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Fostering Security: NATO's Reflection on the Southern Neighbourhood

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In its 75th anniversary year, NATO is gearing up for its next Summit in Washington D.C this July, gathering leaders from all 32 Allies alongside presumably a large contingent of dignitaries from partner countries. The agenda promises a diverse array of discussions, with an expected significant focus on Russia's aggressive war in Ukraine. However, beyond these pressing matters, other crucial issues will also be addressed.

At the previous Vilnius Summit, held last summer, NATO Allies initiated a process to launch a comprehensive reflection process of the Alliance's relationship with the 'Southern Neighbourhood.' This reflection process aims to produce tangible proposals in time for the upcoming Summit. The reflection process is partly consistent of an external report written by experts that have been appointed by the Secretary General. However, this report is merely a part of the larger reflection process taking place internally.

The report, authored by 11 external experts from various Allied states and chaired by Ana Santos Pinto, was submitted to the Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, in April and published on May 7th. It goes to give an analysis and a series of recommendations to not necessarily kick-start a new approach for NATO to engage with the 'Southern Neighbourhood', but rather to build and create a more structured approach for how NATO engages with the 'Southern Neighbourhood' in the future.

It offers concrete recommendations to shape NATO's future strategy, highlighting opportunities for enhanced engagement and cooperation with partner nations, international organisations, and relevant stakeholders. The report on NATO's engagement with the 'Southern Neighbourhood' presents an analysis of NATO's approach paired with observations and recommendations aimed at enhancing NATO's effectiveness in the region.

The report from the independent group of experts supporting NATO's reflection on the 'Southern Neighbourhood' comprehensively addresses the strategic challenges and opportunities NATO faces in its engagement with North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel, and the Gulf. Throughout the paper, the authors underline that the Southern neighbourhood actually consists of several neighbourhoods with very different challenges (but also opportunities) for the Alliance, namely North Africa, the Middle East and thirdly Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa. Some of NATO's partners in the 'Southern Neighbourhood' - i.a. through the Mediterranean Dialogue and the

Istanbul Cooperation Initiative - are Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The group of experts emphasizes the interconnectedness of security between NATO members and these regions, identifying rising strategic competition, disinformation, terrorism, and climate change as key challenges that impact regional and global stability. The report advocates for a strengthened political dialogue and cooperative security framework to address shared security concerns more effectively.

Key thematic areas for cooperation outlined in the report include human security, counterterrorism, maritime security, resilience, climate security as well as responding to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). The report underscores the importance of aligning NATO's capabilities with the specific needs of the nations that comprise the 'Southern Neighbourhood' to build trust and effectively counter negative perceptions and misinformation. Furthermore, the group recommends enhancing NATO's situational awareness and its engagement with international and regional organisations to consolidate a more integrated approach to security and stability in these regions.

The report thoroughly analyses the strategic dynamics of NATO's 'Southern Neighbourhood' and presents 114 recommendations that together thematically primarily highlight diplomacy as the focal area for improvement. These recommendations are conceptualised to build upon one another, starting with short-term actions that lay the groundwork for medium- and long-term initiatives. Given the sensitivity regarding NATO in the region, most recommendations refer rather to political preparatory work in order to strengthen the dialogue: They include the appointment of a Special Envoy for the 'Southern Neighbourhood', special Summit meetings of all NATO's southern partners, establishing more direct NATO representation (establishing liaison offices, setting up a centre for climate and security in North Africa as well as a FIMI Centre of Excellence) in critical regions, and leveraging existing partnership frameworks, like the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, to foster deeper regional cooperation. The report also makes a plea for more regular engagement with other partners such as the African Union and the European Union. One of the more far-reaching recommendations is the setting up of a standing NATO mission dedicated to training and capacity-building for partners. The report concludes with calls for a comprehensive review of NATO's internal structures to ensure coherent and effective engagement with its 'Southern Neighbourhood', reflecting the evolving geopolitical landscape and the diverse challenges these regions present for the Alliance.

Analysis

The experts provide a pragmatic analysis of what can realistically be expected from NATO's engagement with its 'Southern Neighbourhood.' The report acknowledges the complexities inherent to the respective regions and repeatedly refers to what are often seen as good examples of engagement in one of its various 'Southern Neighbourhoods.' Notably, the report recommends that NATO build upon the NATO

Mission Iraq's (NMI)¹ - a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission - success and explore the possibility of setting up a standing NATO mission dedicated to training and capacity-building for partners, to be deployed upon invitation of the latter. Beyond capacity building itself, the report highlights environmental issues and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda as promising areas that can serve as the base for increased cooperative endeavours in other domains at a later stage. By doing so, the report effectively identifies potential areas of cooperation that extend beyond purely political considerations into key security domains that offer accessible opportunities for developing and enhancing relationships in the field of security. Ultimately, these initiatives would not only address immediate security needs but also foster long-term stability through societal resilience and governance improvement. So, while these domains are considered by observers as 'low hanging fruit' for NATO to increase engagement, they also present a means of having an immediate impact on increasing security in NATO's 'Southern Neighbourhoods.'

