi Arabia and Oman, which account for approximately 70% of the Gulf countries’ defence expenditures, declined to be part of the ICI. Both agreed to participate in some activities but refrained from institutionalizing their relations with NATO. Explanations regarding the absence of the Saudis and the Omanis vary.

Oman did not completely reject cooperation with NATO and over the last few years, there have been numerous indications that the Sultanate favoured closer relations. However, caution and balance tend to prevail in Muscat’s posture towards NATO. The popular narrative in the Middle East that portrays the ICI as a NATO-GCC alliance against Iran is an embarrassment for Oman which aims at maintaining good political relations with the rulers in Tehran.

In the case of Riyadh, such a narrative is less unsettling but it has been argued that Saudi Arabia, being the regional hegemon, did not want to be put on a par with the small Gulf kingdoms that rely heavily on

external powers for their security. In other words, if Saudi Arabia was to establish formal relations with NATO, they would have to be in a tailored, one-on-one framework.¹⁶ This is why, contrary to Oman, Saudi Arabia has been participating openly in various NATO activities including seminars, courses and conferences.¹⁷ Hence a closer partnership seems more likely in the case of Saudi Arabia than of Oman.

As a result, NATO officials have repeatedly courted the Saudis. In June 2012, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, Nizar Madani visited NATO headquarters in Brussels to discuss political cooperation with Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The NATO Secretary General reiterated the Alliance’s view that “*Saudi Arabia is a key player in the region and NATO would welcome the opportunity to engage the Kingdom’s government as a partner in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*”.¹⁸

Saudi Arabia’s leadership of the GCC in general, and in particular during the Peninsula Shield intervention in Bahrain, underlines the fact that NATO will have difficulty playing a role in the region without engaging the rulers in Riyadh. But the Saudis’ new regional assertiveness is not automatically the first step towards a period of cooperation with NATO in the future. Saudi rulers are traditionally apprehensive of any Western interference in Gulf security affairs and could opt for a reinforcement of GCC structures to decrease reliance on external frameworks such as the ICI.

The prevalence of the bilateral track. The second obstacle to the advancement of the ICI is the failure to “multilateralize” its process. Saudi Arabia and Oman aside, those Gulf countries that joined the ICI (Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain) expressed their preference for a bilateral framework, rather than a multilateral one (like the Mediterranean Dialogue). In other words, they wanted to engage with NATO but on their own, not side by side. Again, it can be said that this inability to regionalize a NATO approach to the Gulf is the result of the wide geopolitical divergences and traditional mistrust between GCC countries.

In statistical terms, a NATO Defense College research survey showed that in 2008, the ICI states participated

¹⁶ This hypothesis was raised during interviews conducted with Saudi officials and NATO representatives.

¹⁷ Florence Gaub, *Against All Odds: Relations Between NATO and the MENA Region*, Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, 2012, p.11.

¹⁸ NATO News release, «Saudi Minister visits NATO HQ», 18 June 2012. Available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_88464.htm



in 57 cooperation activities (UAE 25, Qatar 13, Bahrain 12, and Kuwait 7). While this is a 72% increase compared to 2005, it is still only 10% of the total activities offered.¹⁹

The ICI partners have approached NATO's initiative the same way they approached their multiple national security arrangements and guarantees with western powers. In both cases, the GCC countries have sought close bilateral relations to pursue their own distinctive diplomatic goals. Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar host US military bases while the UAE are providing the French Navy with a newly built base in Abu Dhabi. In the meantime, all the ICI partners have developed a complex web of defense agreements. Following the Iraqi invasion of 1990, Kuwait signed defense agreements with France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Not only does Qatar enjoy the deterrent effect of hosting the US Central Command but it has also signed a defense agreement with France. The UAE is also tied to France and the United Kingdom through a defense agreement.

In retrospect, for the last eight years, perhaps the biggest challenge for NATO was to find the most appropriate role in all these frameworks. The depth and the number of bilateral defense agreements in the region have meant that the issue has never been a lack of security guarantees but rather a risk of congestion. The prevalence of some sort of competitive bilateralism among Gulf countries may have encouraged cooperation, but it did not ensure common strategic planning, military interoperability and technical complementarity. Frequently it has led to an absence of collective priorities, inconsistent military-to-military relations, and unnecessary redundancies in capabilities.

Consequently, in the case of the ICI, officers and diplomats from Gulf countries tend to ignore their neighbours' agenda with NATO, and formulate their own strategies without envisaging a precise GCC dimension to their actions.²⁰ The misleading analogy here is to see the GCC as a sort of European Union for the Gulf monarchies. These regimes do not systematically design their policies through a GCC lens the way the EU countries do.

