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# Beyond bare numbers: the qualitative subtleties of free-riding on NATO's engagement in the Middle East

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## ABSTRACT

This paper closely scrutinises NATO engagement, particularly the The Eastern Flank countries in the Middle East. Our main argument is that the quantitative approach to free riding is useful only when it comes to black-and-white policy choices and either-or policy decisions. Simultaneously, it fails when we are faced with more complex situations in which evaluations go beyond the very simple numerical markers, such as the 2% threshold of defence spending. By bringing together a unique regional focus (the European East and the Middle East), theoretical dilemmas (free-riding) and policy issues (NATO's multilateral framework of co-operation understood in terms of strategic interests and practical engagement), we are able to show that Romania is a subtle free rider, which cannot be verified by merely looking at numbers alone, but can be ascertained by a careful qualitative analysis which reveals a discrepancy between the country's strategic interests and its level of engagement.


## KEYWORDS

NATO; free riding; Middle East; NATO's Eastern flank; Romania; strategic interests

## Introduction

The discussion of whether NATO should or should not increase its activity in the Middle East (ME) involves all its members, which together must approve every step by consensus in the North Atlantic Council (NAC). Nonetheless, consensual decision-making in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (hereafter NATO or the Alliance) is not the only reason for the importance of individual members' attitudes in this area. It is also an excellent field for making observations concerning the free-riding phenomenon.

During the Cold War (CW), NATO served as a military alliance oriented almost exclusively towards the Soviet Union. After the end of the CW, the Alliance began the process of redefining its purpose in order to become globally relevant in the new multi-lateral world. It shifted from being a military alliance to a more political institution and started to focus on other geographic regions. A watershed moment for NATO members on the Middle East was the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. These attacks were the first and only time in the history of the Alliance when Article 5 of the Washington Treaty was triggered. Following the attacks, in 2002 then-NATO Secretary General

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Lord Robertson<sup>1</sup> indicated six reasons why the Mediterranean direction was important to NATO. In a nutshell, they are: the potential for instability, terrorism, co-operation between Arab and Western states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy security, and economic disparity leading to migration.

In recent years the Middle East has continued to be a geopolitically important theatre and to attract the attention of global powers, such as the United States (US), but also Russia and China. It constitutes a similarly significant area for Europe, as a source of numerous threats on the one hand, and opportunities on the other. However, the European countries still fumble for an effective way to engage in the region. NATO, which serves as a key platform for transatlantic security co-operation, represents one of the possible frameworks through which European states could become more engaged in the Middle East. While NATO itself has so far been relatively restrained from extensive involvement in Middle East affairs, lately there has been pressure from the US administration to take on more responsibility in the region. This US request has broadened the scope of the burden-sharing debate, which traditionally revolved around defence expenditure.

Nonetheless, it would be naïve to assume that all the NATO members have an equal interest in that area; the perspective of the Eastern flank is particularly interesting in this regard. Since the Middle East is not the main area of strategic interests of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, and due to their limited capabilities and resources, it can be easily presumed that they would not launch substantial independent initiatives in the Middle East region. NATO's multilateral framework, therefore, provides a suitable tool through which they can pursue their interests in the Middle East. Simultaneously, it opens free riding opportunities for those members who are interested in reaping the benefits of the Alliance's umbrella without making a proportionate contribution.

We have read with interest the response<sup>2</sup> to our earlier article on the free-riding dilemma among the "new" NATO members,<sup>3</sup> where Dvorak and Pernica present their argument from the microeconomic point of view. While there is no fault in their reasoning and the microeconomic indicators definitely provide an interesting insight into the otherwise simplistic criterion of the 2% GDP threshold, we would like to take the analysis of the free-riding of the "new" NATO members one step further. In this paper we claim that states might free ride not only in terms of contributing to the common budget, as usually portrayed, but also by using NATO initiatives to advance their interests in a disproportionate manner to their engagement. Such a phenomenon cannot be analysed on the basis of economic data and rather requires thorough qualitative analysis of strategic interests and political decisions.

