

NATO'S REFLECTION PROCESS ON THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD(S)

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The report¹ on NATO's southern neighbourhoods, prepared by the Independent Experts Group, was made public on 7 May. It highlights the fact that European security is linked to that of the security of the southern periphery and contains practical recommendations on what NATO should do to strengthen its approach to, and engagement with, these geographies in a way to make the best use of the existing NATO instruments.

The Independent Experts Group which was established by the NATO Secretary General in October last year to take stock of evolving developments in NATO's southern neighbourhood and identify concrete recommendations to shape the Alliance's future approach presented its final report to the Secretary General on 20 March. Allied Foreign Ministers provided their feedback on this report during their meeting in April.

Some of the proposals in this report overlap with the earlier proposals set out by "NATO 2030: United for a New Era" Report² which was prepared by another Independent Experts Group on NATO 2030 agenda that the author of this commentary took part in.

360-degree approach to guide NATO activities

The past developments and current challenges indeed tell us that European security is intrinsically connected to that of the security of Europe's southern periphery. NATO should maintain its 360-degree approach to deter and defend against all threats and challenges coming from any direction. This is important especially at a time when a clear-cut separation which was felt in the past between the two directions (east and south) has lost its relevance.

Indeed, Russia has become a more prominent role in the Mediterranean region, including in Syria and in Libya. China, on the other hand, is a rising actor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Nevertheless, their positions differed in the past, especially before the war in Ukraine. Whereas Russia's interest lied exploiting the turmoil in the region to the detriment of the West's interests, China's priority was prone to maintaining stability and security due to its focus on and interest in commerce and investments. That said, it is clear that both countries were trying to gain bridgeheads in the region, and it looks like this situation could persist in the future as well. In any case China's presence in northern and sub-Saharan Africa, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean is increasingly perceived by the West through a strategic lens.

¹ https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf

² https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially after the turmoil and the ongoing human tragedy caused by the Israeli military operations in clear violation of international law following the onslaught of Hamas on 7 October, will probably attract increasing attention of major powers and regional actors. Needless to say, the already existing challenges would be compounded by the role and nature of non-state actors in the region.

The threats and challenges emanating from the east have long been assessed as a corollary to “deterrence and defence” doctrine, while those caused by the instability in the south are categorised under the banner of “projecting stability”. However, we need to recall that NATO’s role in the fight against terrorism, a cross-cutting issue, is an integral part of the Alliance’s 360-degree approach, including both “deterrence and defence” and “projecting stability”; as such, it contributes to Alliance’s all three core tasks.

NATO Strategic Concept’s Direction for Fight Against Terrorism

NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept³ offers a clear portrait of how such challenges may be addressed in a 360-degree approach. The Alliance considers multiple factors affecting security in the MENA region. These are outlined in the Strategic Environment, as follows:

“Conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East directly affect our security and the security of our partners. NATO’s southern neighbourhoods, particularly the Middle East, North Africa, and Sahel regions, face interconnected security, demographic, economic and political challenges. These are aggravated by the impact of climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies and food insecurity. This situation provides fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including terrorist organisations. It also enables destabilising and coercive interference by strategic competitors”.

Alongside the necessity of facing new and aggravated challenges, NATO continues to attach crucial importance to combatting terrorism. Along with Russia, terrorism is the other major threat that NATO confronts. Terrorism, with all its forms and manifestations, is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries, and to international stability and prosperity. Any strategic anticipation tells us that terrorism will remain high on NATO’s agenda for the foreseeable future. NATO, therefore, should continue to fight this threat with determination and in full solidarity. NATO’s work on counterterrorism focuses on improving awareness of the threat, developing capabilities to prepare and respond, and enhancing engagement with partner countries and other international actors. The Alliance acknowledges both the importance of combatting terrorism and the necessity to fight it, including also with new and more lethal technologies.

Given the prevailing strategic environment in the southern neighbourhood and the importance of countering terrorism, the Strategic Concept outlines different responses across the full spectrum

³ https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

of NATO's core tasks, namely deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. Under its core task of deterrence and defense, NATO will continue to apply deterrence of denial against terrorist threats, combined with attack prevention and measures of protection, particularly for its populations. The importance of broader support in the fight against terrorism also requires NATO's coordination and cooperation with the EU and the UN as crucial partners. The same approach manifests itself in the crisis management and prevention section, where the Allies commit to "ensure the resources, capabilities, training and command and control arrangements to deploy and sustain military and civilian crisis management, stabilisation and counterterrorism operations including at strategic distance".

