

INDEPENDENT EXPERT GROUP
SUPPORTING
NATO'S COMPREHENSIVE AND DEEP REFLECTION
PROCESS ON THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

FINAL REPORT

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Preface

Peace and stability in NATO's neighbourhoods are an important component of Euro-Atlantic security. Threats, challenges and opportunities in NATO's southern neighbourhoods¹ matter to Allied security and to NATO partners. They are also increasingly interlinked with those in the east of the Alliance. Allies agreed, in the 2022 Strategic Concept, that they are committed to enhancing NATO's "global awareness and reach to deter, defend, contest and deny across all domains and directions in line with our 360-degree approach"² in order to respond to security challenges, geopolitical developments and broader evolutions in the Euro-Atlantic and international security context.

NATO's engagement with its southern neighbourhoods is founded on the Allies' long-time understanding that their security is closely intertwined with that of North Africa and the Middle East, the Sahel, and beyond. Thirty years after the establishment of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and two decades following the launch of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, the Alliance's cooperation and proximity with these regions has potential to grow further: through new approaches, new ways, and outreach to additional regions.

NATO's southern neighbourhoods face interconnected security, demographic, economic and political challenges, exacerbated by the impact of climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies and food insecurity. Terrorist groups continue to be active in the region, posing a threat to NATO Allies and partners alike. These pre-existing factors of insecurity are converging with the rise of strategic competition in the region. The impact of pervasive instability and recurrent shocks causes the displacement of vulnerable populations and results in migratory pressures, both on the southern neighbourhoods and Europe. Finding shared solutions is further complicated by strategic competition.

NATO is a defensive Alliance and Allies have agreed that "the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area".³ They have also agreed that "terrorism, in all its forms and manifestations, is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity".⁴ Russia is fuelling and benefitting from regional tensions and instability, and has a growing footprint in the southern neighbourhoods, from Syria to the Sahel, laying the foundations for strategic challenges on NATO's southern flank. Russia and Iran have expanded their cooperation in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Pro-Iranian extremist movements carry out attacks against NATO partners, Allied infrastructure and maritime security. NATO must not underestimate common threats that the Alliance and its southern partners are facing, including the destabilising impact of strategic competitors and the threat posed by terrorism.

¹ Given the significant diversity within the distinct regions in the south of the Alliance (which include the Middle East, North Africa, Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa regions), and the different security challenges that each region faces, this report will refer to southern neighborhoods, in plural.

² NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, paragraph 20

³ NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, paragraph 8

⁴ NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, paragraph 10

China is seeking to further its geopolitical agenda and, as part of these efforts, is expanding its influence in NATO's southern neighbourhoods, including its military and naval presence, as well as control of ports.

At the same time, the Alliance's southern neighbourhoods should also be viewed as a source of opportunities for NATO and Allies. It is at the crossroads of global trade and is among the youngest regions of the world. Strengthening political dialogue about and *with* the region through the language of partnerships, opportunities and concrete solutions to shared interests and concerns — from counter-terrorism to climate change and maritime security — matters. A clear political strategy, continued and consistent practical cooperation and periodic impact assessment of cooperation and capacity building should be the pillars of NATO's approach to this region.

NATO can positively contribute to the stability of partners in the southern neighbourhoods, helping to ensure the security of Allies, and in doing so, reinforcing common security. It can build on existing work, as well as find new and creative ways to build a framework for stability that would contribute to the institutional resilience of states and governments. To do so, it should uphold its founding principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law; promote good governance; and integrate climate change, human security and the Women, Peace and Security agenda across its activities towards the southern neighbourhoods. NATO should regularly monitor and assess the overall progress and political coherence of its engagements and activities in its southern neighbourhoods.

For many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, NATO and Allies are important partners. At the same time, NATO operates in a complex environment, and building reciprocal confidence and trust is vital if the Alliance is to make further strides in NATO's southern neighbourhoods. The perception of NATO and Allies in the southern neighbourhoods is somewhat negative. For many in the region, NATO is perceived as adopting double standards in responding to crises and conflicts on the world stage and is perceived as using its military assets to project power and interests from the 'so-called' "Global North" without fully taking into account the needs and concerns of the South.

In a world that is increasingly interconnected, perceptions and narratives are at the core of political relations. Accordingly, negative and misleading perceptions are used and amplified in favour of NATO's strategic competitors, who contribute to spreading selective misinformation through southern societies, according to their own interests and by taking advantage of their presence in region. To address these negative perceptions, NATO must counter hostile messages and develop a new proactive narrative highlighting its long-standing and multi-faceted engagement with the region and the added value of cooperation in security and defence.

Recognising the crucial importance of NATO's southern neighbourhoods, at the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, NATO Allies tasked the North Atlantic Council to launch a comprehensive and deep reflection on existing and emerging threats and challenges, and opportunities for engagements with partner nations, international organisations and other relevant actors in the region.⁵ This exercise aims to agree concrete proposals to be presented to NATO Leaders

⁵ Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11 July 2023, paragraph 22

at the 2024 NATO Summit. To support this process, in October 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg appointed a group of independent experts to undertake a review of NATO's approach to its southern neighbourhood, and to provide him with concrete recommendations. This process can be the beginning of a new chapter in NATO's approach to the southern neighbourhoods.

To fulfil this mandate, the group of experts engaged with Allies and NATO civilian and military staffs. During their mandate, the experts learned from representatives from NATO's southern partners, institutional and civil society representatives from North Africa, the Middle East, and Sahel countries. It also interacted with senior policymakers in the European Union institutions, as well as governmental representatives and interlocutors from academia and think-tanks.

On the basis of these engagements, the group developed a number of practical recommendations on what NATO should do to strengthen its approach to, and engagement with, its southern neighbourhoods in a way to make best use of the existing NATO instruments. This report presents the group's recommendations and the rationale behind them. The recommendations are organised along geographic and thematic lines. Within each recommendation section, it seeks to identify long-standing, current and future challenges, as well as proposals for short, medium and long-term pragmatic options. Some of the recommendations can be implemented immediately and aim to have a short-term effect. Other recommendations may take time to implement, as they address more structural and long-standing issues. Some recommendations suggest fundamentally revising the manner in which NATO engages partners in its southern neighbourhoods, whereas others encourage Allies to continue or expand existing practices.

According to its mandate, the group focused its analysis and recommendations on the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, while all three regions are of strategic importance to NATO, their diversity and singularities argue for differentiated levels of engagement.

Considering the evolving regional and international dynamics, other adjacent geostrategic landscapes were also considered, for example by looking at Sub-Saharan Africa as a region of growing importance for NATO.

The report reflects the viewpoint of the independent group of experts and not those of NATO, the NATO Secretary General or any of the Allies or partners.

Executive Summary

As instability grows on NATO's southern neighbourhoods, the Alliance requires a renewed strategic approach. This involves, first of all, a strengthening of NATO's political dialogue *about* and *with* the region, through the language of partnerships, concrete cooperative solutions to shared interests and concerns, and a sustainable long-term commitment. An effective approach must prioritise deeper understanding of partners' needs and perceptions, based on trust, credibility and clarity about NATO's purpose. This entails embracing flexibility without compromising NATO's interests, principles and values or undermining Allies' security. It also requires better coordination within NATO and between Allies, to avoid duplication and dispersal of efforts and resources.

