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## From East to East: Reconceptualization of NATO's Eastern Flank Engagement in the Middle East

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### ABSTRACT

The role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its influence on the peace and conflict dynamic in the Middle East has always been a discussed and controversial issue. While the United States and the countries of the NATO Southern flank are active in the discussions on NATO engagement in the region, the perspectives of NATO Eastern flank countries is often forgotten. This work contributes to the discussion with a comparative analysis of four NATO member states from Central and Eastern Europe: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Romania and Poland. Their position is analysed based on their strategic interests and level of engagement in the Middle East, which leads to categorizing them within a created typology.

### KEYWORDS

NATO; Middle East; NATO's Eastern Flank; Czech Republic; Poland; Estonia; Romania; strategic interests

### Introduction

While North Atlantic Treaty Organization (hereafter NATO or the Alliance) has so far relatively refrained from extensive involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, a perception compounded by the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 following the Taliban takeover, the security dependency between the Alliance and this region<sup>1</sup> means that it cannot abandon Middle East (ME) if it wants to remain a pertinent security and defence actor on the global scale.<sup>2</sup> Against those, who point out a shift in Washington's strategic focus towards the Indo-Pacific,<sup>3</sup> ME is still crucial for Alliance's security not only through developments such as terrorism, migration, or energy security, which affect and to some extent even shape the security environment of the most NATO member states,<sup>4</sup> but also due to the increasing presence of the emerging powers, China and Russia in particular.<sup>5</sup> The latter is particularly important for the NATO's Eastern flank, i.e., NATO members from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Although numerous authors have been preoccupied with this issue, the perspective of the CEE countries, is almost entirely absent from the debate.<sup>6</sup> The NATO decision-making process is not the only reason their attitudes are important. Since the Middle East is not the main area of strategic interests of the CEE states, and due to their limited

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capabilities and resources, it can be presumed that they have little desire to launch substantial independent initiatives in the region. NATO's multilateral framework, therefore, provides a suitable tool through which they can pursue their interests in the Middle East.

This research, thus, contributes to the strategic debates on NATO's role in the ME with a comparative analysis of selected countries of the NATO Eastern flank. The driving research question is: What positions do NATO members from its Eastern flank take on the role of the Alliance in the Middle East? Their behaviour within an international organization is presumed to be interest-driven.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the strategic interests of the analysed countries in the Middle East are the first investigated aspect (variable). However, their interests become irrelevant if the countries are not willing or do not have the necessary capabilities to act on them. This dimension is then reflected in the second variable, which is their level of engagement in NATO initiatives in the Middle East.

In order to provide a complex answer to the research question, four countries have been selected for the comparative analysis. Each can be considered as a representative of a certain sub-region of NATO's Eastern flank so that a maximum heterogeneity is reached. The analysis focuses on Estonia as a representative of the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic for Central Europe (Visegrad Four, V4) and Romania from the Black Sea region in the South. To these three regions, Poland is added to be analysed separately, because of its specific policy regarding NATO, which stands out among the other countries in the CEE.<sup>8</sup> The analysis looks for noticeable patterns and differences among them, in their strategic interests and levels of engagement in the Middle East, that would help to categorize them into certain types.

To this end, the conceptual framework first provides an overview of the NATO initiatives and policies in the Middle East, which constitutes a cornerstone of the present research. Afterwards, the existing literature on NATO in the Middle East is discussed, with a focus on the ambiguity in its policies, possible roles, and members' perspectives on them. The methodology section then explains in detail the chosen methods and specifies the use of variables. It is followed by the four case studies, in which each state is scrutinized on the basis of its strategic interests and level of engagement. The crucial part of this work consists of the analysis, where the variables are compared and subsequently each state is placed within a formulated typology.

## **NATO's engagement in the Middle East**

Although the Middle East is commonly referred to, there is still no single universally accepted definition of the region. Even NATO itself lacks clarity on what it perceives as the Middle East. According to Orfy,<sup>9</sup> the Alliance leaves this term deliberately vague since its use has become politicized and the member states are divided on their preferred definition. We apply a narrower and commonly used definition of the Middle East, which situates it between Egypt in the west and Iran in the east, including the whole area of the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>10</sup>

The first time NATO officially acknowledged the need to turn towards the South was during the 1994 summit in Brussels.<sup>11</sup> The 1994 summit laid a basis for the inception of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) initiative, which was launched later that year. Orfy<sup>12</sup>

describes the period between 1995 and 2001 as a first phase of the MD partnership, which primarily served to exchange views among parties on regional security issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the situation in Iraq.

