7 JULY 2026

Commentaries

New Series

BEYOND NATO SOUTH: EUROPE'S MENA INTERESTS IN A TRANSACTIONAL TRANSATLANTIC ERA

COMMENTARY
N.045 NS/2026

Emiliano Alessandri*

*Board of Directors
Fondazione CSF

Debates over NATO's Southern dimension have long assumed that greater Alliance attention to the Middle East and North Africa could provide a coherent transatlantic framework for addressing instability on Europe's southern flank. This expectation has become increasingly unrealistic.

Under the second Trump administration, Washington is neither withdrawing from the MENA region nor handing responsibility to Europeans. From Gaza and Iran to Libya, Lebanon and Syria, the United States remains deeply involved in ways that directly affect European security, energy, and economic interests. Yet this engagement is increasingly driven by transactional diplomacy, commercial opportunities and highly personalised decision-making, rather than by systematic alliance coordination.

At the same time, NATO has limited political bandwidth to reinvent its southern agenda. The Ankara Summit of 7–8 July 2026 may include references to the Mediterranean and the Alliance's priorities on its southern flank, but these are unlikely to define the summit's centre of gravity. Its main focus will inevitably be transatlantic burden-sharing, defence investment, new defence-industry initiatives, support for Ukraine, and the challenge of managing President Trump's unpredictability following Europe's reluctance to support the recent U.S. campaign against Iran.

Recent developments — from Italy's forthcoming command of NATO's Joint Force Command Naples to Washington's apparent interest in a larger Italian role in Libya — should not be mistaken for a broader U.S. handover of Mediterranean security to Europe. The United States is adjusting its footprint on its own terms, while preserving freedom of manoeuvre for unilateral and sometimes arbitrary policies. The recent meeting between Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Saddam Haftar, deputy commander of eastern Libya-based forces, illustrates how Washington continues to engage key regional actors directly, including those whose role remains deeply contested from a European perspective.

The core challenge for Europe, therefore, is not American absence. It is American unpredictability.

This is particularly important because President Trump's approach to the MENA creates direct spillovers for Europe. U.S. and Israeli escalation against Iran, for example, created a massive shock for European energy security, maritime trade and economic stability. Europe cannot accept a pattern in which Washington and regional partners take decisions that reshape the security environment, while Europeans are left to absorb the economic, migration and political consequences. Nor can Europeans assume that NATO's formal mandate will shield them from pressure to

to align with future U.S. campaigns in the Middle East. Trump has repeatedly shown that he is willing to link European burden-sharing, alliance loyalty and regional conflicts in ways that do not follow traditional diplomatic boundaries.

The Ankara Summit also matters because of the political chemistry between Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Turkey is a long-standing NATO member, a major military power and an unavoidable actor in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Syria, Libya and beyond. Erdoğan supports NATO because Turkey has benefited from its place inside the Alliance — in contrast to the European Union, which never admitted Turkey as a member. Yet his foreign policy is not anchored in a conventional Western framework. It is increasingly shaped by Turkish national interests, strategic autonomy and a neo-Ottoman reading of Ankara's regional role.

For Erdoğan, NATO is most useful when it operates flexibly: less as a community of values and political orthodoxy and more as a platform for strategic convenience. This is where he may find common language with Trump. Neither leader is instinctively committed to a traditional Western liberal order. Both favour personal diplomacy, transactional bargaining and national advantage over institutional discipline. That may produce moments of cooperation, but it is unlikely to generate a coherent NATO strategy for the South.

Turkey's ambitions also complicate Europe's own position in the MENA. Ankara has sought to carve out a larger regional role through military presence, defence exports, energy diplomacy and political relationships with Sunni and Islamist actors. Its cooperation with Qatar, its outreach to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers, and its support for selected Islamist forces have often been presented as instruments of regional influence. Yet such alignments can divide as much as they stabilise, particularly when they deepen ideological competition or sharpen rival blocs.

This creates a strategic dilemma for Europe. Turkey is an increasingly important European security actor as the US involvement in European conventional defense is recalibrated. Yet, key EU member states such as France, Italy and Germany will need to cooperate more closely in the MENA precisely because Turkey continues to expand its own agenda in the Euro-Mediterranean space with little regard to the larger European interest.

France, Italy, and Germany will therefore find creative ways to overcome their own differences. France and Italy have frequently competed in Libya. Germany has often approached the region primarily through economic, migration or stabilisation lenses rather than as a theatre of strategic competition. Yet the scale of current change makes fragmentation increasingly costly.

Italy and France remain the European states most directly exposed to instability across the Mediterranean. Both have deep political, economic and security interests in North Africa, the Sahel, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf, and both are directly affected by migration pressures, terrorism risks, energy flows and maritime security. Germany, meanwhile, remains Europe's largest economy and a significant regional trading partner despite its current difficulties and is set to become continental Europe's leading military actor as its rearmament gathers pace.

A more effective European approach to the MENA should therefore begin with closer strategic coordination among Rome, Paris and Berlin.

Such coordination does not require a fully integrated EU MENA security strategy, which remains unlikely in the near term. National interests, colonial legacies, energy relationships, commercial competition and different attitudes toward Turkey, Israel and the Gulf will continue to divide Europeans. But minimum strategic coordination is possible — and necessary. Libya, Lebanon, Syria's stabilisation, Eastern Mediterranean energy, maritime security, reconstruction diplomacy, and an upgraded partnership with Arab Gulf countries are all areas where Europeans should avoid working at cross-purposes.

Europe should also resist being pulled into a simplified regional divide between an informal Sunni coalition, an Abraham Accords-oriented bloc, and shifting U.S. preferences. Its comparative advantage lies in maintaining working relations across regional fault lines. This does not mean neutrality between all actors or indifference to political outcomes. It means preserving enough diplomatic range to reduce escalation, defend European interests and promote long-term regional stability.

Over the coming years, transatlantic relations in the MENA will increasingly revolve around geopolitical positioning, economic influence and strategic bargaining rather than institutional coordination through NATO. The question is no longer whether NATO can finally give its Southern strategy real substance. It is whether European states can defend their own interests in a region where American engagement remains decisive but no longer reliably aligned with European priorities. Meeting that challenge requires moving beyond alliance formulas and acting with greater strategic clarity, political confidence and economic ambition.

Fondazione CSF