The security of the southern neighbourhoods is closely interlinked with that of NATO Allies. The diverse security challenges experienced across the region, either long-standing or emerging, have a significant impact on regional stability and in the Euro-Atlantic security environment, as well as increasingly come to merge with those that have materialised on NATO's eastern flank. Conflicts with deep local roots are exacerbated by global strategic competition, as well as by the threat multiplier of climate change. Tackling the root causes of insecurity, terrorism and instability will require a range of international and local efforts. NATO should therefore cooperate and coordinate with international and regional organisations, partner countries and Allies to reduce and prevent conflicts and security threats, based on a clear sense of where it adds value: a "gold standard" of security capabilities, expertise and capacity-building, across all three of its core tasks, and including non-traditional security challenges such as resilience, climate security, Women, Peace and Security, and human security.

The report speaks of "southern neighbourhoods" in the plural because the south of the Alliance encompasses a number of distinct regions and sub-regions: North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel and adjacent maritime regions. The Alliance needs to strengthen its situational awareness of dynamics in each region, and more widely in sub-Saharan Africa. It also needs to better communicate its purpose and capabilities, and to work patiently to build trust on the basis of concrete and practical actions, recognising negative perceptions and a context of polarisation. Overall, NATO must listen harder, better and more actively to partners, and invest in skills and people to do this.

This report is structured along four main axes: regional approach to southern neighbourhoods; priority thematic areas for cooperation; cooperation with international and regional organisations; and NATO's internal structures.

Key **recommendations** include:

- **Appoint a Special Envoy for the Southern Neighbourhoods**, to provide a clear focal point for partners and to oversee and streamline NATO's wide-ranging activities with the region, ensuring consistency, progress and proximity.
- Conduct a **review to periodically assess NATO's relationship with the southern neighbourhoods**, which include an internal coordination mechanism that engages the Alliance's civil and military structures, as well as a regular report to the North Atlantic Council to evaluate progress.

- Convene a **special summit meeting of all NATO’s southern partners** to discuss proposals for further deepening regional cooperation, when conditions allow it.
- Propose a **High-Level Regional Security and Stability Dialogue** between relevant international and regional organisations.
- Establish **regular consultations on between the NATO Secretary General and the leadership of the European Union** on the southern neighbourhoods, as agreed by the two organisations.
- Establish a **political representation to the African Union**, complementing the existing military liaison office, to facilitate dialogue and cooperation.
- Based on NATO Mission Iraq’s success, 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.
- Explore new partnerships and **expand the options for cooperation with interested interlocutors from non-partner countries**⁶ that are interested in engaging with NATO.
- Leverage the appointment of the Special Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism to **give more visibility to NATO’s role in counter-terrorism**, particularly towards partner countries in NATO’s southern neighbourhoods.
- Building on successful counter-piracy efforts, **identify further areas for maritime security cooperation** in close consultation with partners, including the EU as agreed, as well as regional actors whose maritime security priorities must be carefully attended to.
- **Enhance cooperation on resilience** including through thematic dialogues with multiple partners and building on Resilience Advisory Support Teams.
- Explore with partner countries the possibility of **setting up a centre for climate and security in North Africa** with a two-way exchange of expertise.
- Consider **setting up a Counter- Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Centre of Excellence** and encourage it to open up its activities to partners.
- Consider setting up a permanent standing **“Facts for Peace”** initiative to actively fight disinformation by providing education, training and fellowships as well as support to selected media outlets, journalists and social media influencers in the southern neighbourhoods.
- Promote southern neighbourhoods’ **youth engagement**, leveraging the annual NATO Youth Summit and NATO Partnerships 360 Symposium to reach out to new audiences and foster the Youth, Peace and Security agenda.
- **Review the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub mandate** and functions and streamline the Hub into a joint civil-military entity, with a dual reporting to both military and civilian authorities.

⁶ The group defines new/potential interested interlocutors as countries and international organisations that are not currently NATO partners, but that NATO should consider engaging and cooperating with in a flexible way, outside the parameters of a formal partnership. This does not preclude these countries or organisations from becoming NATO partners in the future.

Guiding Principles for NATO's Approach to the Southern Neighbourhoods

The group's recommendations are grounded in a set of guiding principles, which should set the strategic direction for the Alliance's approach to its southern neighbourhoods. Policy initiatives and frameworks should reflect these principles:

360-degree approach: NATO must ensure that its approach to collective defence is fully based on a 360-degree approach and is appropriate to deter and defend against all threats emanating from both the East and the South. It is essential that the Alliance recognises the deep and growing interlinkages between the two strategic directions. NATO needs to be agile and capable to manage multiple threats and challenges – and potentially several crises happening simultaneously in different parts of the world. This requires balancing and ensuring that adequate attention and resources are allocated simultaneously to NATO's eastern and southern flanks, while retaining a global approach to security.

Values: NATO's cooperation with southern partners should be based on mutual respect and common interests, while recognising that there may not always be a convergence over the understanding of values. This requires a delicate balancing. NATO is an alliance based on common values, i.e. individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and these values should continue to guide NATO's work. According to its mandate and core tasks, as well as to partners' requests, NATO should assist partners in enhancing the democratic good governance of their defence and security sectors. At the same time, the Alliance operates in a world of strategic competition, with countries like Russia and China offering an alternative, 'non-democratic' and 'non-accountable' model. In this context, it is in the Alliance's vital interest to engage over how to solve concrete shared security concerns, by listening to and understanding the partners' particular needs and threat perceptions.

Navigating non-exclusivity: NATO should stress that cooperation and partnership with the Alliance does not necessarily exclude cooperating with other actors, including strategic competitors. A number of partners are concerned about the possible impact of global strategic competition on regional conflicts and indicate that they want to maintain relations with a number of external powers including some that are strategic competitors to NATO. They are wary of being drawn into a geopolitical struggle. NATO should seek a broad engagement and be open to cooperation, without compromising its values or undermining the Alliance's security. In interacting with partners, NATO should emphasise its commitment to multilateralism, international law and cooperative, shared security.

Cooperative spirit: NATO's approach to the region should emphasise shared interests, focusing on both opportunities as well as threats and challenges. It should stress its willingness to learn from, and actively listen to, partners, on a regular and enduring basis, and engage them as active security-contributors through political dialogue and multi-level consultations, a desire that partners' representatives repeatedly expressed during engagements with the group. Building a common sense of purpose and ownership should drive how NATO engages with partners in its southern neighbourhoods. Beyond this point, NATO should ensure its partnerships follow a "Do no harm" principle – linking defence and

security cooperation to good governance and human security, being informed by a thorough understanding of the local context, and thereby assessing the impacts of activities in the specific context, culture and society, with a focus on what is pragmatically achievable in the given context. Policies and instruments aimed at adaptation and institutional resilience, as well as with a concrete impact on populations, must be seen as a priority. In many cases, this requires more sustained political dialogue with a medium and long-term perspective. Finally, partners should be able to outline how much or little public visibility they want to give to cooperation with NATO.

Enhanced representation: Partners in the South express a desire for more interaction and a stronger engagement, more efficient representation and tailored visibility of NATO in the southern neighbourhoods. With the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait and the future NATO liaison office in Jordan, as well as NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), the Alliance already maintains a presence in the Middle East. NATO Mission Iraq shows that proximity, in-country presence and long-term commitments matter, as they allow for a more profound understanding and the building of trusted relations and lasting security cooperation. Based on this lesson, NATO should consider how to enhance its representation and in-country engagements in other regions of the southern neighbourhoods, such as North Africa.