After the Washington Summit in 1999, NATO Contact Point embassies in the MD countries were set up. The establishment of the embassies was one of the similarities between the MD partnership and the already successful partnership with Eastern European countries through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. However, compared to PfP the Mediterranean Dialogue was kept rather low-profile. Attitudes to the MD differed among the allies from the beginning. While the United Kingdom and Italy strongly supported the effort, other countries such as Canada or Germany were more hesitant.

A turning point in the view of NATO members of the Middle East was the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States. Following the attacks, then-NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson in 2002 indicated six reasons why the southward direction was important for NATO. In a nutshell, they were: the potential for instability, terrorism, cooperation between Arab and Western states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy security and economic disparity leading to migration.<sup>13</sup>

Another impulse for further development of NATO engagement in the ME was the Istanbul Summit in 2004. Three main initiatives were launched or strengthened as a result of the summit. Firstly, the countries of the MD partnership were invited to increase their levels of cooperation with the Alliance, including participation in missions and exercises. After that, the involvement of the MD countries in the practical activities of the Alliance expanded. Secondly, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) was established as another partnership programme with countries of the Persian Gulf region. Thirdly, the Istanbul Summit started the first NATO mission in the Middle East. The NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) consisted of training, mentoring and assisting Iraqi Security Forces and operated between 2004 and 2011. Furthermore, the NATO Southern Hub was established to provide a platform for cooperation with countries from the South, including the Middle East and the African continent. It was established in 2017 under the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples and declared fully operational at the 2018 Brussels summit. The main aim of the Hub is to connect the Alliance with governments, international and non-governmental organizations and civil society in the target region. Another responsibility of the Hub is the coordination of NATO efforts and monitoring of regional threats.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration named the growing instability and continuing crises in the Middle East among the main threats undermining Euro-Atlantic stability.<sup>15</sup> The declaration gives similar importance to the Southern dimension as it does to the East, in line with the so called 360-degrees approach, which was emphasized as well at the London summit in 2019.<sup>16</sup>

In 2018 NATO members endorsed the so-called Package on the South, which is meant to help with a more coherent approach to the MENA region. Besides strengthening existing partnerships, NATO also wishes to develop stronger relations with other Middle Eastern countries which are either part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or the League of Arab States (LAS). Within this strategic aim, the Brussels declaration sets out to pursue three main objectives<sup>17</sup>: 1) to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence against threats emanating from the South; 2) to contribute to international crisis management

efforts in the region; and 3) to help regional partners build resilience against security threats, including in the fight against terrorism.

Indubitably, in the current milieu, the Middle East poses numerous threats and challenges to NATO ranging from terrorism, to illegal migration and human trafficking, to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Syria create instability not only within themselves but also spill over to neighbouring states, bringing instability to the whole region. NATO is as well concerned by Syrian and Iranian ballistic missiles that are able to hit the territory of its member states.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the Iranian nuclear programme is yet another source of tensions. Large numbers of state and non-state actors make the situation in the ME unclear, while world powers such as Russia and China compete for influence in the region.

Nonetheless, the interest of NATO in the ME region is not solely threat based. Member states can also see economic opportunities, particularly regarding the arms trade. The Middle East is now the most rapidly growing defence market in the world.<sup>19</sup> For instance, in 2019 Saudi Arabia was the biggest importer of arms worldwide. Also, in 2014–2018 the ME countries accounted for more than half of US arms exports, 60% of Britain's and 44% of France's.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the competition in this area might serve as another incentive to the US and Europe to be involved and get ahead of Russia and China. As of 2020, NATO is cooperating with Middle Eastern countries through its partnership framework, the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Militarily, NATO is involved only in Iraq through its launched NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).

### Conceptualising NATO in the ME

To change its role in the Middle East, NATO needs the agreement of all its members. Each significant decision, including the partnerships or military involvement, is discussed and approved by the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The NAC is the highest political decision-making body within NATO that consists of representatives of all the Allies. Decisions made at any level by the NAC have the same authority.<sup>21</sup> In order to pass a decision, the NAC requires an absolute consensus of all the Allies. Thus, all the countries without exception must agree to any major step the Alliance takes. On the one hand, this measure gives all the members an equal voice in decision-making processes and secures the sovereignty of the decisions of smaller and weaker states. On the other hand, deciding by absolute consensus means that many initiatives can be blocked by a single state pursuing its national interest against the 'common good' agreed by the others.<sup>22</sup>

### Ambiguity in NATO policy towards ME

As we argued earlier,<sup>23</sup> at first glance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization might seem to be a united body which takes all its decisions by consensus and implements them unequivocally. However, the fact that NATO now consists of thirty member states makes its decision-making process much more difficult. The tensions among NATO's members emerging from diverse national interests can in many cases be observed along geographic divisions, the most significant being the one across Atlantic, between the United States

and the rest of the Alliance.<sup>24</sup> These tensions have a direct impact on NATO policies and strategies, including the policy towards the Middle East. Saidy<sup>25</sup> confirms that the traditional transatlantic tensions do not exclude the Middle Eastern decision-making processes.

