NATO's Roles in the Greater Middle East

Henning Riecke

It could be the one positive consequence of last year’s Iraq crisis, or just neoconservative hubris in a multilateral disguise: the United States pushed its influential partners in NATO, EU and the G8 to coalesce their activities toward stabilization and democratization in the “Greater Middle East.” The rationale is clear: political and economic instabilities in the Muslim regions along the “arch of crises” from the Maghreb to Afghanistan might breed threats for the rest of the world, such as terrorism, proliferation and last but not least risks for the energy supply. Freedom and development in these regions would make it easier for the US and Europe to win partners in their fight against the new risks, and would make it more difficult for extremist leaders to muster support. Since democracies do not fight each other, a thoroughly democratized Middle East would live peacefully with the rest of the world. An orchestrated sequence of summits in May and June 2004, the last one being the NATO Summit in Istanbul, is supposed to work out a framework to transform the approach into political action and institutional adaptation.

Much has been written about the inherent contradictions of the new approach. The overall approach seems arbitrary, and there is dispute about which countries are part of the Greater Middle East. The respective states vary widely with regard to political structures and stability, the degree of development and impact of Islam on state policy.

While most political statements repeat that the initiative for change has to come from the region itself, the United States might not be patient enough to wait. Washington did not consult with Middle Eastern governments much before launching its initiative. It is clear that internal change and democracy cannot be brought about by external influence, especially when the most ardent promoter of change has such a bad reputation in the Arab world, for double standards and coercive policy, as the United States has after the Iraq war. Many of those Arabs who yearn for political reform in their own countries abhor the idea of being assisted by an American government. Western planners are now waiting nervously for a response from the Arab world that could be taken as a signal that assistance is welcome.

Some of the most difficult obstacles lie in the diverging expectations of the transatlantic partners themselves. A refined understanding of democracy should be undisputed, with elements such as equal participation, pluralism, human rights or rule of law in accordance with a cultural background. But should the G8, EU and NATO states promote democratic change, when an open election could bring the most radical anti-Western or fundamentalist forces to power? There are strategic differences, too: while the US government seeks restructuring of the region, with a democratic stronghold in the transforming Iraq and thus relying at least partly on the use or threat of force, the Europeans would be happy to create institutional structures that have worked well in Europe in the first place. Finally, while many strategists in European capitals see an enduring solution of the Israeli-Palestine conflict as the precondition of democratization of the Middle East, their colleagues in Washington hope that transformation in the neighborhood might facilitate a solution.

These are difficult starting conditions for NATO. What could NATO’s specific contribution be to objectives such as transparency, democratization and regional stability? NATO could find itself playing multiple and contradicting roles in the region: as a partner, as a stabilizer and as an enemy. Does this block it from being a relevant partner or will it enable the Alliance to influence the situation on the ground?
NATO has had a partnership program with countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb since 1994, the so-called Mediterranean Dialog, with a number of rather pro-Western countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. With a dense pattern of meetings, seminars and expert visits, the Mediterranean Dialog aims at fostering better understanding, dialog and cooperation. To be sure, the program met some criticism regarding the selective nature of the circle of its members, the lack of an overall agenda and the half-hearted interest of the NATO members. It has been a forum for dialog and exchange without much effect on the region’s stability, especially not with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has in turn impeded progress of the Mediterranean Dialog.

But despite its flaws, the Mediterranean Dialog has been moving toward more practical cooperation. In a document agreed upon at the Prague Summit in November 2002, the Allies decided to upgrade the Mediterranean Dialog. Practical cooperation would include military training and education, exercises, crisis management, and consultation on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or small arms and light weapons. The goal is to enable Mediterranean Dialog states to participate in NATO missions outside Article V – that is, stabilization missions in places such as the Balkans or in Afghanistan. Some countries already do this, like Morocco, Jordan and Egypt in Bosnia. Although this adaptation has received new attention, NATO had invented it before the latest Greater Middle East initiatives. The refined program is supposed to be presented in Istanbul.

The Mediterranean Dialog’s expansion will build upon the experiences of the Partnership for Peace program. For a number of reasons a partnership program with countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb would have to be modified, in contrast to the “classical” Partnership for Peace. It is unclear what the incentive for Arab states would be to participate in an expanded Mediterranean Dialog. The classical carrot of the Partnership for Peace program – the view to membership – is no prospect for states in the Middle East. Influence could be another incentive. Many potential partners identify NATO as only a military tool, in line with an American agenda for reshaping the region. They would expect a NATO partnership program to be an instrument to gain some influence on this process – an expectation that could easily be disappointed. Military and financial support would be an enticement as well, so NATO Allies would have to accept to pay a huge price for cooperation.