Credibility: NATO must match its level of ambition with the appropriate level of resources, from deterrence and defence to partnership and practical cooperation activities. Importantly, NATO should not promise more than it can deliver, and must follow up by delivering, in a transparent and accountable manner, on what has already been agreed. This principle entails managing expectations from partners on NATO's purpose and resources, as part of clear communications and dialogue. It also entails ensuring the appropriate level of resources are provided to deliver on Allied commitments in the southern neighbourhoods. The Alliance should ensure the efficient use of existing resources and capabilities before seeking to develop new ones. Priorities for both partners and other interested interlocutors should set clear goals for engagement and deepening cooperation, including ways of measuring and assessing results. It is important to recognise that maintaining and building relationships requires investment, time and long-term engagement.

NATO's added value: NATO must not lose sight of its core purpose: to ensure the collective defence of Allies. It must equally be mindful that, as a politico-military Alliance, its key added value and expertise lies in the broader defence and security field, where it is regarded as the "gold standard". At the same time, this needs to be conveyed in a way that is appealing to partners. For many partners, the Alliance's emphasis on crisis prevention and management and cooperative security will resonate with their own security concerns and interests. The Alliance should hence stress its interest in strengthening partner countries through training and capacity-building. NATO should further emphasise the importance of non-traditional security (including resilience, understanding and adapting to the impact of climate change on security, cyber security, human security and the Women, Peace and Security agenda) and work efficiently with international and regional organisations to see how these issues can be addressed while adhering to its own added value. Explaining why NATO wants to engage with partners will help demystify anti-NATO propaganda and enhance interest in cooperation. Presenting its comprehensive approach to security will also help to differentiate its offer from that of NATO's potential adversaries and competitors.

Synergies: NATO must seek synergies and cooperation with other international organisations active in the region (the United Nations, African Union, Gulf Cooperation Council, League of Arab States) and seek a deeper cooperation, coordination and complementarity within the context of its existing partnership with the European Union. NATO should emphasise its interest in supporting and complementing activities of other institutions, in line with the principle of ‘added value’.

Inclusivity: when engaging in its southern neighbourhoods, NATO should seek to listen to and interact with a wide range of stakeholders in addition to its official governmental interlocutors. It should do so in a context-sensitive manner. Continuous outreach and dialogue with, among others, civil society, parliamentarians, academia, think tanks and independent media can enrich the Alliance’s understanding of local dynamics and contribute to building stronger and more sustainable relationships with partner countries.

Accessibility and flexibility: The southern neighbourhoods are not a monolith and levels of interest in cooperation and favourability towards NATO vary within the region. From the Alliance’s perspective, it is important to understand partners’ own interests and tailor its level of engagement and cooperation appropriately. This entails a tailored and flexible approach to partners, both states and international organisations, and other interested interlocutors. To that end, NATO must maintain its regional frameworks, e.g. by revitalising the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, while also ensuring flexible, tailored approaches that are appropriate for each country or sub-region, since different actors have different interest in cooperation with NATO. Beyond the immediate partners and neighbourhood, NATO can slowly build up its dialogue with African states including by observing relevant regional fora.

Streamlining: NATO’s approach must be simple and understandable from the perspective of existing or potential partners and interlocutors. This entails an external dimension (such as a clear and comprehensible interface for outside actors, easy access to partnership activities and plain communication of available cooperation mechanisms and instruments) and an internal component (streamlining various work strands within NATO’s structure, ensuring efficient internal communications and complementarity, making better and more effective use of existing tools and programmes, through regular assessment and adaptation when needed).

Regional Approach

NATO's southern neighbourhoods encompass a number of distinct regions and sub-regions such as North Africa, the Middle East, the Gulf and the Sahel, and the adjacent maritime regions. NATO should strengthen its representation and engagement in these regions, when needed and requested by partners, to improve NATO's bilateral cooperation. This section provides an overview of actionable recommendations, tailored to both existing partnership frameworks and relevant regions of strategic importance to NATO. The Alliance should regularly monitor and assess the overall progress and political coherence of its engagements and activities in its southern neighbourhoods.

Existing Partnerships

NATO's partnership frameworks – the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) – are useful to build NATO's approach to the southern neighbourhoods. Complex regional dynamics, conflict and tensions can freeze the convening of meetings in these formats. This should not limit NATO's ability to move forward by complementing the existing frameworks with flexible formats.

Moreover, because each partner is different, the introduction of Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPPs) reinforces the importance of individual partnership and bilateral relations between NATO and one given partner. This flexibility allows NATO to accommodate the different levels of ambition each regional partner has with respect to political dialogue and practical cooperation with NATO.

NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, which celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2024, is one of the few formats in which Mediterranean countries come together. Bilateral tensions between MD partners as well as differences in needs, capacity and level of ambition towards NATO have prevented the Alliance from fully leveraging this format.

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative was launched in 2004, in a challenging context. ICI countries indicate they are keen to deepen partnerships with NATO, upgrade political dialogue and engage in public diplomacy. Other interlocutors such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have participated in selected ICI activities. There might be opportunities to extend ICI membership or activities to other eligible and interested countries.

Recommendations:⁷

In the short term

1. NATO Leaders publicly recognise the interlinked importance of the southern neighbourhoods to NATO and endorse the adoption of a new narrative affirming that a closer relationship with southern neighbourhoods is mutually beneficial.
2. Encourage the Secretary General to visit southern partner countries periodically and enhance the frequency of high-level political dialogue.
3. Convene a special summit meeting of all NATO southern partners to discuss ideas and proposals for further deepening regional cooperation, when conditions allow it.
4. Propose a High-Level Regional Security and Stability Dialogue between relevant international and regional organisations.
5. Enhance existing efforts for partner contributions to the NATO decision-making process through political dialogue and consultations;
6. Involve southern neighbourhoods' partners in the conceptualisation and preparation of NATO partnership events and ensure adequate representation on panels.
7. Deepen thematic dialogues and consider establishing sub-regional working groups within the MD and ICI for practical cooperation, complementing the bilateral dialogues in the ITTPs.
8. On the ICI framework, reaffirm commitment to regional peace and security, reflecting and updating the 2004 political narrative and deepening dialogue with Gulf countries, through the ICI, through the GCC and bilaterally.
9. Provide the NATO-ICI Regional Centre with the appropriate human and financial resources, and provide clear political guidance for its enhanced role in deepening partnerships, sharing expertise and building capacity with all ICI partners and other GCC countries.
10. Engage more with parliaments, media, civil society and youth in the region and invite scholars and think-tankers from the regions to expert briefings at NATO Headquarters.

In the medium term

11. Systematically review which additional NATO activities and centres can be made available to interested MD and ICI partners.
12. Consider inviting interested countries to become partners within the MD and ICI format once there is agreement and conditions allow it.

⁷ Recommendations are organised into three temporal categories for implementation: short term (18 months); medium term (up to 5 years); long term (beyond 5 years).

13. Exploit the NATO-ICI Regional Centre to reach out to the Arabic media in GCC countries, including with local think-tanks and academic institutions.

In the long term

14. Coordinate with other frameworks that have strongly overlapping participation, such as the Union for the Mediterranean, to identify topics where NATO has added value and where there could be synergies.
15. Consider a NATO role in efforts to promote a Mediterranean framework of security and cooperation, including by deepening cooperation with the European Union as agreed by the two organisations.