According to Orfy,<sup>26</sup> NATO is often perceived in the Middle East only as a tool of US policy. Nevertheless, Orfy claims that the European allies are not willing to be pushed into actions that are opposed to their interests. Orfy also assumes that both sides understand they are not able to pursue their interests in the Middle East without each other. In this relation, the US brings its international status and military power, while the European states contribute with soft power and give more credibility to common initiatives.

These tensions among member states have been present since the very beginning of NATO ME initiatives, as in the case of the aforementioned disagreement on the establishment of the Mediterranean Dialogue in the 1990s. For this reason, NATO takes a rather ambiguous approach in order to reflect a multitude of its member states' goals and interests in the region. Indeed, the number of swollen problems that undermine the Pact's ability to operate effectively has been growing over recent years, which are not limited to coherence of strategic interests. To circumvent this problem, the building of regional coalitions of the willing, based on allies within the nodal system, is being considered as. The NATO strategic concept update is underway after the 2021 Brussels Summit.<sup>27</sup> However, the lack of clear strategy towards the Middle East is criticized by several authors,<sup>28</sup> as well as by experts and professionals.<sup>29</sup> Chivvis<sup>30</sup> agrees that the differences among NATO members cause a lack of clear strategy, and that members are more connected by facing common threats than by sharing strategic interests in the region. These differences provide an explanation why the Alliance is not able to agree on a common approach towards the Middle East and its activities in the region consist only of what Saidy<sup>31</sup> refers to as a 'shopping list' of individual initiatives. The creation of the Southern Hub in 2017 could have been an opportunity to unify the approach of the Alliance, but according to Samaan's interviews,<sup>32</sup> it has contrarily amplified the differences. Thus, to date, NATO ME strategy is based on the lowest common denominator and left intentionally vague in order to satisfy all the actors in the decision-making process.

### ***Different perspectives on NATO's role in the ME***

Nafaa<sup>33</sup> categorizes actors within an organization into two levels: the secretariat, in other words the institutional level, and the intergovernmental level of member states. These categories of analysis can also be applied to the literature analysing NATO policy on the Middle East based on which type of actors it focuses on. A vast body of literature explores the institutional level,<sup>34</sup> which Smith<sup>35</sup> in the case of NATO further differentiates in terms of military and civilian actors. This allows Samaan<sup>36</sup> to show the internal tensions among NATO military and civilian structures and their struggle to create a unified strategy towards the ME.

On the other hand, Orfy<sup>37</sup> points out that the research on the preferences of individual member states regarding NATO ME policy is still insufficient. The analysis that has been carried out at this level so far is either from the perspective

of ME partner governments or examines the interests, goals and attitudes of only a few countries in the Alliance. Most attention has been paid to the United States, due to its importance and activity in the region,<sup>38</sup> which supports the realist premise that the balance of power projects into the behaviour of the organization.<sup>39</sup> defines an international institution as a set of rules which regulate cooperation among states. Besides the US, the literature also often focuses on the countries which are most affected by the situation in the Middle East, i.e., the Southern flank of NATO, consisting of Turkey<sup>40</sup> and other NATO members in the Mediterranean area.<sup>41</sup>

However, other NATO members have been almost entirely excluded from the research. In particular, this is true of the countries of the NATO Eastern flank. These are the states situated in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which for geopolitical and historic reasons consider Russia their main security concern, especially after the 2014 takeover of Crimea and the 2021 crisis at the Belarussian border. While the countries of CEE might not be as directly affected by developments in the ME as their southern neighbours, their attitudes on the matter are equally important due to the consensual decision-making process in NATO. They have the same opportunity to participate in the decision-making process regarding the Middle East as any other member state.

One might assume that since the ME is not the primary focus area of the Eastern flank, these countries would play a passive role in decision-making and would not take part in NATO initiatives in the region. Yet, the CEE countries are participating in NATO partnerships in the region and all of them have deployed military personnel to the NATO Mission Iraq, even though the Alliance does not oblige them to do so. To reiterate, the engagement in the Middle East might not be solely threat-based, but countries might pursue other opportunities there, especially in the economic area. Therefore, for the CEE states NATO might provide an important platform of communication and engagement with Middle Eastern governments in pursuit of their national interests.