Furthermore, ICI partners are sometimes in two minds about their relations with NATO and the West in general. Several officials from GCC countries interviewed for this research paper expressed their "ignorance about NATO's real objectives with the ICI", describing it as "a partnership without a cause". In some cases, local observers, keen to uphold conspiracy theories, questioned the ICI's "hidden agenda". According to their logic, since there is no explicit or convincing goal, there must inevitably be a hidden one. Abdulaziz Sager, Chairman of the Gulf Research Centre, was already underlining this tendency in 2006: "the initiative being put forward within the framework of NATO has been perceived in negative terms as being no more than a mechanism by which the West can continue to control the region. With the reputation of the United States in the Gulf deteriorating rapidly, NATO was perceived as a wolf in sheep's clothing or as a new package for Western policies of the past".²¹ The best illustration of this contradiction can be found in the recent statement by Dahi Khalfan Tamim, Dubai Chief of Police, in January 2012. During a public conference, he affirmed that "the United States' security policy is the first threat to the Gulf"²², thus provoking an embarrassing controversy in the UAE, a Federation that has proved very active in cooperating with the West and NATO.

All in all, the reality-check for NATO is that the politics of GCC countries have proved less similar to each other than they appeared at first. NATO may have failed to engage with the GCC as a whole simply because a GCC regional vision barely existed in the first place. In the coming months, this might change due to the idea of a Gulf Union launched by Saudi Arabia. With the much awaited GCC Summit taking place next December, NATO should follow the on-going developments in the region carefully. They could pave the way for a rethinking of the approach to the ICI framework.

But this is only one part of the equation, and one that NATO obviously cannot control. Regarding the partnership *per se*, the Alliance should waste no time in reconsidering its bottom-up approach. Strengthening cooperation in the operational domain could have

¹⁹ Pierre Razoux, "What future for NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative?" *NATO Defense College Research Paper*, n°55, January 2010, p. 3; Florence Gaub, *op. cit.*, p.11.

²⁰ This appraisal is based on a series of interviews with diplomats and senior officers in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE in June 2012.

²¹ Abdulaziz Sager, "What Do the Gulf Cooperation Council States Want From NATO?" in: Ronald Asmus (Ed.), *NATO and Global Partners: Views From the Outside*, Riga Papers, German Marshall Fund, 2006, p.17

²² Wafa Issa, "Police chief defends criticism of US policies", *The National*, 20 January 2012.



been effective if there had been a clear common perception of the ICI's *raison d'être*. Unfortunately this pattern is no longer sound and revamping the partnership is therefore urgent.

3. The road ahead: recommendations for the ICI

Gaining from the achievements. Although the ICI's relevance as a strategic framework has generated scepticism, some achievements in NATO-GCC relations are worth considering and using. First, the Gulf countries have been amongst the most active partners in operations. The UAE and Bahrain have worked with the International Stabilization and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. In 2011, the UAE and Qatar took part in Operation Unified Protector in Libya, coordinating their resources with NATO forces at the Joint Forces Command-Naples.

The UAE sent six F-16s and six Mirage fighter aircraft in support, while Qatar provided direct military assistance to rebel groups in the form of weapons shipments and on-the-ground advisory and communications support.²³ In the fall of 2011, the UAE appointed its first Ambassador to NATO, an unprecedented and innovative way to strengthen the partnership relations. Finally, Kuwait is also very active and is building a regional NATO Centre on its soil to conduct educational activities for GCC countries and NATO nations to enhance ties from inside the region.

These achievements prove that what is at stake is not NATO's Gulf policy as a whole but the ICI as a means of implementing it. This paradox was emphasized by some inside observers in Brussels who argued that the successes mentioned above "have nothing to do with the ICI *per se* and could well have taken place without it".²⁴ Thus, to prevent the ICI as a framework becoming irrelevant in the future, we must refine its methodology and its agenda priorities to bring it closer to NATO and ICI partners' security concerns.

Conducting a NATO-Gulf strategic dialogue. The first, and crucial, imperative is to extend the current bilateral nature of the ICI. That does not mean that those GCC countries who wished to continue their

special relations with NATO would no longer be able to arrange regular bilateral visits and meetings: the multilateral track should become the core arrangement for the ICI. This practice can be developed by creating a regular strategic dialogue between the current ICI partners which could be held twice a year, once in Brussels and the once in one of the Gulf capitals. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Oman would be able to attend as special observers.