In this regard, Koivula notices that a new emphasis on NATO out-of-area operations, crisis management, and broader conceptions of security signify a widening agenda of burden-sharing and therefore, simultaneously, a widening window for free-riding opportunities.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, this paper places NATO's engagement in the Middle East under close scrutiny particularly with regard to the Eastern Flank countries. Our main claim is that Romania is a subtle free rider in the context of NATO's engagement in the ME – a fact that cannot be verified by merely looking at numbers alone, but that can be ascertained by a careful qualitative analysis. By doing so we wish to not only engage with the response paper by Dvorak and Pernica, but also advance the discussion and bring together a unique regional focus (the European East and the Middle East), theoretical dilemmas (free riding) and policy issues (NATO's multilateral framework of co-operation understood in terms of strategic interests and practical engagement). To this

end, after providing an overview of our theoretical framework and methodology, we conceptualise and operationalise variables which enable us to proceed with a careful case study analysis. The conclusions show that the face value, numerical indicators might be misleading in a complex policy setting that goes beyond simple dichotomies, whereas a qualitative approach might lead to a surprising appraisal.

### **Ambiguity in NATO policy towards the Middle East**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation might seem at first glance 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 Transatlantic, between the United States and the rest of the Alliance. These tensions have a direct impact on NATO policies and strategies, including the policy towards the Middle East region. Saïdy<sup>5</sup> confirms that the traditional transatlantic tensions do not exclude the Middle Eastern decision-making processes. According to Orfy,<sup>6</sup> NATO is often perceived in the Middle East only as a tool of US policy. Nevertheless, he claims that the European allies are not willing to be pushed to actions that are opposed to their interests. Orfy also assumes that both sides within NATO 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's Middle Eastern initiatives, as in the case of disagreement over the establishment of the Mediterranean Dialogue in the 1990s. For this reason, NATO has taken a rather ambiguous approach in order to reflect the multitude of its member states' goals and interests in the region. However, the lack of clear strategy towards the Middle East is criticised by several authors,<sup>7</sup> as well as by experts and professionals.<sup>8</sup> Chivvis<sup>9</sup> agrees that the differences amongst 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 Middle East. These differences explain 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 Saïdy<sup>10</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>11</sup> it has contrarily amplified the differences. Thus, to date, NATO's 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. The question of what would be required to reach this satisfaction is unfortunately beyond the scope of our discussion.

### **The different approaches to NATO's role in the Middle East**

Mearsheimer<sup>12</sup> defines international institutions as sets of rules which regulate co-operation among states. The states create these rules and consequently agree to abide by them. This supports the realist understanding of institutions as a reflection of states'

calculations based on their self-interests. Nafaa<sup>13</sup> then categorises actors within an organisation into two levels: the secretariat, in other words the institutional level, and the inter-governmental 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>14</sup> which Smith<sup>15</sup> in the case of NATO, further differentiates between military and civilian actors. Samaan<sup>16</sup> reveals internal tensions amongst NATO military and civilian structures and their struggle to create unified strategy towards the Middle East.

At the same time, Orfy<sup>17</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 Middle East partner governments or examines the interests, goals and attitudes of only a few countries in the Alliance. The research pays most attention to the United States, due to its importance and activity in the region,<sup>18</sup> which supports the realist premise that the balance of power projects into the behaviour of the organisation. Besides the US, the literature also often focuses on the countries which are most affected by the situation in the Middle East, namely the Southern flank of NATO, consisting of Turkey<sup>19</sup> and other NATO members in the Mediterranean basin.<sup>20</sup> Notably, NATO members that are not the US or part of the Southern flank have been almost entirely excluded from the research. In particular, this is true for the countries of the NATO Eastern flank. These are the states situated in Central and Eastern Europe that, for geopolitical and historical reasons, consider Russia as their main security concern and point of reference. It could therefore be plausibly assumed, especially if the realist approach to international institutions is adopted, that most if not all the CEE states will be free riders on NATO ME policy. However, while the CEE countries might not be as directly affected by developments in the Middle East as their southern neighbours, their attitudes on the matter are equally important by virtue of the consensual decision-making process in NATO. They have the same opportunity to participate in policy-making regarding the Middle East as any other member state. One might also assume that since the ME is not the primary focus area of the Eastern flank, these countries would not play a very active role in determining policy and would not take part in NATO initiatives in the region. Yet, CEE countries do participate 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.

It is clear then, that NATO's engagement in the Middle East is not a simple either-or situation for NATO's Eastern members that is clear-cut and self-evident and thus lends itself to a purely quantitative analysis. As mentioned above, members' engagement in the Middle East might not be solely threat-based, but individual countries might pursue opportunities there, especially in the economic area. Therefore, based on the realist understanding of state behaviour in international organisations, for the CEE states NATO might provide an important platform of communication and engagement with Middle Eastern governments in pursuit of their national interests.