## Research design

For this small-N comparative study, four cases from the NATO Eastern flank were selected. The countries are: the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia and Romania. The selection was guided by the need to cover the Eastern flank in its scope, so that the results would be more or less applicable to the whole area. That is why each of the countries is considered as a representative of a particular CEE sub-region, with the exception of Poland as a *sui generis* case. The Czech Republic represents the Central European region that is politically connected by the Visegrad Group and includes Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. However, Poland is analysed separately since its role within NATO has traditionally been stronger than that of the other states within the V4 group. The Baltic states are another sub-region in the Eastern Flank. Estonia therefore stands as a representative of its regional neighbours, Latvia and Lithuania. The last sub-region to be analysed is the area neighbouring the Black Sea, where Romania and Bulgaria stand as members of the Alliance. Since these four countries belong to different sub-regions of Central and Eastern Europe and each has its own strategic interests, it is presumed that there will be differences in their views on NATO's engagement in the Middle East.

At the same time, these countries share a number of similar characteristics, which helps to eliminate several factors that could influence their behaviour, thus making the comparison more focused and relevant. The CEE countries have similar historical experiences as part of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War under the influence of the Soviet Union. The militaries of these countries have, then, similar starting points after the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. All of the countries also had to go through a democratic and economic transition in the 1990s. Even within the new security architecture in Europe, they share membership in the European Union and NATO. They joined the Alliance in two waves, during the 1999 and 2004 enlargements. For this reason, they are still considered the ‘new NATO’, in contrast to the Western members of the Cold War’s ‘old NATO’. Although they quite vary in the size of their territory and population, from a European—and all the more transatlantic—perspective these differences are rather negligible and they can be labelled small or middle-sized countries.

What positions do NATO members from the Eastern flank take on the role of the Alliance in the Middle East? The two variables we have analysed within each case, strategic interest and level of engagement, are juxtaposed. While many common elements can be found among the Eastern flank states, their positions cannot be perceived as entirely unanimous. We are able to create a typology based on the differences among them in the strength of their interest in the Middle East, as well as in the level of their engagement in NATO ME initiatives. Within this typology, four archetypes of states in their relation to NATO’s role in the Middle East are described and the four countries are categorized within them.

## Comparison of variables

### *Strategic interests*

Most of the interests of the Eastern flank states are connected to their national security interests and concerns regarding the defence of their own territory. This is reflected in their activities in the Middle East, which are primarily used to strengthen NATO, improve relations with other NATO members, and deter Russia or any other potential threat. Despite the lower number of interests that directly regard the Middle East compared to Southern flank members, among the analysed countries there are themes and patterns that can be identified regarding these interests, as well as differences concerning their focus and strength.

The transactional character of each country’s interest in the Middle East is particularly present in the cases of Poland and Romania. These countries pay attention to the issues of the NATO Southern flank in order to maintain the Alliance’s attention to their own security concerns, referring to the basic principle of NATO collective defence. Specifically, Romania gives importance to the broader concept of strategic credibility,<sup>42</sup> while Poland pursues a very specific goal of establishing a permanent US military presence on its territory.<sup>43</sup> Estonian policy is not very clear in this regard, but it mostly approaches its activity in ME affairs as a way to strengthen the cohesion of NATO.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the Czech Republic does not state that it expects any benefits from NATO members for its involvement and rather pursues its own interests in the ME.<sup>45</sup>



In their strategic documents, Estonia and Poland mention the necessity of containing Russian foreign policy in the Middle Eastern theatre.<sup>46</sup> They perceive Russia in the region as a competitor to Western states, especially the US. Specifically, the Russian interference in Syria and Russian relations with ME states such as Iran and Turkey raise concerns for Eastern flank states. However, the Czech Republic and Romania do not pay attention to Russian influence in the Middle East in their official documents. In the case of the Czech Republic, this may be because the country wants to maintain diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad, an ally of Russia. Romania wants to balance its strategic relationship with Turkey and not be openly hostile towards Russia.<sup>47</sup>

The need for stabilization of the Middle East is one of the interests all four states agree on. This is an almost entirely threat-driven interest since they consider the instability of the Middle East one of the main causes of the current threats to Europe. Among the numerous security issues, mass migration from the region plays a dominant role. Additionally, the countries are concerned with terrorism, extremism, and radicalization of their societies both via migration and diasporas.<sup>48</sup> In general, the countries are aware that these threats do not currently directly affect their territories, but they admit the possibility that in the future they could. Another concern is the potential destabilization of NATO's Southern flank, which would consequently destabilize the whole Alliance. Nonetheless, opinions on how to handle the instability in the ME differ. While Poland propagates transatlantic engagement and doubts the ability of the EU to act effectively,<sup>49</sup> Romania would prefer EU management of these threats.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, the Czech Republic and Estonia do not express strong official positions on this issue and support the involvement of both organizations.<sup>51</sup>

One factor shaping the scope of each country's interests and cooperation with ME countries is whether it had any previous historical links to the region. During the Cold War, it was common for the states of the Eastern Bloc to cooperate on some level with several Arab countries. While the regimes of the CEE countries changed, many of the Middle Eastern regimes persisted, so states such as Romania see the possibility to renew these relations. Moreover, Romania, because of its geographic position, interacted with the Middle East countries long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, Estonia, as the most remote state from the ME, cannot follow up on its historical connections, since it was not a sovereign state during the Cold War. With regards to current relations with the Middle East, the Czech Republic has the most developed relations in the region. It is diplomatically active, especially in the Levant, through its strategic partnership with Israel and as the only NATO country that has diplomatic relations with Syria.

