Through its long history, NATO’s strategic concept has been officially changed five times, always trying to keep up with consecutive changes in the international environment. But, except from the official changes of NATO’s strategy, there have also been changes in its regional strategy, which reflects its overall one. Right after USSR’s collapse, USA’s emergence as the only superpower and the rise of global terrorism, the alliance has tried to change its traditional “unilateral” way of acting. Since 1991, NATO has tried to establish “cooperative security arrangements in its neighbourhood”. As Karl-Heinz Kamp puts it, “in the aftermath of the Cold War, the partnership concept served NATO primarily as a political tool for maintaining order”.

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More specifically, NATO has launched the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the NATO-Russia Council, the NATO-Ukraine Commission, the South Eastern European Initiative, as well as the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).³

Changes made by the “Cooperation Initiatives”

The first remarkable change effected by these initiatives is that they opened NATO’s horizon into other areas, i.e. the Mediterranean, the Middle East or the ex-Warsaw Pact countries. The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) was launched in 1994 by the North-Atlantic Council (NAC) involving seven non-NATO countries of the Mediterranean region; Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel and Jordan. This MD was the first step to what has later become the ICI. But, even though there had been an institutional framework with “measures of practical cooperation between NATO and MD countries”, “seminars”, “workshops” and “political consultations”,⁵ the MD did not evolve into an institution capable of achieving true cooperation. That was obvious during the alliance’s reaction towards the crisis of 9/11. NATO ended up operating alone in Afghanistan, without any help from any non-NATO Middle Eastern country, with the exception of Jordan.

This proved that the alliance had not reached a viable institutional framework in the region and, as a result, the MD countries chose not to align with the USA against a Muslim country, even if this country was a pariah state. First, NATO did not manage to inspire enough trust and security to the MD countries. It has not offered these countries the proper motivation to participate actively in NATO’s moves, goals and decisions. Given the high levels of anti-Americanism in the region, had these countries actively helped NATO, they would have provoked their neighbours’ mistrust and, maybe, hostility, without gaining any special benefit. Secondly, attacking an Islamic country would be simply too much for the Middle Eastern countries, even though their regimes were of a secular nature. Furthermore, the western MD countries were not capable (for economic and geopolitical reasons) providing help to NATO, as they are neither offering well-located military bases, nor can they contribute by providing military units.

The alliance has realised its shortcomings and dedicated the Istanbul Summit (in 2004) to a new initiative for the same purpose and region, called the ICI. Even though the region has not changed, the ICI was built on three new basic pillars. Firstly, dealing with the new threats (primarily terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and failed states) at their source, secondly, developing new capabilities and, thirdly, creating strong cooperation among nations and institutions.⁶ It was according to the third pillar that the alliance has decided to engage a much larger group of countries in the ICI. After all, the Initiative “is open to all interested countries of the broader Middle East region who subscribe to its aims and content, including the fight against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”.⁷

More specifically, six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were initially invited to cooperate, showing that NATO’s main interest was in that specific area. The ICI contained also more details concerning the areas in which the countries can develop bilateral activities.⁸ To date, four of the six GCC countries – Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – have accepted the invitation and joined the initiative, while Saudi Arabia and Oman have shown a great interest in it, without having yet decided to join it, even though Saudi Arabia is a traditional ally of the USA. This Saudi reluctance has of course to do with the peculiar nature of the regime, but it might also reveal certain mistrust
in formal regional alliances frameworks that had prevented the MD from working efficiently.⁹

Financial burden sharing of the ICI might be also a weak point for ICI. With the European and American economies in dire straits, the Gulf partners could be invited to participate in the Initiative’s cost in a more generous manner, an extra reason for discomfort in the ICI. But the concepts of success and failure are always relative, and they depend on the goal. The ICI’s goal refers to the first basic pillar mentioned before, that is to fight terrorism and to prevent state failing and WMD proliferation. As most of the ICI partners are not running an immediate risk of state-failing, they will be asked to help in confronting the other two. However, the boldest security intervention in the name of combating terrorism and preventing state failure was not one in the framework of ICI. Saudi Arabia’s intervention, with the approval of the GCC, in Bahrain during the recent riots showed the limits of such regional NATO initiatives.

Nonetheless, NATO has successfully cooperated with Jordan, Qatar and the UAE in the alliance’s intervention in the Libyan civil war. Though many analysts would doubt NATO’s ability to secure the country’s future stability without operating in the way it did in Afghanistan, the fact that these three countries are cooperating under ICI’s institutional framework shows that the ICI prospects seems at least rosier that those of the MD.

Geopolitical implications

Through the ICI the Alliance has practically been morphing its future role. Interference should be expected in failed states or states harbouring terrorism. The definition of these types of states will most probably belong to NATO itself. Furthermore, the alliance should be expected to try and increase its power, through all means possible, developing new weapons can be considered as most probable. After all, NATO can take on military operations no other organisations could tackle, and that is an advantage it wants to preserve. The alliance needs, on the other hand, regional alliances so as to project its influence.

NATO is changing and is gradually transforming into something totally different;⁰⁰ from being an alliance built on the Cold War against the Warsaw Pact, it has become an institution with interests and goals extending from North America and Europe to Russia and the Greater Middle East.

The changes brought by these initiatives can be also considered as part of USA strategy, trying to maintain their place in the international scene as China and Russia¹¹ are expanding their relatively restricted¹² post Cold War spheres of influence and while other regional powers, such as India, Pakistan, Turkey, Brazil, and Iran, are increasing their global and regional influence. Although Washington is undoubtedly the most powerful actor in the international scene, it needs to secure its global hegemony.¹³ NATO seems to be the most appropriate mechanism to achieve this strategic goal.

At the same time ICI could, under certain provisions, offer its partners some sort of comfort facing nuclear Iran, the ascent of an unpredictable Egyptian regime, and the Turkish search for supremacy in the region. NATO’s changes should be examined in the light of a Euro-Atlantic effort to preserve the existing global balance of power and to reduce their dependence on unfaithful regional allies, Turkey in particular. In any case, NATO’s evolution should not be analysed independently of the changes in the international scene. NATO seems to evolve into a new type of international actor, categorised neither as a security alliance, nor as a regional partnership.
NOTES


4. For more information on each one of these initiatives, see http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-E5343DE2-B1A18293/natolive/68147.htm (Accessed on 21/07/2011)


8. Ibid


12. Their spheres of influence can be characterised as “restricted” only in relation to USA’s sphere.