Then there is the problem of membership. Sooner or later the Mediterranean Dialog’s limited membership would impede it from becoming an effective instrument against new risks. Some countries that some NATO members have been unwilling to cooperate with in the past could be included. The likely candidates would be Iraq, Libya or the Persian Gulf states. Syria or Iran would have to go through profound internal transformations before they could become partners with US blessing. The membership question would create a dilemma: a partnership program would aim at democracy and cooperation against terrorism; yet too formal a commitment on the first goal might cut off opportunities for the latter.

A clear motive behind Greater Middle Eastern cooperation for the Allies is to find partners in the fight against international terrorism and against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The creation of a regional framework with a shared security culture would create confidence as a basis for closer cooperation. Other activities planned in the context of upgrading the Mediterranean Dialog will deal directly with responses to terrorism. Areas of cooperation and joint training include border control, the sharing of intelligence and civil emergency planning.

The list of possible next steps could be expanded further: a military code of conduct on the handling of ethnic minorities could become a topic for a Greater Middle Eastern partnership.
program, similar to the respective OSCE documents. Seminars on personnel management already exist in the Partnership for Peace framework. Why not train officers on how to keep control over extremist ideology in the military? For some of these issues, however, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be an impediment. Cooperation with the Mediterranean Dialog’s member Israel against extremist violence will be difficult for many Arabs.

**NATO as a Stabilizer**

For the regions of Central Asia and the Middle East, NATO is no longer an external actor. The Alliance is operating in one country of the wider region (Afghanistan) and its operation is debated in another (Iraq). Tension exists between its factual role as a stabilizer, which might be welcome, and the perception of NATO as an outside interference.

NATO took over command of the International Security and Assistance Force of Afghanistan (ISAF), which includes 6,500 troops from 35 countries, first to secure the political transition and then to protect the work of the government and the upcoming elections in June 2004. Since December 2003 NATO has also commanded a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kundus to create a secure space for development activities and to extend the government’s authority outside Kabul. Five more PRTs are to be created before the Istanbul Summit. The ISAF command also has a partnership character, an important element being to assist the national authorities in creating military forces and command structures, and helping with the cantonment of heavy weapons.

The United States sought NATO support for the stabilization of Afghanistan and has asked for more troops and more PRTs. Even possible NATO command of the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces has been under discussion, but NATO planners are not keen for too close a connection between the two operations.

NATO has stayed more or less clear of the Iraq war. It provided missile defense and surveillance aircraft to Turkey during the war (Operation Display Deterrence), after lengthy haggling among Germany, France and the United States. The possibility of NATO assisting the Iraqi reconstruction has been under discussion since early on in the occupation phase. Poland received NATO support for its command of a Multinational Division South in Iraq, in the form of assistance in the force-generation process, training, logistics and communication.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Brussels in early April 2004 to vindicate the idea of a stronger NATO role in Iraq and with an eye on the Istanbul Summit. Even now, 16 of the 26 NATO Allies are part of the coalition forces in Iraq. For instance, NATO command over the Polish Multinational Division could be seen as a logical extension of its earlier role. NATO could also take over tasks across the occupied country, such as logistical support or the training of Iraqi forces.

Meanwhile, support has eroded. The heated fighting in Falujah and Najaf, the Spanish withdrawal, and most of all the prisoner abuse by American forces have changed the situation. Not only would NATO deployment have to cope with a much more dangerous situation on the ground, it would be identified with an American-led occupation that is no longer seen as a liberating force or as providing a model for a democratized military.

The French and Germans oppose a NATO operation in Iraq for those reasons, but have signaled that they would not block a consensus. Under current circumstances, their arguments might be enough to create a majority against the Alliance going ahead. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has favored a stabilization force of Islamic states as an alternative, but while some Arab states have signaled their willingness, Turkey has already ruled out sending troops to Iraq. While the UN resolution regarding the transfer of power
and the conditions of an international presence currently under negotiation might shift opinion in NATO toward support, much will depend on how the Bush administration deals with the abuse scandal. Thus, although no NATO Ally could be indifferent with regard to failure of the US operation or the transition in Iraq, an impressive commitment in Istanbul is unlikely.