The Eastern flank states have tried to find common ground with the NATO ME partners to offer know-how in areas they consider their strengths. For the Czech Republic, it is CBRN defence,<sup>52</sup> for Estonia information technology,<sup>53</sup> for Romania systemic transformation,<sup>54</sup> and for Poland maintenance of Soviet equipment.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, except for a few Czech CBRN projects, actual cooperation in these areas has not yet been achieved and the offers represent only a future possibility.

Each of the four countries also pursues some kind of economic interests in the Middle East. However, the economic sectors of interest, as well as the target countries and the scope of cooperation, differ significantly. For instance, the Czech Republic is mainly interested in arms export,<sup>56</sup> and Poland in energy resources and export of raw materials.<sup>57</sup> Estonia and Romania are in a phase where they are trying to establish their

economic relations with ME countries and explore the options that local markets offer.<sup>58</sup> The countries of the Eastern flank are also quite actively involved in the questions of the Middle East peace process and issues concerning Israel. In this regard, the Czech Republic particularly stands out for considering the security and stability of Israel as one of its core interests.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, Poland and Romania are more trying to balance their relations with Israel and the Arab countries.<sup>60</sup> Estonia keeps a low profile on the question of Israel.

In conclusion, it is possible to infer that the interest of the Czech Republic in the Middle East is the strongest of the analysed states. The country pursues its own interests in security, economic and diplomatic areas and does not approach the ME only as an instrument to gain the trust of its NATO allies. Romania expresses interest in becoming more involved in the ME and renewing its old ties with the region. It does not, however, pursue many specific interests and is left with strategic credibility as its most important goal. Polish interests in the ME are not very strong and the country rather sees its ME relations as an opportunity to bring more attention to its own territory. The Estonian interest can be considered the lowest since it has few historical connections to the ME and the country lies geographically afar.

### Level of engagement

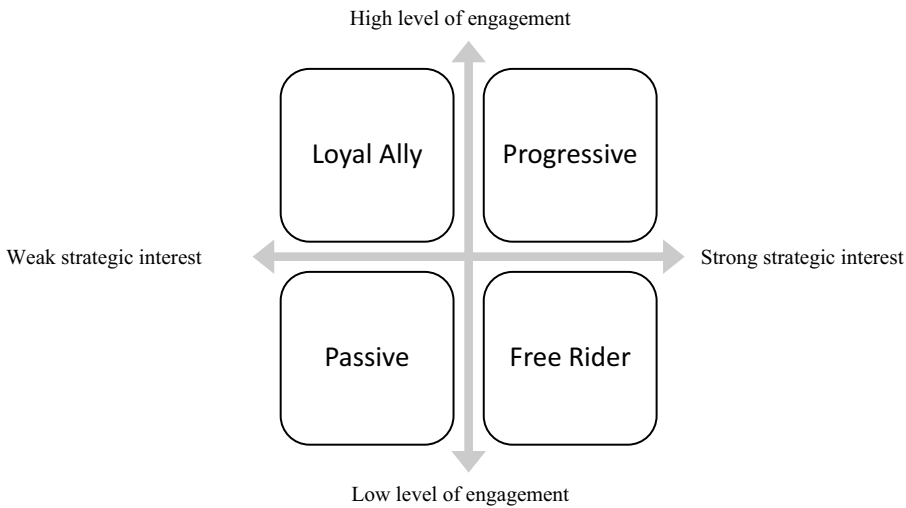
All of the analysed countries consider participation in NATO operations abroad as a necessary contribution to the Alliance. Thus, all of them also participate in the NATO Mission Iraq, yet some more actively than others. The difference can be primarily seen in the numbers of deployed personnel, given that the NMI is generally a smaller NATO operation with about 580 personnel from all member states. In this context, the Polish contribution with one hundred soldiers puts Poland among the three most active countries in the mission, together with Canada and Spain. For illustration, Canada as a leading nation in the NMI has deployed 250 soldiers.<sup>61</sup> At the opposite end stands Estonia, whose contribution of one advisor can be considered merely symbolic.

