# Seminar Report

**Research Division - NATO Defense College, Rome - December 2009**

## Seminar report

## "NATO and Gulf Security"

2nd-3rd December 2009

Nato Defense College, Rome

On 2nd-3rd December 2009 the NATO Defense College held an international research seminar entitled "NATO and Gulf security", within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). This high-level event, run under the Chatham House Rule, brought together 55 experts, researchers, officers and diplomats. Participants came not only from member states of the NATO, MD and ICI, but also from the Gulf region. Iran and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states were thus represented. The seminar made it possible to take an in-depth look at the security challenges and strategic issues for all countries within the Gulf region.

The most important points examined during the lectures and informal discussions can be summed up as folllows:

### ● The main actors in the region

**The United States** will remain an indispensable major actor for Gulf security. No other State has the will or the means to replace the USA in their role as the main provider of regional security. The free movement of shipping in the Straits of Hormuz remains all the more vital an issue for the USA in that oil consumption can only increase over the next 20 years. The Gulf thus loses none of its geostrategic importance.

The two main handicaps the United States must address in the region are their generally negative image and their impatience which leads them to make mistakes.

The Gulf states are divided regarding the stance to be taken on the American military presence in the Gulf, and on a possible offer to bring the region under the American nuclear umbrella. However, all of them are in agreement that the Gulf's security architecture will depend on the outcome of the dialogue between the USA and Iran, whatever it may be.

**NATO** is little known in the region and suffers from this lack of image. Just five years after its inception, the achievements of the ICI are nonetheless judged on the whole in a positive light, though subject to limitations which will impede any further progress. The ICI, perceived as a potential weakening factor within the GCC, is thus today at a crossroads. It still has a number of obstacles in its path:

- the absence of Saudi Arabia and Oman among ICI member states;
- lack of a shared strategic vision;
- persistent rivalries within the GCC;
- relative diffidence of the ruling families vis-à-vis the military establishment;
- continuation of the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts;
- the emphasis on bilateral relations.

With the exception of the British and French, who both maintain a military presence within the region, **the Europeans** and the EU are seen as suppliers of "soft & smart security".

**The GCC** remains a weak actor suffering from a serious lack of credibility. It cannot be considered a real Alliance and has to date proved totally incapable of establishing a credible collective security framework.

With Iraq currently ruled out, **Iran and Saudi Arabia** are for the moment the only two pivotal forces within the region.

**Turkey's** penetration within the region is clear and is a source of irritation to some GCC members.

## ● The main challenges facing the States of the Gulf region

In terms of security:

- Iran, by reason not only of its nuclear programme and ballistic missile capability but also of its ability to use various "terrorist" movements to its advantage.

- Yemen, which runs the risk of becoming a failed State from which terrorist groups are threatening to strike targets in Saudi Arabia.
- The terrorist threat, which is well under control for the moment, thanks to close cooperation among GCC States in the fight against terrorism.

In political terms:

- Strenghteming the GCC to ensure full development of its regional coherence.
- Stabilisation of Iraq and its transition to a centralised, nationalist, secular State.
- Settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, still the main breeding ground for terrorism in the Middle East as a whole. In this regard, it is important that the West do all in its power to reassure Israel so that it feels sufficiently secure to make the concessions which the Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese consider essential.

In socio-economic terms:

- The need to preserve each country's identity.
- The need to deal with the demographic factor, in order to restore the balance in the proportion of nationals within the populations of GCC member States.
- The need for political reforms.
- The readiness to limit the expansion of Shiism within the region.

Curiously, none of the speakers examined the environmental factor or the risks associated with global warming (particularly in terms of access to drinking water), or the need to diversify the economic structure of GCC States. The financial crisis in Dubai is seen as a transient phenomenon, the outcome of which will be a balancing out of forces to the advantage of Abu Dhabi.

## ● The stabilisation of Iraq

Prime Minister Maliki does not believe that a federal Iraq is the solution and is ready to use force to establish a strong centralised State. His government has shown its clear intention to distance itself increasingly from Iranian influence.

Turkey has become an important actor whose presence must be taken into account in Iraq.

Contrary to much received wisdom, the "class struggle" is a far more important dividing factor in Iraqi society than ethnic or religious factors.

The future of Iraq will ultimately depend on the Iraqis' answers to three fundamental questions:

- What should be the role of the army and the officer corps?
- How should the Constitution and the country's central institutions evolve?
- What role should be offered to the Kurdish minority?

## ● Iran

The Gulf States are divided on the attitude they should adopt towards Iran, particularly with the prospect of Iran as a nuclear power.

There is widespread agreement on the fact that Afghanistan would offer an ideal setting for positive re-engagement of Iran in a "win-win" scenario.