NATO's Southern Neighbourhoods: Regions of Strategic Interest to NATO

North Africa

North Africa's stability is of strategic interest to NATO as it is both a direct neighbourhood for some Allies and borders on the unstable Sahel region. Governments and state institutions in the region struggle to deliver services, while militaries are key players, and in some cases, highly trusted institutions. Strategic competitors seek to expand their influence in North Africa. Disinformation campaigns have been on the rise in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, and Wagner's activities have contributed to destabilising the region. Moreover, anti-Western sentiment among populations has been growing in the context of the war in Gaza. Tensions among some states remain high, while regional cooperation is low.

Cooperation between regional actors and NATO Allies functions well through bilateral, informal and flexible formats. At the same time, North Africa could benefit from a NATO liaison office or similar representation, as proximity and long-term engagement matters.

Within North Africa, Libya deserves particular attention. Allied interests in resisting aggression in NATO's East, while at the same time addressing challenges in the South, intersect in Libya, where Russia's deployment of Wagner forces fuelled turmoil in the country and turned it into a platform for destabilising the Sahel and beyond. This trend not only undermines Allied security, but also hinders the sovereignty of the countries in the South. The Wagner presence in Libya was long overlooked and Russia is actively pursuing efforts to re-brand its Wagner presence (i.e. Africa Corps) in order to continue to project influence.

Recommendations:

In the short term

16. Intensify political engagement and build on the strong demand for practical cooperation, such as defence capacity building (DCB) and demining, and engage in targeted messaging for the different specific contexts.
17. Continue to support the political process in Libya and the efforts of the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Libya, since the principal path to reversing the instability trend is for Libya to unify its political institutions, form a unified military force, and regain sovereign control of its southern borders.
18. Highlight concrete ways in which NATO contributes to regional security, such as resilience, crisis prevention and disaster relief, as well as the protection of critical infrastructure.

In the medium term

19. Intensify political engagement and practical cooperation as well as targeted messaging for the different specific contexts.
20. Establish a permanent liaison office in North Africa, when requested, to allow for better situational awareness and building long-term trusted relations.
21. Reaffirm NATO's commitment to providing advice to Libya, upon its request, in the area of defence and security institution building, taking into account political and security conditions in the country.

In the long term

22. Seek to leverage the Mediterranean Dialogue as a de-escalation tool in times of tensions through enhanced frequency of exchanges on all levels.
23. Consider inviting Libya to the Mediterranean Dialogue once an elected government is in place.

Middle East

Stability in the Middle East is of strategic interest to NATO, and crises, conflicts and fragility in the region can have direct consequences for Allies' security.

The current war in Gaza has become the most acute crisis in the immediate southern neighbourhoods of NATO. The consequences of this war on Euro-Atlantic security cannot be ignored and need to be assessed. Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more important than ever, allowing Israel to ensure its security while guaranteeing Palestinians their right to their own independent state. NATO has a strategic interest in averting the further spread of conflict in the eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf and the Red Sea.

Future peace and security arrangements for Israel and Palestine are likely to require the provision of a variety of international security commitments. If approached to support potential security arrangements, NATO could consider offering expertise, sharing experience and, potentially, training and capacity-building to future multinational initiatives.

Iran's destabilising and contested role in the region is part of a complex of regional conflicts that reflect significant political struggles that should be addressed not only by security measures and deterrence, but also through wider international and local political efforts. While the GCC countries are close partners of the United States and most are partners of NATO, they also are seeking to develop better relations both with Iran and with Israel over time.

Tensions between Iran and most NATO countries have intensified, as Iran has become a key supplier of weapons to Russia in the context of its war of aggression against Ukraine. Iran has shown its ability to disrupt shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea. Iran-backed groups are now attacking Allied assets in the Middle East.

NATO sees stability in Iraq as a cornerstone of regional security and supports Iraqis' efforts to stabilise their country, fight terrorism and prevent the return of ISIS/Daesh. NATO Mission Iraq has positive elements that could inspire future approaches in the southern neighbourhoods – in particular, the model of mutually agreed security and defence capacity building.

Syria must remain among the priorities of NATO's policy for the South, since the developments in that country have a direct impact on the security of NATO, its Allies as well as partners.

Recommendations

In the short term

24. Reaffirm the previously stated commitment to a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace through a two-state solution and support the international peace efforts of Allies to implement the two-state solution.
25. Consider the Alliance's potential contribution to humanitarian and disaster relief actions led by the UN and others through NATO's logistic assets.
26. Continue to assess increased or new security threats linked to the war in Gaza, including a deteriorated security environment for NATO Mission Iraq and attacks in the Red Sea sub-region.
27. Reaffirm the importance of addressing the threats emanating from all terrorist groups and their affiliates in Syria and Iraq.

28. Support international efforts towards finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict, consistent with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, including measures for a voluntary, safe and dignified return of Syrians.

In the medium term

29. Harmonise and streamline NATO's existing instruments and promote an enhanced collaborative interaction between the multiple entities in NATO's ecosystem in order to enhance NATO's capacity to monitor, assess and address the threats and challenges to the security of the Allies stemming from instability in the Middle East.
30. Enhance awareness and training in non-proliferation normative and institutional frameworks for interested partners, through tailor-made courses, encouraging partners to use their voice to uphold an international non-proliferation regime.

In the long term

31. The existing regional frameworks – the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative – should be used as complementary tools for promoting enhanced regional dialogue and cooperation in security and defence.
32. Once conditions are in place, invite the Palestinian Authority to observe or participate in Mediterranean Dialogue activities, in accordance with existing practices.

Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa

Security in the Sahel has dramatically deteriorated over recent years, with severe consequences for populations in the region and for NATO Allies' and NATO partners' interests. This degradation is the result of a combination of multiple long-standing challenges that have intensified: terrorism and violent extremism, fed by communal and political violence, organised crime, irregular migration and human trafficking, all of them worsened by poor governance, demographic growth, and environmental stress under accelerated climate change. Russia has exploited and fuelled these negative trends.

Growing instability in the Sahel region already has negative spill-over effects on Euro-Atlantic security. Terrorist groups have been expanding their presence and influence in the Sahel, at times through cooperation with criminal organisations and other destabilising actors.

Furthermore, democracy has been receding, and many military coups have taken place in the Sahel since 2020. Russia has taken advantage of this trend, deepening diplomatic and military partnerships in the region, deploying private military companies and carrying out disinformation campaigns. Apart from a partnership with Mauritania, NATO is not well-known and understood in the region: this challenges its ability to deepen cooperation and successfully address shared security challenges.

From the Sahel, terrorist groups have expanded their presence and activities towards coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea. Terrorist groups are also making inroads in East and Central Africa. They still pledge to target Allies' and partners' security interests.

A number of states in Sub-Saharan Africa, including some that have experienced coups, have turned away from existing international organisations. This has affected NATO Allies and partner organisations such as the EU and the UN. In this context, Russia has increased its influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, while China has also been gaining influence through economic investment in strategic infrastructure, such as ports. NATO is not well-known and understood in the region and suffers from negative preconceptions.

The Horn of Africa is a region of growing strategic competition given its location at the crossroads of South-South trade. Regional conflicts in the Horn of Africa also provide an entry point for illegal arms transfers and illicit networks. NATO has previously carried out effective operations in this area, for instance by providing airlift support to African Union peacekeepers in Darfur and by undertaking a successful anti-piracy mission.