## Methodology

Gerring<sup>21</sup> defines a case study as "an intensive study of a single case for the purpose of understanding a larger class of cases." In political science the cases may vary from the

level of nation-states, across political parties to particular leaders, however, the state level of analysis is still the most common.<sup>22</sup> Depending on the number of examined units (N) the research design might vary from a single case, across small-N, intermediate-N to large-N analysis. The small-N approach offers particular benefits and drawbacks. The small number of cases allows more space for the researcher to get familiar with each case and to carry out more focused and in-depth analysis.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, single-case studies are more intensive (i.e. have a lower level of abstraction) and less extensive (i.e. only one case is examined). Because it is possible to focus on the particular features of the problem at hand while at the same time relating those features to broader sets of research questions in the field, single-case studies can be used to draw inferences about significant research questions. This is most suitable for the creation of new data sets on yet unexplored phenomena, such as the question of CEE states free-riding on NATO's engagement in the Middle East. New hypotheses might be generated as a result of the research; thus, an inductive approach is relevant.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, a low level of generalisability is considered the main weakness of the small-N case study. This follows the rationale that an observation gained from a small sample size cannot be applied globally. However, this study does not have the ambition to broadly generalise its results.

### **Case study selection**

When crafting a small-N case study, the selection of the cases should be considered a cornerstone in the process.<sup>25</sup> The selection can be guided by the research question and/or preliminary hypothesis.<sup>26</sup> Another important determinant of the quality of a case study, following the process of case selection, is an abundance of possible variables. For this reason, small-N studies usually depend on the proclamation or assumption of *ceteris paribus*, that is, that all of the unresearched variables are considered as holding constant across the sample.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, a reduction must be carried out not only in the number of cases but also in the number of possible variables. These variables are often very abstract so that the reduction must be executed in a manner that does not prematurely close doors to alternative explanations of the problem.<sup>28</sup> A careful operationalisation of variables and consideration of any contextual variables are essential in solving the problem of excessive abstraction.<sup>29</sup> The benefit of using the small-N case study design is that these vague concepts can be operationalised more fittingly to the specific cases.<sup>30</sup>

There are many different states that could be selected for this research as there are numerous and varied states in the Eastern flank. The Central European region that is politically connected by the Visegrad Group includes the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, are another sub-region belongs in the Eastern flank. Finally, there is the area neighbouring the Black Sea, where Romania and Bulgaria stand as members of the Alliance. While the Baltic states might perhaps be more obvious candidates for being free riders, and the Central European countries are less conspicuous but still potential exemplars, in order to show that qualitative analysis can pick up on subtleties of political behaviour, we propose to examine Romania. Due to its proximity and long historic ties with the Middle East, it would appear on paper that Romania is not a likely free rider, since it

checks all the numerical boxes. Nonetheless, careful conceptualisation and operationalisation of variables will allow us to look beyond the numbers.

Our case study analysis has three main parts. The first introduces the country, its basic characteristics, decision-making actors and relevant strategic documents. In the second part, these documents serve as the primary evidence to identify the general strategic interests of the country, which are then examined to determine its more specific interests in the Middle East. The last part the case study focuses on the analysis of Romania's practical engagement in NATO's ME initiatives, which may take form of either military involvement or partnership co-operation.

### ***Conceptualisation and operationalisation of variables***

The variables analysed in this study emerge from the main research question, how do states engage in NATO's ME initiatives in order to support their strategic interests? The first selected variable deals with the strategic interests of the country in the Middle East and the second its practical engagement in the region. Taking a realist approach, the country's behaviour within an international organisation is presumed to be interest-driven.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the strategic interest of Romania in the Middle East is the first observed variable. However, interests become irrelevant if the country is not willing or does not have the necessary capabilities to act on them. This aspect is then reflected in the second variable, which is the level of engagement in NATO initiatives in the Middle East.