Even more clarity about how important direct engagement in the NMI is for each country can be seen in the percentage of troops in the operation out of the total number of troops deployed in foreign operations, as presented in Figure 1. For example, Romania, which is otherwise quite active in operations beyond its borders, participates with the lowest share in the NMI. The countries which are closer to Russia and live with the possibility of an attack on their territory have naturally reduced participation in international missions since they need to maintain capabilities for their own defence. The converse can be seen in the case of the Czech Republic, which faces no immediate threat and therefore can send abroad almost 4 % of its military.

*Note:* Data compiled from national sources.<sup>62</sup>

|                                 | Czech Rep.    | Estonia       | Poland        | Romania <sup>1</sup> |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Soldiers abroad (mandate)       | 982           | 105           | 2047          | 1902 + 760           |
| % of total military personnel   | 3.93 %        | 1.67 %        | 1.73 %        | 2.6 %                |
| Soldiers in NMI (deployed)      | 29            | 1             | 100           | 14                   |
| <b>% out of soldiers abroad</b> | <b>2.95 %</b> | <b>0.95 %</b> | <b>4.89 %</b> | <b>0.74 %</b>        |

Figure 1. Personnel in foreign operations and in NMI.



**Figure 2.** Typology of states based on their position on NATO's role in the ME.

Each country sends to NMI unit/s with different specializations. While all of them have advisory roles to the Iraqi army, one of the Polish platoons takes care of the security of the mission. Notably, the Czech forces have four members within the NMI command structure. The relative importance of the NMI is also reflected in the rhetoric of the political leadership and the armed forces in each country. The highly involved states, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, try to promote their participation in the mission in the media and in the official discourse of their representatives. But in the cases of Romania and Estonia, only a few references can be found in communiqués sent abroad or in the internal public debate.

The NATO partnerships with Middle East states, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative are used quite rarely by the countries of the Eastern flank, with the NATO Eastern Partnership with Ukraine and Caucasus countries at the focal point. The only analysed state that stands out is the Czech Republic, which quite actively takes advantage of some of the opportunities that the NATO partnership frameworks offer. It uses its diplomatic relations with countries in the Middle East, especially in the Levant area, to connect them closer to the Alliance. Making its embassies available as NATO Contact Points is one of the most visible steps of Czech foreign policy within the partnerships, as it has done multiple times with the embassy in Tel Aviv and in Amman, for example. Although Syria is not a NATO partner state and therefore cannot have a NATO Contact Point, the Czech Embassy in Damascus serves *de facto* as one and confirms this trend. The only other example from among the four CEE countries was the Romanian Embassy in Kuwait, designated as a NATO Contact Point for the first time, which was considered a great success in the country.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to offering the NATO Contact Points, the countries participate in joint exercises, meetings and consultations in Brussels, on a standard ambassadorial level as do all the members of the Alliance. Estonia and Poland often host NATO exercises in which the partner states can participate in or simply observe; Israel being the most engaged in this regard. They also cooperate with partners on scientific projects within the Science for

Peace and Security programme, with Poland and the Czech Republic as the most active, based on the number of projects they participate in together with partner countries from the Middle East.

## Typology

Having compared the two variables, the countries can be categorized according to existing archetypes. Each can be placed on two axes: on the horizontal axis based on how strong its strategic interest in the Middle East is, and on the vertical axis based on its level of engagement in NATO ME initiatives. These axes together create four quadrants, which represent four archetypes describing orientations towards NATO involvement in the Middle East.

Two opposite pairs can be recognized within the typology as visualised in [Figure 2](#). The passive and progressive countries whose level of engagement matches their interests are the first opposites. On the other side, stand the loyal ally and the free-rider which act counter-intuitively, at a first glance, since their engagement is either higher or lower than their interest.

### Loyal ally

The ideal country that belongs to the first quadrant, labelled as a loyal ally, does not have a strong interest in the Middle East, yet is extensively engaged in NATO ME initiatives. Since their engagement is not driven by interests in the ME, it must be explained in other terms. In the case of multinational initiatives, where cooperation with allied countries is necessary, the transactional character of their engagement might provide the explanation. Their attention to the ME might be a *quid pro quo*, with the expectation of reciprocity from the states with strong interests in the region. Out of the analysed countries, Poland can be considered a loyal ally. The country has few interests in the Middle East, regarding mainly economic expansion and energy security. These interests are, however, not exclusive to the Middle East, but are focused on other distant regions as well. The extensive Polish engagement in the NMI is, then, quite disproportionate to its interests and raises the question, what reason is behind this decision? Here comes the transactional explanation to help. By taking more responsibility in the Middle East, a move called for by the US, Poland might get more US attention for its national issues, especially the long-term goal of a permanent US presence on Polish soil, which would mean strengthened deterrence towards Russia.