The Iraq case has somehow overshadowed an emerging discussion of another scenario: that NATO should command a peacekeeping force between Israelis and Palestinian people. In theory, the idea is compelling: the Alliance would build upon its Balkan experience of nation-building in a partly hostile environment; and both European and American forces would bring in allies of the Arabs and the Israelis. The preconditions for such an operation would be a peace settlement according to the roadmap or some other format that the NATO Allies have endorsed, and the invitation of both parties. A UN mandate would be desirable, and positive experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq helpful. The emerging partnership pattern could even enable Arab countries to contribute to a Multinational Division, creating a mix of Allied and regional forces under NATO command.

The first condition alone seems remote, however. Disarming irregular forces and supporting an emerging Israeli-Palestinian partnership would be possible, but for this NATO could only come in to stabilize a working settlement. In a different setting, NATO would have to press for disengagement of highly asymmetrical forces in a tight geographical setting, suppressing an angry urban guerrilla while keeping off heavy Israeli forces. Consensus for this in the North Atlantic Council would be unlikely.

NATO as an Enemy

Finally, let us look at the more hostile scenarios. NATO might face a situation where it commands troops in small flexible operations against terrorist infrastructure, proliferation networks or in areas where ethnic conflict might turn into violence. The newly created NATO Response Force has an operational spectrum that is designed to support the existing missions of collective defense and stabilization with flexible and quickly available capabilities, but robust operations against new risks are also possible. These new tasks might at one point call for a decision to engage in a theatre in the Arab region, perhaps in areas with loose state control, or in states neighboring Mediterranean Dialog states. NATO would find itself as an opponent of regional forces on the ground, with supporting non-state groups across borders.

Such a situation could also develop when NATO Response Forces operate in areas where NATO is present in a stabilizing force. If NATO took over the battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan from the United States, as was discussed earlier in 2004, it would do this with a different set of troops and would have to coordinate with the expanding ISAF missions. If NATO was present with a command in Iraq, it could find itself both in a role to track and suppress terrorist networks and to keep up domestic security.

In public perception, the more coercive operations, even with a separate set of forces and a different command, could hardly be detached from friendly operations during nation-building. NATO would need to make the issue a case for the partners in the region. The need for prior consultation could well conflict with the necessity to prepare a swift operation.

The Next Steps

For the last couple of years, the Middle East and its neighboring regions have been an area of growing concern for NATO members and have offered challenges for the Alliance. A consensus about the appropriate way in which to meet these challenges and a strategic reorientation was hard to find. Although the latest round of expansion shifted the point of gravity to the east, NATO has to look south as well. The Mediterranean Dialog, reflecting
NATO’s undetermined stance with its own low profile, could at least be used as the basis for a more complex network of partnerships in the region.

NATO’s greatest strength lies in military-to-military cooperation. An impressive expansion of the Mediterranean Dialog as an overall framework for partnership, in concert, but separated from the Barcelona process of the EU, could improve the impact that NATO’s activities have in the strategic region. Every bilateral cooperation program would need to be tailored to the specific conditions and preferences of each country, with clear incentives for the partner. The bombastic “Greater Middle East” label can be an asset and a burden in this process: it will help focus political attention and raise money, but could overshadow pragmatic collaboration on the working level.

The Alliance will at the same time have to play a number of roles in the regions of the Greater Middle East, some of which are hard to reconcile. Partnership programs should pave the way for more effective stabilization, in concert with Arab partners. NATO Allies would need to use the instruments of partnership with more commitment (and a higher budget) than before, to find partners for long-term strategies against new risks, even including more coercive operations.

Istanbul will be a decisive moment in the Alliance’s history, although it is not likely to produce historical documents. On the one hand, it could be damaging for NATO as a whole if the objectives – bringing democracy in the region, confronting violent extremism and redefining transatlantic relations – are not properly balanced. The Greater Middle Eastern initiative will not remove the real points of contention between Europe and the United States: the role of institutions and international law; and the use of force. If these conflicts prohibited NATO from developing a sound partnership with states in the region, or kept it from playing relevant roles in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Alliance’s relevance would once more be in question. If the reorientation is done correctly, it could produce greater convergence of goals, expectations and strategies toward the Middle East, and a common ground amongst the transatlantic Allies and partners in the region. While many planners in Washington are currently seeking the Allies’ support in a region of concern for both, Europe might seize the opportunity to press for greater weight and thus for more balanced security relations with the United States.16

Dr Henning Riecke is a Resident Fellow at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (German Council on Foreign Relations).

Notes


7. For the numbers, see http://www.nato.int/issus/afghanistan/index.html.