Although NATO is likely to focus on the regions of Africa that are closest to the Euro-Atlantic, it also has an interest in engaging more broadly with regional organisations, namely the African Union (*see section on Cooperation with International Organisations*), and with governments in the wider continent, especially those that play a positive role in regional peace and security. Building these relations will take time and long-term engagement, and NATO should clearly state its interest in identifying future opportunities for cooperation, rather than in establishing a military presence.

Recommendations:

In the short term

33. Coordinate closely with the potential interlocutors on the visibility and outreach of engagements with NATO.
34. Continue to monitor security risks emerging from the region and consider reviewing whether renewed maritime security efforts may be warranted.
35. Support a comprehensive mapping of existing aid and support packages provided by Allies, international and regional organisations, and partner countries to the Sahel region. This exercise should aim to identify blind spots and room for cooperation or opportunities to join efforts with existing initiatives or potential new ones to be created.
36. Consider to be present locally in high-level policy fora to listen and engage with actors from the region.

In the medium term

37. Explore new partnerships in the wider region around the Sahel.

38. Designate, when possible, Contact Point Embassies (CPEs) in non-partner countries.
39. Open its training, scholarships grants and media literacy efforts to third countries from the region – including journalists and social media influencers in their fight against disinformation.
40. Build from existing partnerships, like the one with Mauritania, and seek to open additional cooperation activities to third countries from Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the long term

41. NATO should be guided by local demand when it comes to long-term objectives for establishing partnerships and developing relations with new interlocutors. NATO should be patient and gradual in building its understanding and relationships.

Thematic Areas for Cooperation

NATO's key purpose is to ensure Allied collective defence, based on a 360-degree approach. To realise its key purpose, NATO carries out three core tasks: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security. NATO's southern neighbourhoods are important to all three core tasks.

When it comes to the 360-degree approach, NATO must ensure credible deterrence and defence from the threats coming from all directions. Russia's influence and destabilising role in the southern neighbourhoods poses significant risks to Allied security. Crises and conflicts in key strategic arenas, from the Red Sea to the Sahel, can also have second and third order effects on Allies' security. Moreover, ensuring freedom of navigation is essential for the interests of Allies, as well as for partners and potential interlocutors.

NATO also has a shared interest with its partners in the South to contribute to crisis prevention and management. Investing in crisis prevention, including by supporting partners and building their capacity to counter terrorism and address shared security challenges, should be a key priority for the Alliance. NATO has an interest in reaching a broader audience within the political and military structures of partner countries. NATO should also harness its expertise to ramp up support for disaster relief assistance and resilience to climate-related shocks.

Cooperative security through political dialogue and practical cooperation with partners benefits the security of both Allies and partners. Building a positive agenda for cooperation, based on addressing shared security needs and preventing conflict should be at the core of NATO's cooperative security agenda. Among the areas where NATO can help are arms control and non-proliferation, including assisting with efforts to tackle small arms and light weapons trafficking, and demining. Opportunities for mutual learning should be highlighted.

Thematic areas offer both opportunities for political dialogue and practical cooperation and are assessed as highly promising and valuable to advance NATO's three core tasks and meet partners' security needs. These include human security, Women Peace and Security and good governance; counter-terrorism; maritime security; resilience; climate change and security; as well as public diplomacy, strategic communications and countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. Looking to the future, the Alliance should invest in these areas as a way to scale, deepen and broaden existing cooperation as well as a potential avenue to reach out to new interlocutors.

Human Security, Women, Peace and Security, and Good Governance

In the 2022 Strategic Concept, Allies agree on the importance of streamlining three cross-cutting issues across its core tasks: human security; the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda; and good governance in security and defence sectors. These topics are highly relevant for security and defence engagements with all partners in the southern neighbourhoods. They can contribute to sustainable institution-building and help to strengthen capacities to prevent, manage and reduce conflict.

NATO's human security policy is based on five pillars: protection of civilians; children in armed conflict; conflict-related sexual violence; cultural property protection; and combatting trafficking in human beings. All pillars are founded on international humanitarian law and gender perspectives are applied across the pillars.

Recommendations:

In the short term

42. Seek a "lead by example" approach to WPS, by encouraging Allies to prioritise sending women military personnel to NATO activities with its southern partners. The same holds for diversity in a broader sense.
43. Encourage partners to promote the WPS agenda throughout their defence and security sectors.
44. Encourage partners and Allies to ensure women officers are included in training and in NATO Defense College courses. Consider establishing an alumni network specifically for women who have graduated from these courses.

In the medium term

44. Broaden and deepen NATO's work on human security, WPS and democratic good governance, building on programmes like 'Building Integrity' with interested partner countries and other interlocutors in the southern neighbourhoods.
45. Building on the Civil Society Advisory Panel on Women, Peace and Security model, establish a similar mechanism to engage with civil society from Allies and partners on human security and good governance.

In the long term

46. Develop a mechanism to assess lessons from previous NATO missions and operations to further understand the impact of conflict on local communities and particularly on vulnerable groups, with a view to ensuring strengthening civilian harm mitigation measures and the application of the 'do no harm' principle.

Counter-Terrorism

NATO identifies terrorism as "the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity". It stressed that countering terrorism is essential to collective defence, contributes to all core tasks and is integral to its 360-degree approach to deterrence and defence. NATO's efforts to counter terrorism include working to enhance Allies' capacity to tackle the terrorist threat and manage the consequences of terrorist attacks.

Working with partners is essential to NATO's approach to countering terrorism. NATO focuses on enhancing partners' capacity to counter terrorism and address shared security concerns.

This is achieved both by providing assistance to partners (in areas such as Counter-Improvised Explosive Devices, Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems, Battlefield Evidence, etc.), where NATO has developed counter-terrorism expertise, and by tailoring such assistance to partners' specific needs and requests. Therefore, contributing to fighting terrorism through training and capacity-building is and will remain a key priority for NATO's approach to its southern neighbourhoods.

NATO contributes to countering terrorist threats through advise-and-assist missions/capacity-building efforts aimed to enable and empower local partners in their own security endeavours. NATO Mission Iraq is one example of that, but Defence Capacity Building Packages in Jordan, Tunisia and Mauritania are other examples of such varied contribution.

Recommendations:

In the short term

47. Leverage the appointment of the Special Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism to give more visibility to NATO's role in counter-terrorism, particularly towards NATO's partner countries in southern neighbourhoods.
48. Develop a process for the systematic analysis of lessons learned at the political and strategic levels, taking into account partners' best practices and experience on counter-terrorism.
49. Continue to contribute to international efforts in fighting terrorism, including through the Global Coalition against Daesh.
50. While addressing the threat of terrorism, NATO should avoid language that can be misperceived as stigmatising by southern partners.

In the medium term

51. Boost Allied situational awareness of NATO's southern neighbourhoods, including by further developing NATO's intelligence capabilities.
52. Expand NATO's partnerships and explore opportunities for further cooperation with regional partners on countering terrorism. Attention should be given to building partners' capacity to address the terrorist threat and to areas where NATO can enhance civil-military capabilities.
53. Invest in NATO's role in understanding and responding to terrorist misuse of technology, including by stepping up work on countering drones and investing in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence.

In the long term

54. Enhance and streamline cooperation with international and regional institutions, such as the UN, African Union and GCC.

55. Strengthen coordination with the European Union on counter-terrorism. Both organisations should continue to hold regular staff-to-staff exchanges and cooperate to deliver concrete projects, creating synergies whenever possible.