The text strongly emphasises the link between the security challenges on its eastern and its southern flanks: The report makes it clear that Russia's engagement in the Southern neighbourhoods, particularly through partnerships and influence in conflict zones, represents a strategic challenge to NATO, not only in direct security terms but also in maintaining influence in these regions. In demonstrating the interlinkages in what is happening on NATO's Eastern and Southern flank, the experts are reconciling the differing security concerns and realities of the NATO Allies, which are a product of their respective security environments. In doing so through the analysis it makes and the recommendations it proposes the report seeks to inspire cohesion and unity with regards to how NATO engages with its 'Southern Neighbourhood.' Several paragraphs also demonstrate the self-awareness of the difficulties that any form of cooperation or dialogue offer coming from the Alliance may encounter. One of these is due to the fact that the Alliance is active in geopolitical context where Russia and China offer alternative cooperation models and have some very close allies in these regions. The recommendations include having a policy of non-exclusivity with Russia and third countries as a pragmatic recognition of this complex diplomatic landscape. The experts argue that enabling such flexibility could be crucial for NATO's long-term strategic interests, as it would help to build partnerships and relations with partners without forcing them into potentially destabilising choices.

The report extensively discusses how NATO can enhance its engagement with the countries in the 'Southern Neighbourhood' by expanding on its cooperation with various regional partners and cooperations frameworks. Within this context, the report identifies the European Union (EU) as a particularly significant partner, noting the high degree of complementarity in values and goals between NATO and the EU, and suggesting that deeper cooperation could be highly beneficial. Several of the operational domains where the reflection paper suggest that NATO should intensify its efforts, such as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), WPS, and

¹ A deeper analysis on the purpose and added value of the mission can be found here: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/auslandsinformationen/artikel/detail/-/content/blick-in-alle-richtungen>

climate resilience are areas where the EU has already accumulated substantial expertise and operational capacity. The report does not however develop further on the strategic advantage NATO could gain from a more integrated approach with the EU.

The report comprehensively addresses the challenges posed by disinformation in the 'Southern Neighbourhood,' and dedicates a substantial number of recommendations into how NATO can challenge disinformation. Despite this, it is vague in its recommendations about how NATO might effectively counteract Russia's strategic use of anti-Western sentiments specifically, which are prevalent to varying degrees across the 'Southern Neighbourhood.' Ultimately, the campaigns against disinformation and trainings can only go so far if the disinformation is designed to build into existing local narratives and sentiments. Considering these dynamics, the recommendations that the concept of NATO's Contact Point Embassies (CPEs) should be expanded upon are important. This is because these embassies should not only serve as platforms for NATO's engagement, but their choosing should also reflect historical interactions and experiences of the Ally in question with the host country as a means of effectively combatting disinformation on the ground.

Commentary

Altogether, the report demonstrates a high level of understanding and investigation into how and where NATO could do better to maximise the effectiveness of its engagement in its 'Southern Neighbourhood.' The recommendations in the report are however also reflects that NATO is an organisation that operates on the consensus of all the Allies. Accordingly, while the analysis is in-depth and sharp, the recommendations demonstrate a concerted effort on the part of the experts involved to provide recommendations that are acceptable and palpable to all the Allies. This in of itself reflects the challenge of trying to build consensus among 32 Allies, who all have their own focuses, agendas, and security realities and who have very varying interests about how much they want NATO to be involved in the various regions. This is especially the case as some Allies have a strong vested national interest in some of the regions that comprise the 'Southern Neighbourhood' because of their proximity and historical engagement.

The report rightly emphasizes the enormous differences between the regions and the potential partners, but even this differentiation into three neighbourhoods seems roughly drawn when one "neighbourhood" comprises Sahel and Sub Saharan Africa.

A key recommendation from the report is the need for more frequent consultations between NATO and the European Union leadership concerning the 'Southern Neighbourhood.' While the report rightly emphasises increased regularity of these interactions, it misses the opportunity to advocate for a more structured and systematic exchange. The report's focus on heightened leadership engagement should not ignore the crucial need for structured interaction at the working level, where –

according to some observers - current engagements are sporadic and lack a systematic framework. Establishing regular, structured dialogues at both leadership and working levels would strengthen cooperation, reduce duplication of efforts, and enhance the synchronisation of NATO and EU strategies and operations in the Southern Neighbourhood.

The report's recommendations are primarily aimed at enhancing and making more effective NATO's diplomatic engagement with countries in the 'Southern Neighbourhood.' This focus is noteworthy, given that NATO's fundamental strength lies in its military capabilities, which align with its core mission. However, the recommendations reflect the analysis that through the broadening of its toolkit to include more nuanced diplomatic approaches NATO can better safeguard the security interests of the Allies that comprise it. Additionally, the recommendations highlight the challenging decisions and trade-offs the Alliance must navigate to adopt a pragmatic approach towards difficult players and non-exclusivity, while ensuring a 360-degree view of security threats, particularly regarding Russia's influence beyond its borders. By doing so, NATO not only adheres to its primary objective of securing the Allies but also expands its strategic reach and effectiveness, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive approach to regional security.

While observers have noted that the reflection paper has received positive feedback among several Ambassadors from the different regions, it will be up to the NATO Summit to give it the necessary political support. If NATO wants to engage more deeply with potential partners in the region, this reflection paper should be only the first starting point of an intense and regular dialogue.

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