### ***Strategic interest***

The term "national interest" plays a key role in the realist understanding of foreign policy decision making, as it is considered a main driver of state behaviour in international relations.<sup>32</sup> However, if not defined properly, the concept of interest could be used quite ambiguously in political science and international relations. In this analysis, strategic interests are understood as rather specific objectives which serve the broader national interest, i.e. the *raison d'état*, by maintaining or increasing the power of the state.<sup>33</sup> Strategic interests are less abstract than the *raison d'état*, which serves as a guiding principle. Both specific strategic interests and the broader national interest are in most cases articulated in national strategic documents, such as official defence and/or security strategies. Depending on the particular country the terminology may differ, but this two-level differentiation of interests is consistent. The concept of strategic interests can also be referred to as strategic objectives, priorities, or otherwise. While the *raison d'état* is usually similar across nations, strategic interests are more diverse as they are created based on the specific needs of each state. The decision-makers then use them, or rather, are supposed to use them, as a guide when designing new policies. Given our topic, this analysis focuses on those strategic interests that are related to the Middle East region. During the research, these two principal questions are asked: 1) What are the country's specific strategic interests regarding the Middle East? 2) How strong are these interests in comparison to other countries? The interests in the Middle East can subsequently be categorised on a scale from weak strategic interests to strong strategic interests.

## **Level of engagement**

The actual level of engagement in NATO initiatives in the Middle East might offer another insight into the perspectives of individual Eastern flank countries. Engagement is understood as a form of participation in NATO initiatives, which reflects the ability of the country to make policy decisions and subsequently implement them.<sup>34</sup> The premise for analysing this variable is that proclaimed strategic interests are irrelevant unless the country is willing to act on them practically. The analysis focuses on current NATO initiatives in the Middle East, as of the end of 2019. In line with these initiatives, the work is divided into two parts, while none of them is considered superior to the other. The first one regards military engagement in the region, in this case within the NATO Mission Iraq. In this regard, numbers and types of troop contributions are compared. The second part focuses on engagement within existing NATO partnerships, the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative (ICI). The research looks into whether the country uses these partnerships and if yes, how and to what extent. Qualitative analysis of military and partnership participation, indicating the general level of engagement in NATO ME initiatives, enables us to rank the country on a scale from low to high.

## **Case study analysis**

Romania can be considered a middle-sized European country, with a population of almost 20 million and an area of 238,397 square kilometres. In the context of NATO's Eastern flank, it is the second largest and most populated country after Poland. The country's location plays a particularly important role in Romanian decision-making. Together, Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria are the only three NATO members in the crucially important Black Sea region. The significance of the Black Sea, which Romania considers its backyard,<sup>35</sup> is perceived not only in relation to Russia but also to the Middle East. Of the Eastern flank nations, Romania and Bulgaria are the closest to the Middle East. The Middle East, if Turkey is considered part of it, is therefore in their neighbourhood. The strategic position of Romania is important not only for the country itself, but for its NATO allies as well. Especially for countries such as the US, it lies on the way to the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

Romania joined NATO in 2004, together with most of the other CEE states. Since 2013 it has been significantly increasing its defence expenditure, rising from 1.28% to 2.04% of GDP in 2019. In the same year, the Romanian Armed Forces (RAF) had 73,100 active duty servicemen. The main actors of Romanian foreign and security policy are the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. As a semi-presidential system, the President of the Republic can influence foreign policy, if he chooses to do so. There have been even situations when the President abused power and was impeached for it.<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are each in charge of different military units. Despite frequent political turmoil, the top priorities of Romanian foreign policy have remained stable, such as being a credible ally in NATO. The only exception is current President Klaus Iohannis, who has deviated somewhat from the Western direction of the country and has tried to take a more neutral approach to Russia.<sup>38</sup> In our analysis we scrutinise two main strategic documents. The



first of them is the National Defence Strategy 2015-2019, which sets out the basic interests and objectives of Romania, identifies threats, and describes the country's security environment. The second document is the Military Strategy of Romania from 2016, where more precise steps and priorities for defence of the country are laid out. In addition, we take into account the foreign policy objectives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and expert literature on this topic.