Maritime Security

Maritime domains are spaces of economic opportunities, but also marked by security challenges and great power competition around the globe as well as across the Euro-Atlantic, Indo-Pacific, and Middle East and North Africa regions. The growing role and maritime presence of strategic competitors and adversaries in NATO's neighbourhood also serves to stress the links between NATO's eastern and southern flanks.

Numerous shared challenges that confront NATO Allies and partners in the southern neighbourhoods have maritime dimensions. This includes long-standing challenges such as irregular migration, terrorism, drugs smuggling, piracy and organised crime. Shared challenges also include new and recently exacerbated issues: be it the current situation in the Red Sea; external risks to Allied security in the eastern Mediterranean; geopolitical tensions with maritime dimensions; or the protection of undersea infrastructure. These challenges are often overlapping.

According to the 2022 Strategic Concept, maritime security is key to Allied peace and prosperity. To ensure it, Allies focus on enhancing situational awareness to deter and defend against all threats in the maritime domain, uphold freedom of navigation, secure maritime trade routes and protect the main sea lines of communications. NATO is also actively involved in protecting critical undersea infrastructure from hostile hybrid attacks. NATO and southern partners share an interest in addressing these maritime security challenges.

Recommendations:

In the short term

56. Participate in relevant global and regional fora, such as the G7++ Friend of the Gulf of Guinea, to engage with relevant actors, understand southern partners' perceptions of maritime security and maritime threats, and identify areas of potential cooperation as well as NATO's contribution.
57. Map existing maritime domain awareness efforts to identify NATO's added value in collecting, processing and disseminating maritime data and building situational awareness as assets to support the international community and partner countries.
58. Enhance its understanding of interlinkages between maritime security, security of critical infrastructure, including ports, and countering terrorism, smuggling and trafficking, including the impact of geopolitical dynamics on these issues. To this end, explore the possibility of enhancing cooperation with southern neighbourhoods' partners to protect

critical infrastructure of common interest (notably oil and gas pipelines and undersea cables).

In the medium term

59. Build on its legacy of successful counter-piracy with Operation Ocean Shield as a backdrop for identifying opportunities elsewhere, particularly where NATO is best placed to be the first responder, also in providing security for food corridors. This should be done in close consultation with regional partners and by de-conflicting with existing operations in the maritime domain.
60. Identify opportunities for training, exercises and capacity building with a specific maritime focus for partners. Interdiction training could, for example, be as useful for combatting Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing as for counter-piracy.
61. NATO should pay special attention to the maritime security priorities of coastal states in the regions where NATO wishes to deepen collaboration on maritime security. These priorities go beyond counter-piracy to include issues such as Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.

In the long term

62. Engage at appropriate level with the European Union on their maritime security instruments towards southern seascapes, to identify NATO's added value, in areas such as protecting blue economies.

Resilience

In the 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO states that national and collective resilience is essential and underpins each of NATO's core tasks. NATO has several instruments in its toolkit to bolster resilience, including the capacity to undertake regular assessments of NATO's overall collective resilience based on baseline requirements,⁸ as well as the ability to inform and advise on national resilience planning and deploy subject-matter experts through Resilience Advisory Support Teams. Many of these tools can also be leveraged to support partners in strengthening their own capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions.

Resilience challenges in the southern neighbourhoods are broad, ranging from those linked to climate change and extreme weather events, to food insecurity, vulnerable critical infrastructure, and impact of conflict on civilians, among others. It is in NATO's interest to work with partners and new interlocutors in NATO's southern neighbourhoods in managing natural and human-made disasters and shocks ranging from floods, lack of water supply and interruption in food supply chains to mass displacements.

⁸ The seven baseline requirements for resilience are: assured continuity of government and critical government services; resilient energy supplies; ability to deal effectively with uncontrolled movement of people; resilient food and water resources; ability to deal with mass casualties and disruptive health crises; resilient civil communications systems; and resilient civil transportation systems.

Recommendations:

In the short term

63. Involve partners from the southern neighbourhoods in the Alliance's consultations and dialogue on building resilience, including by inviting them to relevant NATO Committees as well as to attend NATO events such as the annual NATO Resilience Symposium.
64. Build on and invest in the visibility of Resilience Advisory Support Team missions to provide advice on improving national resilience to interested partners in the southern neighbourhoods.
65. Consider holding resilience-focused thematic dialogues with partners in the southern neighbourhoods.
66. Seek to incorporate resilience goals as requested by partners and by building on the seven baseline requirements, in Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPP) with southern neighbours and in Defence Capacity Building Packages. Work in this area should also include evaluations of progress as part of the periodic assessment.
67. Make more visible to partners the work of NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, which works with Allies and partners to respond to natural and human-caused disasters.

In the medium term

68. Enhance the role of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) in supporting partners in the southern neighbourhoods, ensuring both adequate resources and robust coordination with relevant NATO and Allied entities, such as the NATO Support and Procurement Agency's Southern Operational Centre in Taranto, Italy, as well with external actors, including relevant international organisations.
69. Enhance opportunities for partners to take part in resilience-related exercises (CORE and EADRCC) and training in order to enhance local capacity, for instance in emergency management.

In the long term

70. Consider including, on a case-by-case basis, interested interlocutors in NATO's resilience-building activities, such as training and capacity building as well as exchanges of best practices.

Climate Change and Security

The Strategic Concept defines climate change as a “defining challenge of our time”. It can exacerbate conflict, fragility and geopolitical competition, and affects the way in which armed forces operate. NATO has expressed its ambition to become the “leading international organisation when it comes to understanding and adapting to the impact of climate change

on security". The Alliance has committed to integrating climate change considerations across NATO's core tasks and has developed an agenda focused on enhancing awareness, adaptation, mitigation and outreach (through dialogue and cooperation with partners) as key priorities to tackle the impact of climate change on security.

Partners in NATO's southern neighbourhoods have a clear interest in this topic, as it directly affects their security. The nexus between climate change and security threats is increasingly evident around the globe, and particularly in the southern neighbourhoods. Effects of climate change have exacerbated conflicts from the Middle East to the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and beyond, and are an additional trigger for mass displacement of people, with a direct impact on the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO's southern partners are among the most exposed to climate change worldwide, suffering from water shortages and related effects on food production and social stability.

NATO has a unique expertise when it comes to assessing and adapting to the impact of climate change on security and on the defence and security sectors writ large. NATO's 2023 Climate and Security Impact Assessment Report points out how climate change affects operational capabilities, military equipment, infrastructure, supply chains and logistics in NATO and it points to specific climate-related security challenges in the Alliance's southern neighbourhoods. Energy transitions are a further climate change-related challenge for militaries, including questions of coherence in transitions and interoperability. NATO possesses a comparative advantage on the climate change-security nexus compared to strategic competitors, which can be very useful to partners.

On the other hand, some partners are becoming leaders in the field of adaptation to climate change. NATO can thus also draw on partners' experience and expertise on working in an operational environment that is particularly exposed to climate change. Working with partners on climate-related security issues is a two-way street.

Recommendations:

In the short term

71. Establish the thematic group on climate change and security agreed in the "Action Plan to Increase Dialogue" within the MD and ICI countries.
72. Enhance dialogue and cooperation with partners and new interlocutors in the southern neighbourhoods on the impact of climate change on security and defence sectors, notably on maritime security, making full use of relevant NATO standards and technical expertise.