### Progressive

The ideal type in this category has a strong strategic interest in the Middle East region, which naturally leads to a high level of engagement. For this type of state, NATO's engagement in the Middle East represents one of the possible tools to achieve its strategic interests in the region. Given the current state of NATO ME initiatives, which are quite modest and have high potential to be developed, a progressive country would most likely call for their enlargement. To some extent, the Czech Republic can be placed into this category. Its strategic interest

in the Middle East is comparatively the strongest of the analysed countries, and possibly one of the strongest within the Eastern flank countries. The Czech Republic adequately engages in the NMI and uses the partnership frameworks in areas that serve its interest, such as to build relations with Israel and Jordan. Therefore, it could be expected that the Czech Republic would push for more NATO engagement in the Middle East. However, since the country is still not an ideal example of this category, the voices for more NATO engagement are not heard from most Czech representatives, with the exception of President Miloš Zeman.

### **Passive**

A passive country in the third quadrant represents the direct opposite of the progressive type. An absolutely passive country would have zero interests in the Middle East region and therefore it would not be engaged at all in NATO ME initiatives. The interest of the country must therefore lie in another direction, and any possible engagement would lack the significant transactional value that it has for the loyal ally type. Among the analysed countries, Estonia falls into the passive type. While it has some interests in the Middle East, such as economic cooperation and promoting ICT technologies, these interests are quite limited in their scope and the country does not pay much attention to them. Accordingly, Estonian engagement is at a very low level, with one advisor in the NMI and almost no involvement in the partnerships. On the rhetorical level, Estonia sees its engagement as a way to strengthen NATO, which would put it closer to the loyal ally category, but the country does not act within the available initiatives.

### **Free-rider/Prefers other frameworks**

A country that is located in the fourth quadrant has strong interests in the Middle East, yet does not engage with NATO ME initiatives. There are two possible explanations for this behaviour. First, the country might be a so-called free-rider, according to the theory of alliances.<sup>64</sup> According to the theory, small countries in Alliances tend to free-ride on the security provided by bigger countries, as their contribution in absolute numbers does not have much real impact. Alternatively, as we have argued elsewhere, for the 'new NATO' members, the influence of the hegemon is of paramount importance.<sup>65</sup> Another explanation might be that the country prefers other multilateral frameworks or bilateral cooperation to NATO and finds them more suitable to pursue its interests in the ME. In reality, it will most likely be a combination of both these factors. Romania can be used as an example of a country in this quadrant. It has a strong interest in the Middle East region, where it is trying to renew its historical ties and limit migration to Europe. However, its low engagement in the NMI and in NATO partnerships does not match its ambitions. For Romania, NATO is not the primary framework to promote its interest in the Middle East, where it on the one hand focuses on bilateral strategic partnerships with countries like Turkey and on the other would prefer the EU to do more for stabilization of the region.

## Nato's role in the ME according to the Eastern flank

This research sought to contribute to the debate on NATO's role in the Middle East by looking for an answer to the main research question: What positions do NATO members from the Eastern flank take on the role of the Alliance in the Middle East? In the end, there are two possible ways to approach the answer, from the perspective of the whole Alliance or with a closer look at individual states.

When following the traditional division of NATO into the 'old' (in the West and South) and 'new' (in the East) member states, several general assumptions can be made about the latter based on elements that are common for all the analysed countries. Indeed, very often the CEE countries are approached as a homogenous organism, which this research proves to be wrong. Given the number of interests of the Eastern flank states in the Middle East identified in our analysis, it is clear that they are not solely bandwagoning behind the greater powers in the Alliance; they pursue their own national interests in the region. Nonetheless, these interests are naturally of a limited nature, as Russia remains the focus of their strategic considerations. Furthermore, those interests that are common for the whole region are mostly threat-based. Mitigation of the threats like migration or terrorism, even though perhaps not directly affecting the CEE countries, is at the forefront of their interests in the ME. A fitting example is Estonia, which surprisingly, given its location, is greatly concerned with migration from the Middle East. Moreover, these states also see unique economic opportunities in the region: the Middle East offers energy supplies and represents an open market for arms and machinery export. The CEE countries do not oppose participation in the NATO ME initiatives, since all of them are, to some extent, even though limited, engaged in the NMI and partnership frameworks.