### **Strategic interest**

The Romanian Defence Strategy from 2015 defines two levels of national interest, higher and broader national security interests, followed by more specific national security objectives. Both of these categories are built on a set of values and principles for national security. The national security interests include the protection of state sovereignty, democratic values and human rights. Interestingly, Romania connects defence of its territorial integrity with the loyalty of citizens to the state and its institutions. "Ensuring the irreversible nature of belonging to the trans-Atlantic collective defense systems" is one of the priorities.<sup>39</sup> Among the more specific national security objectives, the most relevant for this analysis are: 1) "strengthening Romania's profile within NATO and the EU, through conceptual, as well as operational contributions; 2) consolidating the strategic partnership with the US, including the economic and trade co-operation; 3) ensuring security in the Black Sea region; 4) deepening co-operation with neighbouring states and states of NATO's Eastern flank; 5) promoting political, economic, and security interests in regions strategically relevant for our country."<sup>40</sup> The security objectives imply that NATO and the EU are crucial for protection of Romania's national interests. The strategic partnership with the US is thus considered a security guarantee for the country. This is not an unusual approach in Romanian foreign policy, which has traditionally relied on the big players in the Black Sea region, at the expense of co-operation with its neighbours.<sup>41</sup> The need for strengthening its place in the western security systems became even more acute after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and even more so after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

### **Interests in the Middle East**

The Middle East direction is quite vaguely mentioned in Romanian strategic documents, as a region that directly and indirectly affects the country's national interests,<sup>42</sup> together with North Africa. The strategic documents emphasise the importance of focusing on both the Southern and Eastern dimensions. In the Military Strategy, developments in the MENA region are mentioned as "a true paradigm shift in Romania's area of strategic interest."<sup>43</sup>

### **Strategic credibility**

The concept of strategic credibility resonates throughout the Romanian strategic documents as one of the main characteristics of its foreign policy. In other words, Romania aims to be a predictable and credible ally.<sup>44</sup> According to Gerasymchuk,<sup>45</sup> this is a rather new trend in Romanian strategic thinking. Romania is aware that the security

interests of NATO members differ and is willing to accommodate this in exchange for a security guarantee.<sup>46</sup> By its involvement in the Middle East it aims to help bear the burden of the Southern flank states and thereby strengthen their relationship.

### ***Stabilisation of migration flows***

Before the events of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s and ongoing destabilisation of the Middle East, Romania had perceived terrorism and migration as threats existing only far beyond its borders. However, the updated strategic documents note the deteriorating security environment in the ME neighbourhood and the possibility of the influence of these threats on its territory. The Defence Strategy describes the crises in the Middle East, including terrorism, Islamic radicalisation, and intensified migration, as a challenge to security.<sup>47</sup> Migration especially threatens the stability of Europe as a whole, and consequently also Romania. The migration crises, however, should primarily be managed by the EU.<sup>48</sup> Terrorism, according to the strategy, is not a directly threatening issue within Romania, but the proximity of countries where it flourishes makes terrorism an external threat.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Restoration of historical relations with Middle Eastern countries***

Romania has always had interests in the Middle East, especially during the communist regime. The country had close relations with many Arab countries in the Middle East, as well as with Iran. For instance, Romania helped install Iraqi infrastructure, with the former Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana claiming that Romania had built one-third of Iraq's economy.<sup>50</sup> Another example of pre-1989 cooperation is Lebanon, which used to invest heavily in Romanian businesses. Romania considers Lebanon the "ideal gateway to Middle East" to this day.<sup>51</sup> However, after 1989 and the westernisation of Romanian foreign policy, good economic and diplomatic relations with Arab states have been almost entirely suspended. Post-communist Romania saw all its interests in integration into Western organisations and the transition to a market economy.<sup>52</sup> Since 2006 the country has been trying to restore its frozen relations with Middle Eastern countries. Nonetheless, they still remain rather low-profile.<sup>53</sup> Some voices claim that Romania should follow up on its pre-1989 ME policy as soon as possible, before the former links are completely forgotten by a new generation of Middle Eastern politicians.<sup>54</sup> Also, according to Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Teodor Melescanu, the development of political and economic relations between Romania and Arab states is a priority for Romanian foreign policy. In this regard, Romania should aim to resolve disagreements through bilateral negotiations, in order to resolve crises and bring stability and peace to the Middle East.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Mediation between Israel and Turkey***

As Turkish-Israeli relations have worsened, Romania has seen itself as a possible mediator between the two countries, since it has excellent relations with both sides. Turkey as a NATO member and Israel as a NATO partner are both strategically important for the Alliance and for the United States in the Mediterranean and Middle East

region. Romania could therefore serve as a middle ground in the Israel-Turkey-US security triangle.<sup>56</sup> On one hand Turkey represents a strategic partner, besides the US, with which Romania co-operates on a high level. On the other hand, Romanian relations with Israel were good even during the communist regime, when it was the only country from the Eastern Bloc that had diplomatic relations with Israel between 1967 and 1989. Intergovernmental discussion and joint military exercises are common among these countries.<sup>57</sup> However, Romania proceeds carefully in the Palestinian question since it does not want to undermine its efforts to build relations with other Arab countries.<sup>58</sup>