In the medium term

73. Explore with relevant partner countries the possibility of setting up a centre in North Africa for climate and security. Building on existing NATO tools and initiatives⁹ as well as on the experiences and contributions from partner countries, the centre should:
- i. Develop tools for Allies and partners to mitigate security implications of climate change, namely on security and defence sectors;
 - ii. Promote coherence and interoperability in energy transitions of Allied and partner armed forces;
 - iii. Develop early-warning mechanisms for climate risks, in cooperation with think-tanks and civil societies in partner states;
 - iv. Carry out outreach activities to new interlocutors in Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa.
74. Encourage cooperation between partners from different regions that are particularly affected by climate risks such as the Indo-Pacific and southern partners, and/or that are leading adaptation efforts.

In the long term

75. Open thematic activities to potential partners and new interlocutors, particularly from Sahel countries.

Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications

Public perceptions of the Alliance in the southern neighbourhoods are somewhat negative. This stems from a number of reasons, including: poor knowledge-based information about what NATO is and what it does; conflating the Alliance with national foreign and security policies of individual Allies; the aftermath of the 2011 Libya campaign; the termination of NATO's operation in Afghanistan; long-standing perceptions of "double standards", made more acute in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and amplified over the war in Gaza; as well as perceptions of instrumentality, expansionism and lack of genuine attention to partners' concerns. Misperceptions also play a role, fuelled by disinformation and propaganda (*as discussed in the section on counter-FIMI*).

Unfavourable attitudes and lack of trust can become obstacles to strengthening cooperation in certain areas and could make some governments less prone to cooperating with NATO. The Alliance tends to be viewed more positively by defence and security sectors in partner countries with a history of close cooperation with the Alliance or Allied militaries.

⁹ Including the Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence, the Science for Peace and Security Programme, the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre.

In this context, NATO needs to significantly improve its strategic communications vis-à-vis the southern neighbourhoods to address these issues and convey a more positive image of the Alliance. The fundamental basis upon which to tackle existing mistrust is to build closer and trusting relations with partners, and to showcase what NATO has to offer to partners in terms of concrete actions.

Recommendations:

In the short term

76. NATO's public diplomacy efforts should give the same priority to the southern neighbourhoods as to the eastern neighbourhood, investing in being more visible and proactive.
77. Update NATO's communication strategy for the southern neighbourhoods. The strategy should focus on explaining NATO, its diverse and multilateral nature, mandate and functions as well as the concrete benefits of cooperation, building on practical examples of what NATO has done – from providing logistics and airlift support to peacekeeping missions, to deploying field hospitals to support the COVID-19 response, as well as delivering training and building capacity in areas such as countering IEDs and enhancing cyber defence.
78. Boost the Alliance's understanding of the information space in the southern neighbourhoods, including by enhancing relevant cultural and linguistic skills at NATO, conducting regular polling and assessments of partners' perceptions of NATO, ensuring frequent interactions with experts on and from these regions, and using NATO's existing regional presence as well as Contact Point Embassies to gather regular feedback from partners.
79. Strengthen NATO's voice in the region, including by better utilising the Contact Point Embassies, the NATO-ICI Regional Centre, Hub for the South and other NATO activities in the southern neighbourhoods, as well as by increasing engagement with Arabic-language broadcast media and by working more through local actors and partners.
80. Improve cooperation with partners on public diplomacy by involving them more in the conceptualisation of relevant NATO public engagements and by including information and communication elements in all Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPP) pending partners' agreements.

In the medium term

81. Consider inviting partners from the southern neighbourhoods regularly to NATO summits and other high-level events.
82. Promote a new NATO-led recurrent event on the southern neighbourhoods, inviting Allies, partners, international and regional organisations.

83. Scale context-sensitive youth engagement, drawing on the “do no harm” approach. Leverage the annual NATO Youth Summit and NATO Partnerships 360 Symposium to reach out to youth audiences in the southern neighbourhoods.
84. Set up a network of southern neighbourhoods’ partners experts to contribute to increased Allied understanding and ability to communicate and engage effectively.

Responding to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)

NATO faces a highly contested information environment in the South, where there is a growing ‘battle of narratives’. Strategic competitors are able to make inroads into public opinion, while engaging in destabilising activities. They are also able to manipulate, distort or fabricate information to discredit NATO and NATO Allies. In the immediate future, therefore, public views against NATO could worsen, hindering the Alliance’s ability to fulfil its core tasks vis-à-vis the southern neighbourhoods. A successful Counter-FIMI strategy should be based on an increased and sustained tempo of well-targeted proactive strategic communications based on the recommendations in the previous section.

Recommendations:

In the short term

85. Adopt a proactive strategy by recognising the importance of building resilience to disinformation, for instance through media literacy, rather than try to rebut every item of fake news. As local populations inform themselves through local or regional means, NATO should work to empower local news and informational actors.

In the medium term

86. Consider setting up a “Facts for Peace” initiative along the lines of NATO’s Science for Peace and Security Programme, as a common-funded, permanent standing feature providing education, training, fellowships and various forms of support to a selected line of media outlets, journalists and social media influencers in partner countries that are actively fighting disinformation.
87. Consider setting up a Counter-FIMI Centre of Excellence (or nest it within the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats) and encourage it to open up its activities to partners.

In the long term

88. Strengthen NATO’s credibility and trust through concrete activities, presence and regular interaction with partners, while being mindful of many partners’ uneasiness with being engaged through the framework of great power competition, rather than as valuable actors in their own right.

Cooperation with International and Regional Organisations

Allies have a shared interest in contributing together to stability and to conflict and crisis prevention through NATO. However, NATO is not always the most appropriate forum to address the core issues underpinning instability. This is why it is important for the Alliance to cooperate with other international and regional organisations – such as the UN, the EU, the OSCE, the GCC, the Arab League and the AU – to address the broader conditions fuelling crises and pervasive instability and contribute to stabilisation and reconstruction. An example could be through the proposed High-Level Regional Security and Stability Dialogue (see *Recommendation 4*).

In this context, NATO supports the United Nations in crisis prevention and management, offering assistance when requested and feasible. NATO is already supporting the United Nations through multi-year training, capacity building and logistics support. These efforts contribute to strengthening the UN's capacity to manage and sustain peacekeeping operations. In its engagement with southern partners, NATO can build on existing cooperation and further deepen it on issues such as climate change and security, maritime security, counter-terrorism, Women, Peace and Security, and human security.

The African Union is responding to various crises by promoting African solutions. Comparatively to UN missions, there is a growing number of African-led peacekeeping and security missions, as well as African-led mediation efforts, across the African continent. These developments reflect the ambition to increasingly rely on local leadership and solutions. A key framework for these efforts is the AU's 'Silencing the Guns' initiative to resolve conflicts, genocide and gender-based violence across the continent as part of its Agenda 2063. This is an enormous task. NATO has previously supported the AU peacekeeping mission in Darfur with strategic airlift. It also cooperates with the African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism. Building on these examples, there could be opportunities to further cooperate with the AU upon request.

Leaders in the Middle East also express an ambition to have more regional mechanisms for resolving conflicts and providing security. This will be a key dynamic to watch.

Recommendations

In the short term

89. Engage in a conversation with the UN regarding its efforts around human security and Youth, Peace and Security, possibly in the context of the 2024 Summit of the Future.
90. Enhance cooperation with the UN in areas such as logistics support to humanitarian missions and climate change and security.
91. Establish a political representation to the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, complementing the existing military liaison office, to facilitate dialogue and create new mechanisms for cooperation.

92. Promote regular dialogue between the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for WPS and the AU's Special Envoy for WPS.
93. Ensure Mediterranean Partners to Cooperation and Security are part of the agenda for discussion when staff talks are held with the OSCE.