The dialogue could include a political dimension by gathering together ministers and chiefs of defence, but its effectiveness would depend on a calibrated mix of diplomats, desk officers and scholars from both sides discussing the ICI agenda. In other words, this NATO-Gulf strategic dialogue should not be designed as a classic, very formal and official gathering but as a platform to exchange fresh ideas and promote future cooperation. In other words, it could be inspired by the experience gained from second-track fora like the existing Manama Dialogue for the Gulf countries or the Shangri-La Dialogue that has been shaping the Asian security debate for the last decade. To achieve this balanced sense of diplomatic formality, an institution like the NATO Defense College could be an appropriate forum in which to bring NATO and Gulf officials together. Through the various courses and high-level seminars conducted by its Middle East Faculty and gathering officials from NATO members and partners, the NATO Defense College has acquired a know-how that could prove well-suited.

Setting an ambitious policy agenda. Initially the architects of the ICI chose to limit the scope of the partnership to practical cooperation, such as defence cooperation, military interoperability, counterterrorism, or border security. This agenda was to be the first stage in a more ambitious dialogue which would eventually include a political dimension. However, it seems as if NATO and its partners were bogged down during this first phase and forgot the long term goal which was eventually to initiate political discussions.

A future NATO-Gulf Strategic Dialogue could redirect the partnership towards its long-term goal and include the discussion of timely policy issues such as:

²³ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Qatar: Background and U.S. Relations", Washington, Congressional Research Service, 2011, p.6.

²⁴ Interview with officials from NATO Headquarters, Spring 2012.



1. Reinforcing maritime security: the rise of piracy in the Indian Ocean since 2008, as well as the development of access-denial capabilities (cruise and short-range ballistic missiles, naval mines) by countries like Iran to deter NATO or GCC forces in the Strait of Hormuz are now phenomena that are of common interest. A NATO-Gulf dialogue could discuss common strategic planning, including the net assessment of emerging threats and the appraisal of the naval capabilities required to counter them.

2. Countering security vacuums in the Middle East: NATO has a decade-long experience of capability-building skills with nascent armed forces through its Training Missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As ICI partners have expressed concern about the fragility of statehood in neighbouring countries like Iraq and Yemen, the Alliance could play an effective role in mitigating the risk of security vacuums in the region. NATO's role in preventing State failure would not be limited to military operations. More particularly, it could help bridge the gap between the GCC and Iraq. The relations which have now been built between NATO and Iraqi forces in the field of military education and defence diplomacy could be used to reassure ICI partners.

3. Cautious exchanges about the stand-off with Iran: the Iranian issue should not be treated casually. The threat perception in the Gulf regarding Iran has to be taken into consideration with caution, but here too NATO could play a key role in preventing unintentional escalation. Eventually, NATO and GCC countries will have to find a more or less formal framework to shape some kind of deterrence dialogue with Iran. This subset of the NATO-Gulf strategic dialogue would logically engage NATO partners, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative as well as the Iranians. It would not necessarily involve high level national representatives and would very likely remain at the second-track level. Though it might sound far-fetched, there is nothing in theory that prohibits Iran from participating in ICI discussions.²⁵ Several political issues would have to be cleared up before: the nature of

Iran's nuclear programme, the willingness of both NATO members and partners to engage with Iran and the compatibility of such an initiative with the current UN, US and EU sanctions regime targeting Tehran. But in the long run, a dialogue of this kind could provide a framework in which to discuss respective military postures, exchange assessments on potential flashpoints, design safety valves and eventually to avoid miscalculation.

In general terms, an agenda for NATO-Gulf strategic dialogue may have to accommodate the national preferences and inclinations of the 28 Allies, in particular those who already have special relations with the GCC as a whole or/and with its individual countries. But owing to the interdependence between stakeholders in the security issues mentioned and also to the Allies' new emphasis on cooperative security, this dialogue would not be redundant.

Conclusion

The time has undoubtedly come to revamp the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Lessons from its eight years of existence show that the issue at stake is not the purpose of the partnership itself but rather its methodology. In that perspective, it relates to a broader challenge for NATO: as it struggles internally with the financial crisis, the organization is revising its global posture through the concept of "smart defense" introduced by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. "Smart defense" aims at extracting greater value from reduced defense budgets through closer cooperation. As suggested above, cooperation with ICI partners during Operation Unified Protector may well be the closest illustration of "smart defense" practices we can achieve. This is why the implementation of an ambitious but at the same time realistic strategic dialogue with Gulf countries could help the Alliance reassess its approach to the Middle East. More than a century ago, when their laboratory faced bankruptcy, the physicist Lord Rutherford said to his colleagues: "*Gentlemen, we are out of money. We'll have to think*". As the transatlantic allies face the same difficulties, they should indeed start thinking about smart partnerships.

²⁵ The official ICI 2004 document does not specify geographic limits and states that "based on the principle of inclusiveness, the initiative could be opened to all interested countries in the region who subscribe to the aim and content of this initiative [...] Each interested country would be considered by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis and on its own merit".