## **Level of engagement**

On the rhetorical level, Romanian representatives are strongly supportive of Romanian involvement in NATO's ME initiatives. The current Prime Minister Ludovic Orban does not even oppose further engagement of NATO in the Middle East and says that Romania should actively join in.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, President Iohannis has expressed the need to explore new ways for NATO to "become more involved in the region and in the fight against terrorism."<sup>60</sup>

## **Military engagement**

According to its Military Strategy, Romania should participate in NATO collective defence in several ways. The country should provide its capabilities to NATO and its strategic partnerships, participate in various initiatives and programmes of the Alliance, as well as in operations abroad.<sup>61</sup> Thanks to its strategic location, Romania can contribute to allied missions and operations in Middle East and Asia by providing logistic support. For instance, the Constanța air base helps to create an air bridge for transfer of NATO personnel and equipment to and from Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup> In 2019, Romanian Armed Forces (RAF) participated in foreign missions and operations with around 1,902 soldiers. The Ministry of Internal Affairs sent to these operations another 760 servicemen and police officers. It is mostly active within the mission in Afghanistan and the Sea Guardian naval operation in the Mediterranean; in 2019 it deployed several hundred soldiers to these operations.<sup>63</sup>

## **NATO Mission Iraq**

Romania joined the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq in 2016, in order to support the fight of the US-led coalition against Daesh. Later in 2017, it extended the mission's mandate to the territory of Kuwait and in 2019 to Qatar. About 50 soldiers and police officers from both the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior were deployed in OIR. The deployment within the NATO Mission Iraq is considerably smaller. The mandate allowed for 18 military advisors to take part in the mission structure, and no Interior Ministry personnel.<sup>64</sup> By the end of the year only fourteen soldiers of the Romanian Armed Forces were present. The deployed soldiers are engaged in providing expertise at the Iraqi War College, advising the Iraqi Ministry of Defence with military reforms and training Iraqi military instructors.<sup>65</sup> Undoubtedly, it cannot be

	Romanian Armed Forces	Ministry of Internal Affairs Forces
Soldiers abroad (mandate)	1902	760
% of total personnel	2.6 %	3.2 %
Soldiers in NMI (deployed)	14	0
<b>% out of soldiers abroad</b>	<b>0.74 %</b>	<b>0 %</b>

**Figure 1.** Personnel in foreign operations and in NMI. *Note:* Romania counts personnel from the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior separately<sup>73</sup>.

said that Romania shirks its duties. Given that the NMI is generally a smaller NATO operation with about 580 personnel from all member states, the significance of each member state's contribution cannot be primarily deduced from the numbers of deployed personnel to the mission. More clarity of how much importance is given by the state to direct engagement in the NMI can be seen in the percentage of troops in the operation out of the total number of troops deployed in foreign operations. Such a comparison shows that Romania, which is otherwise quite active in operations beyond its borders, participates with the lowest share in the NMI.

### **NATO Partnerships**

The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made assistance to partner states one of its objectives in NATO. Nonetheless, while the ministry has not prioritised its NATO partnerships, ongoing Romanian assistance to Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova strongly suggests that its main focus is on the Eastern Partnership. Romania aims to help strengthen the resilience and defence capabilities of its Middle East partners, as well as support their counter-terrorist efforts.<sup>66</sup> Romania sees the Mediterranean Dialogue partnership as a framework that connects different actors in the Mediterranean region with NATO and helps them build mutual confidence. The country claims to support both partnerships, both politically and practically,<sup>67</sup> but this is not reflected in practice and public communication on these topics is lacking. Within the Mediterranean Dialogue, Romania has co-operated more actively with the countries of North Africa, particularly Mauritania and Mali, than with countries in the Middle East region.