Nonetheless, the Eastern flank should not always be perceived as a single unit. A closer look reveals differences in perceptions of NATO's role in the Middle East. These differences are reflected in the four archetypes that were found as a result of the analysis. When extended to the other states of the Eastern flank that were not subjected to this analysis, several assumptions can be made based on the geographic sub-regions where these states are located. All the Baltic states most likely fall into the passive category. The distance of this sub-region from the Middle East, lack of historical connections, and the imminent threat of Russia determine their interests to be weaker, and their level of engagement lower.<sup>66</sup> In the Black Sea sub-region, Bulgaria, similarly to Romania, could have a stronger interest in the Middle East because of its proximity. The country would then be labelled a free-rider or a progressive, based on the level of its engagement in NATO ME initiatives. The sub-region of Central Europe is the most difficult to categorize as a whole. It is improbable that, in terms of ME policy, any of the states, except for Poland, would be considered loyal allies since they would need to make certain demands from their NATO Allies in return. Instead, they could be any of the other three types, because it is not possible to presume whether Slovakia and Hungary have as strong interests in the Middle East as the Czech Republic or to what level are they engaged. Based on these criteria, they could be progressive, passive or free-riders. While the above reflections regarding the CEE states that were not part of this analysis constitute assumptions rather than inference, the results of this work might be tested and serve as a guideline for the analysis of other Eastern flank countries.

## Conclusions

The role of NATO in the Middle East is a very complex issue, which can be looked upon from many different angles. This research aimed to contribute with the rare perspective of its Eastern flank members. The comparative analysis revealed that while there are multiple commonalities, the CEE countries are not entirely united on this issue. We presume the security focus for the Eastern flank is primarily directed towards Russia and cooperation with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. For this reason, given the limited capabilities of each country, they side on most of the major issues with the official position of the Alliance, or alternatively with the United States as the hegemonic power in NATO. Nonetheless, each of the analysed countries pursues certain interests in the Middle East region augmented by their membership in the European Union.<sup>67</sup> Those interests vary in their focus and scope. Some countries, especially Romania and Poland, pay attention to the Middle East region mainly because they expect to get in return the attention of the US and other members of the Alliance to their national security issues. This strategy appears to be successful, since Poland managed to achieve its goal of a permanent US military presence.<sup>68</sup> Although it cannot be certain to what extent the particular Polish involvement in the Middle East helped fulfil this goal, it has certainly improved the Polish image as a loyal ally. The Polish case might serve as an example for other states that seek more attention from NATO members to their national security interests.

Furthermore, all of the analysed countries have an interest in stabilizing the Middle East region in order to mitigate possible threats, such as terrorism and illegal migration, that emerge from the regional instability. Economic interests are also present in each case, as well as country-specific interests, such as the Czech partnership with Israel and Romanian renewal of historical ties. In the area of military engagement, there is not much space for increased involvement. NATO has only one operation in the Middle East, the NATO Mission Iraq, with limited personnel. All of the analysed countries contribute to the mission. Poland participates extensively, similarly the Czech Republic, while the Romanian and Estonian contributions are rather low.

However, there is more potential for further engagement via the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative partnerships, which are not fully used by the Eastern flank countries. These partnerships, in fact, offer a variety of tools to establish or deepen cooperation with ME partner states, and therefore could help the CEE countries in reaching their strategic interests. Nonetheless, the only country that noticeably participates in the partnerships is the Czech Republic.

As a result of our analysis of strategic interests and levels of engagement in each case, four types of countries based on their position towards NATO ME initiatives were created: loyal ally, free-rider, passive and progressive countries. Poland acts like a loyal ally, who despite its minimal interest in the Middle East contributes quite extensively to the NMI. The Czech Republic falls into the progressive type since it has a stronger interest in the ME, which it actively pursues with participation in various NATO ME initiatives. Estonia can be labelled as a passive country because it has little interest in the region and engages only symbolically in military and partnership initiatives. Romania has a strong interest in the Middle East, but does not really pursue them through NATO initiatives.

The typology that was created for the purpose of this research could also be used in other studies. It would be interesting to apply it not only to other CEE countries but also to the members of the ‘old’ NATO. This further research might answer the question, whether the divisions are truly along geographic lines or are rather linked to the strategic interests and level of engagement of individual states. All in all, the states of NATO’s Eastern flank should definitely be included in the discussion on the role of the Alliance in the Middle East and should be given space to express their individual positions, which differ based on their strategic interests in the region. If NATO desires to increase the engagement of the less active states in its ME initiatives, it needs to offer them proper incentives based on the typology of the target countries. A passive state might be offered something in its security interest in exchange for participation so that it would turn into a loyal ally. For states that prefer other frameworks of cooperation or to free-ride, NATO must clearly communicate what benefits engagement brings. For instance, the Alliance might emphasize the fact that it is one of the few frameworks for military cooperation with ME states and also that participation in the existing partnership programmes might strengthen bilateral relations between Eastern flank countries and their Middle Eastern counterparts.

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