Key principles of Iranian domestic policy:

- Defence of a regime which always sees itself as threatened from outside.
- Appropriate balance between the regime's "republican" and "Islamic" dimensions, the expression of this being division of power between the Supreme Leader, the President of the Republic, the Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council and the Chairman/Speaker of the Parliament.
- Refusal to accept any outside interference.

The four key words of Iranian foreign policy:

- Security
- Dignity
- Prestige (through mastery of nuclear technology)
- Flexibility

The three fundamental objectives of Iranian foreign policy:

- Acceptance of the Iranian nuclear programme, on which there is total consensus among Iranian politicians and which is seen as a very powerful factor in national cohesion.
- Guarantees of non-aggression towards Iran.
- Recognition of a regional role for Iran, particularly in the energy sector.

Iranian foreign policy has apparently always pivoted around three mainstays:

- The Gulf, still the priority focus of interest for Iran.
- The Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the territories governed by the Palestinian Authority), seen as a source of leverage to achieve Iranian objectives in the Gulf.
- The "Look to the East Policy" (Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Latin America), which is there merely to offset attempts to isolate the regime.

  In this respect, it is interesting to note that the Iranians are always wary of the Russians (with relations between the two countries going through continuous ups and downs). Agreement with the Americans would most certainly entail a clear slackening of relations between Tehran and Moscow.

  The Iranians see their relations with the Chinese as essentially based on shared, clearly understood economic interests, particularly in the energy sector. There is a long-standing tradition of solid, profitable economic ties with China. Chinese energy investments are considered crucial in the long term and this relationship based on shared interests must be preserved at all costs.

  The Iranians take exception to the Indians, whom they accuse of pursuing contradictory agendas. On the other hand, relations with Pakistan are cordial, altough they are suspicious about the Pakistanis' ambiguous position in their dealings with Afghanistan.

  Finally, relations between the Iranian regime and President Chavez of Venezuela have a solely economic rationale (imported petrol), as a precaution against a possible stiffening of sanctions against Iran.

The Iranian President Ahmadinejad would be very favourable to major bargaining with the United States, but not necessarily with the rest of the international community. An interim agreement on nuclear power safeguarding the interests and dignity of Iran (the honourable way out) would be a decisive step allowing him to gain support for his pragmatic political line from Parliamentary Speaker Larijani, and then from Supreme Leader Khameiny. Ahmadinejad is seeking above all to re-establish "strategic parity" so that he can negotiate with Barack Obama on an equal footing. Relations with the USA are thus at an exaggeratedly high premium for the Iranian regime, which sees this as the best route to achieving Iran's foreign policy objectives.

The Iranian regime is realistic and does not oppose the American military presence in the Gulf, but it wants to shift Iranian-US relations towards a "win-win" situation. **Iran would be**

**favourable to a regional security architecture based on four main actors: Iran, Iraq, the United States and Saudi Arabia**.

Iran is developing an ambitious long-term energy strategy, aiming to free itself of dependence on oil terminals within Gulf waters (seen as too enclosed and too vulnerable in the event of a crisis) by diversifying its oil and gas exports in three different directions:

- Towards Europe, via Turkey (hence the need for Tehran and Ankara to maintain good reciprocal relations).
- Towards India, Asia and Japan, thanks to the construction of a new oil terminal giving direct access to the Indian Ocean (with the contribution of Indian capital).
- Towards China, Afghanistan and/or Pakistan, thanks to the construction of a new oil pipeline (with the contribution of Chinese capital).

## ● The future of the ICI

To be credible, NATO has to clarify its strategy towards the ICI and think about what it is prepared to offer its members in terms of actual security. In other words, the States within the region have to understand what NATO would do in the event of their being attacked.

Afghanistan is a testing ground for the credibility of NATO's commitment within the region. By the same token, NATO should help more with the stabilisation of Iraq to show the added value it brings to the region.

NATO must give priority to improving its image in the Gulf states, both among the ruling classes and public opinion. It would be useful to run more surveys so that the image issue can be properly assessed. It seems equally important to reinforce the cultural dialogue between the member states of NATO and the ICI.

There is a need for renewed impetus in a political approach to relations between the West and the GCC States (currently dominated by military and security issues). In this respect, the GCC States are unanimous in their view that NATO action in the Gulf region must complement (and not replace) that of other international organisations, and must comply with the rules of international law. A NATO operation in the region would be accepted only if based on a UN Security Council resolution.

There is widespread consensus on the need to focus on the quality – not the quantity – of activities proposed within the partnership framework.

There is a need to distinguish clearly between the ICI and the MD, the logic behind the two being different.

In conclusion, NATO must show patience in its relations with the Gulf States.

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