On one occasion, the Romanian Special Naval Forces helped to train and assist partner states within NATO Mediterranean Dialogue.<sup>68</sup> Another co-operation initiative started in November 2019, when the first round of the "Romania-Egypt Defence Forum" took place in Bucharest and the two countries proclaimed their will to co-operate in order to manage the security situation in the Mediterranean.<sup>69</sup> Another NATO Mediterranean Dialogue partner country that Romania co-operates with is Jordan. For Romania it is considered a "major NATO partner" in the region and a state that is affected by the Syrian refugee crises. Therefore, Romania has decided to support Jordan with humanitarian aid, which in 2015 amounted 1 million lei (over 200,000 EUR).<sup>70</sup> Romania also participates in the Science for Peace and Security Programme, but it does not co-

operate with ICI or Mediterranean Dialogue countries, except for Mauritania. Also, Romania's NATO Contact Point Embassies are more oriented towards the countries around the Black Sea, where its main strategic interest lies. While Romania has several diplomatic missions throughout the Middle East, only its embassy in Kuwait has served as a NATO Contact Point for a two-year period since 2019.<sup>71</sup> Kuwait is an especially important part of the ICI partnership, since it hosts the ICI Regional Centre.

## Conclusions

Our proposed conceptual framework enables a qualitative analysis of free riding along two axes: strategic interest and level of engagement. According to this framework, a high level of strategic interest but lack of corresponding engagement would denote a free rider. In other words, free riding does not mean a definite lack of input; it is merely a situation where a state's level of engagement is lower than its interest.

A country that falls into this category has strong interests in the Middle East yet does not act on them through engagement in NATO Middle East 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>72</sup> In line with this 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. The alternative explanation is that the country prefers other multilateral frameworks or bilateral co-operation to NATO and finds them more suitable for pursuing its interests in the Middle East. The reality will most likely be a combination of these factors and Romania fits both criteria: it has a relatively 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. Furthermore, for Romania NATO is not the primary framework to promote its interest in the Middle East. Instead, Romania is focusing on bilateral strategic partnerships with countries like Turkey, and it would prefer the EU to step up more in the stabilisation of the region.

The level of Romanian strategic interest and engagement in NATO is reflected in its approach to the Middle East within the organisation. The transactional character of the country's interest in the Middle East is particularly visible: Romania pays attention to the issues of the NATO Southern flank in order to maintain the attention of the Alliance on its own security concerns, referring to the basic principle of NATO collective defence. A prominent element influencing the scope of any state's interests and cooperation with Middle Eastern 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 co-operate on some level with several Arab countries. While the regimes of the CEE countries changed, many of the Middle Eastern regimes persisted, and CEE states such as Romania see the possibility to renew these relations. Moreover, Romania, because of its geographical position, interacted with the Middle East long before the twentieth century, which also heightens its interests. In this regard, Romania is trying to balance its relations with Israel and the Arab countries.

The need for stabilisation of the Middle East and achieving a sustainable equilibrium there is one of the most prominent of Romanian interests. This is an almost entirely threat-driven perspective since the Romanian government considers the instability of

the Middle East as 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, Romanian authorities are concerned with terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation in Europe via migration and diasporas. Romania is aware that while in general these threats do not at the moment directly affect its territory, in the future they could. Another concern is the potential destabilisation of NATO's Southern flank caused by these factors, which would consequently destabilise the whole Alliance. With regards to how to handle the instability in the Middle East, Romania would prefer EU management of these threats to the NATO framework.

Because Romania values the broader concept of strategic credibility, it considers participation in NATO operations abroad as a necessary contribution to the Alliance. Yet, while it participates in the NATO Mission Iraq, this activity is definitely sub-optimal not only in the context of Romania's other engagement as showed in Figure 1, but also in view of its ambitious interests. The country expresses interest in becoming more involved in the Middle East and renewing old ties with the region, but it does not pursue many specific interests and is left with strategic credibility as the most important. For instance, whereas it aspires to pursue economic interests in the Middle East, it is still in the phase of trying to establish economic relations with ME countries and explore the options that local markets offer without having yet made any palpable progress or success in this regard.

These results show the significance of qualitative analysis that is not based solely on economic indicators. Furthermore, our paper contributes to the theory development by analysing the defence institution from the point of view of its architecture as a vehicle of national interests. Romania as a NATO member which spends more than the 2% target on defence cannot be labelled a free rider. However, we argue that even if the country meets this criterion, it can free ride on the collective goods provided by the Alliance in other less quantifiable areas of transatlantic co-operation, such as advancing its interests in the Middle East. Free riding on the political level of interests, together with scrutinising microeconomic indicators which show where the money is actually spent, raises again the question of the validity of the popular 2% threshold as the main criterion for assessing commitment to NATO.

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