In the medium term

94. Enhance cooperation with the UN on Youth, Peace and Security, including by promoting a regular side event at NATO summits on the topic with representation of partners and non-partner representatives.
95. Explore new areas for NATO-AU cooperation, using as a potential model the range of support offered to UN missions, such as logistics assistance to peacekeeping and disaster-relief operations, airlift support, delivery of military hospitals, as well as training and capacity-building in areas such as countering IEDs and medical care.
96. Promote climate change and security, and Women, Peace and Security as shared priorities and key domains of active cooperation with all interlocutors.
97. Assess, in consultation with the AU, if NATO could potentially contribute to the progress of the AU's "Silencing the Guns" initiative.

In the long term

98. Enhance NATO's support to international and regional organisations through advice to those engaged in stabilisation and peacekeeping, promoting the visibility of such activities, when possible, but doing so discretely when the context requires it.

NATO – European Union

The European Union is a unique and essential partner for NATO, and Allies and EU members share the same values. NATO and the EU play complementary, coherent and mutually reinforcing roles in supporting international peace and security, including in the southern neighbourhoods.

Any obstacles to cooperation need to be overcome given the strategic common interests that the organisations have. Further coordination can be developed making the most of each organisation's distinct advantages to the benefit of NATO Allies and EU members.

The EU has a clear and comprehensive strategy towards its southern neighbourhoods and an array of relevant tools. Its goal of helping to ensure the southern neighbourhoods as a region of peace, security and cooperation is fully compatible and consistent with NATO's goal of contributing to peace, security and stability as a way of strengthening Allied and global security.

Recommendations:*In the short term*

99. Establish regular consultations between the NATO Secretary General and the leadership of the European Union on the southern neighbourhoods.
100. Enhance and broaden staff level exchanges between NATO and the EU to assess developments in the southern neighbourhoods, keep each other informed of activities.

In the medium term

101. Invest in closer cooperation and promoting synergies between NATO and EU public diplomacy in the southern neighbourhoods.
102. Intensify exchanges between the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and European Parliament on the southern neighbourhoods.

In the long term

103. Develop NATO-EU cooperation, as agreed by the two organisations, by making the most of each organisation's advantages for the benefit of the efficiency of their policies and activities in the region.

NATO's Internal Structures

NATO and NATO Allies already carry out a wide array of engagements towards the southern neighbourhoods. However, these activities are often dispersed across various NATO entities, as well as across Allied bilateral and mini-lateral efforts. Dispersion reduces coordination and increases the risk of duplication. It also makes it difficult for partners and interested interlocutors to engage with the Alliance. This is further complicated by the absence of a clear focal point that partners and interested interlocutors can reach out to. Addressing these issues would enhance NATO's attractiveness to partners in the southern neighbourhoods.

If NATO wants more active and beneficial engagement with its southern neighbourhoods, this needs to be reflected in its internal structure. This encompasses a broad range of measures, ranging from consensus-building within the Alliance, over ensuring adequate structures, coordination and funding mechanisms, to investing in messaging.

NATO needs robust situational awareness of the complex set of crises that Allies and partners in the southern neighbourhoods face. This requires more dialogue and cooperation with partners, in line with NATO's partner countries' clearly stated desire, as well as strong coordination with all relevant stakeholders.

Recommendations:

104. Appoint a Special Envoy for the Southern Neighbourhoods, duly supported by a structure that can collect and synthesise the interactions with the broader network of counterparts in the southern neighbourhoods. This senior officer should oversee and streamline NATO's various work strands and activities towards the southern neighbourhoods, ensuring consistency and progress, and avoiding duplication and dispersion of efforts. This person should also be a permanent point of contact for partners and interested interlocutors willing to approach NATO, in a region where building trust and confidence through personal relations is key.
105. Improve awareness and understanding by:
 - i. Exploring the possibility of establishing a standing NATO mission dedicated to training and capacity-building for partners, to be deployed upon invitation of the latter.
 - ii. Enhancing NATO's proximity to partners on the ground. This could come in the form of additional NATO liaison offices or training centres.
 - iii. Creating a review process to periodically assess NATO's relationship with the southern neighbourhoods, from an internal and external point of view. This process could include tasking external experts to evaluate selected partnerships through dialogue with a range of stakeholders in partner countries.

106. Enhance coordination by:

- i. Developing an internal coordination mechanism – as part of the periodic review – that includes civil and military structures to strengthen internal consultation and communications and regularly assess the advancement of objectives and outcomes achieved in partnerships with the southern neighbourhoods. A report should be regularly presented to the North Atlantic Council to evaluate progress and provide any necessary adjustments.
- ii. Strengthening information exchanges between Allies on existing bilateral cooperation with partners in the regions to avoid duplication, ensuring complementarity, providing support to ongoing efforts and promoting a cohesive approach to the region.
- iii. Assessing the role of Contact Point Embassies (CPE) to improve their visibility and efficiency, including in consultation with the CPE Allies. Selection of CPEs should be strategic to maximise an effective relationship with the host country.
- iv. Leveraging the wide range of Centres of Excellence, particularly in engaging new interlocutors.

107. Appropriately resource its efforts by:

- i. Swiftly and fully implementing the decision to fund Defence Capacity Building Packages through common funding and reduce the need for extra-budgetary contributions, including Trust Funds. Ensure that NATO has the necessary resources to deliver on cooperation with and support to partners through common funding in order to increase the sustainability of programmes.

The Hub for the South

The NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub (NSD-S HUB) was established to increase NATO's understanding of the regional dynamics of North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel, Sub-Saharan Africa and adjacent areas. The Hub's activities consist of an "understanding" pillar and an "engagement" pillar. To fulfil its mandate, the Hub interacts with think tanks, academia and civil society organisations both in partner countries as well as with additional actors. The Hub has been able to engage with a wide range of interlocutors in the southern neighbourhoods, creating a valuable and diverse network.

However, the Hub's activities have remained disconnected from the rest of the NATO ecosystem and, therefore, its potential has not been fully achieved. This is due to a number of factors, including its limited mandate, its placement within the NATO structure and its lack of linkages with NATO Headquarters. It is therefore paramount for NATO to better integrate the Hub within the NATO structure and increase its link with the political leadership, to best leverage the network that the Hub has developed with partners and interested interlocutors in the southern neighbourhoods through its "engagement" pillar.

Recommendations:

108. Review the Hub's mandate and function to allow relying on the Hub to contribute to training and capacity-building activities for partners, including through Mobile Training Teams and secondment to NATO offices and training centres in the southern neighbourhoods.
109. Integrate the work of the Hub within the Alliance's political outreach efforts towards the southern neighbourhoods.
110. Restructure the Hub for the South into a joint civil-military entity, with a dual reporting line to both military authorities and civilian ones, such as the proposed Special Envoy, and establish a liaison for the Hub at NATO Headquarters to improve coordination and synergies.
111. Develop systems for coordination, communication and collaboration between the NATO Defense College and Hub for the South, maximising synergies and ensuring complementarity.
112. Strengthen the role of the Hub in supporting public diplomacy and strategic communications, under the guidance of the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, to ensure coherence across the Alliance.
113. Encourage Allies to prioritise sending profiles with relevant linguistic and regional expertise to the Hub, to strengthen the Hub's outreach function to new interlocutors.
114. Rotate Hub personnel to/from NATO Headquarters to enhance their understanding of NATO's structure and activities.