There is no agreed definition of what "the south" geographically entails, neither of what "terrorism" means and how to fight it, and what role NATO should have. One may notice varied approaches even among the southern Allies. More alignment of Allied policies and approaches on these issues will provide them with the ability to act with a sense of unity, cohesion, and solidarity. Since terrorism is perceived as an existential threat by some Allied countries, any disagreement on the classification of terrorist groups will continue to hamper the possibility to act together. The support that certain allies have been giving to those groups which are affiliated with some of the terrorist organisations jeopardises the unity and cohesion among Allies. It is inconceivable to see such support to be rendered with the pretext that these groups serve their interests in their fight against another terrorist organisation (ISIL). At the same time it is ironic that this support has long been qualified as "tactical, temporary and transactional" just like in the case of support given to PYD/YPG, a group affiliated to PKK, which is classified as a terrorist organisation by both the US and the EU. A more resolute stance by NATO in countering terrorism by making use of political, military, and other means that are at its disposal would be essential. In this vein, NATO's role should not remain limited only to contributing to capacity building in partner nations who possess limited means.

NATO can facilitate enhanced consultations and common understanding among Allies on strategic developments on the periphery of the Alliance and beyond if they share same perspectives as to the fundamentals of fighting terrorism as I alluded to earlier. That would also facilitate efforts to take all measures individually and collectively to eradicate terrorism and address its root causes. While individual Allies retain the primary responsibility for their domestic security, and for their own resilience, more determined, coordinated, and integrated joint work is needed to achieve the necessary effect in combating terrorism.

Maritime security

The direct connection between Mediterranean and European security is most obvious in maritime security. Surveillance and control of maritime space have become critical issues for NATO. Analysts are concerned about the risk of maritime terrorism and even piracy in the Mediterranean. These require Allies to be forthcoming on allocation of maritime capabilities during NATO's force generation processes. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate deterrence and defence into the

regional defense plans without losing sight of adverse implications stemming from the southern periphery.

Transformation in MENA and NATO's engagement with partners in the region

Beyond questions related to power politics, the so-called Arab revolutions that broke out in the 2010s continue to transform the region's governance, economy, and society. Furthermore, as the Arab revolutions have dramatically highlighted, in the MENA region socio-economic imbalances such as unemployment, inflation and external debt have negative consequences for the relationship between economic prosperity and stability. On the other hand, population growth, coupled with low economic growth, has become a major source of domestic instability. Demographic and economic disparities are not the sole source of migration, from rural to urban areas within the MENA region, but also towards more prosperous and secure states outside this region. That is why migration across the Mediterranean will remain on Europe's agenda for the foreseeable future.

In 30 years of political dialogue and practical cooperation through the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) countries and 20 years with Arab Gulf states within the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), NATO has been able to successfully build a culture of cooperation in the security field, with 11 regional partner countries with varying level of development and security backgrounds. Despite their differences they share an interest in engaging with NATO as an influential strategic actor and as a practical contributor to their security needs. Negative public attitudes towards NATO in MENA remain a challenge, but a manageable one.

Since 2006 all MD countries have developed Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programs as a functioning tool, and they all are updating them regardless of the regime changes they underwent following the Arab revolutions. They all wish to further strengthen their partnership with NATO to modernise their defense and security institutions.

"Arc of instability" including Sahel and ways to bolster NATO's partnerships

All in all, an "arc of instability" that stretches from the Gulf to Maghreb, including the neighbouring Sahel, compels NATO and its partners to keep thinking about how to respond to evolving traditional and non-conventional threats and challenges.

NATO and its MD and ICI partners do face common transnational security challenges and threats: terrorism, spillover from failing and failed states, trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery means, maritime security, protection of sea lanes of communication and energy supply routes. NATO can provide an added value with its experience and expertise to address some of these challenges, in line with one of its core tasks, namely cooperative security, while complementing the efforts of other International Organisations (IOs), like the UN and the EU.

New informal mechanisms could be developed to bring a range of relevant regional actors into the MD. The Mediterranean security environment now embraces a set of wider regional links. To the south, conditions in sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel are having a direct effect on the stability in North Africa.

It is evident that stability and security in the MENA region cannot be perceived in isolation from that of the Sahel region. The growing relevance of Africa to the security of the MENA region points to the utility of including the G-5 Sahel, the African Union, and other regional organisations like the League of the Arab States in MD activities, when relevant.

NATO must think more creatively about how it utilises partnerships in the South. A more proactive engagement with relevant MENA and Sahel countries is necessary with a view to “enabling the region to stand on its own feet” by fully respecting regional ownership. This needs to start with result-oriented political engagement. NATO must put itself at the center of an informal system of overlapping organisations and bilateral/multilateral relationships to respond to threats and contribute to stability in the region together with other stakeholders.

NATO should increase defence capacity and institution building efforts; strengthen targeted public diplomacy efforts to raise awareness about NATO and improve its profile in the eyes of the MENA populations.

Through the individualised and tailored approach with MD and ICI partners, NATO should make the best use of existing tools in its long-term engagement with a sense of joint ownership, rather than inventing new initiatives. Although currently there seems to be little support to expand MD partnership, countries like Libya could be brought in over time when conditions permit.

The Alliance should energise current partnerships while deepening and diversifying its dialogue with MENA and ICI partners, showing interest not only in traditional security issues but also cooperation in focusing on civil society, non-military actors, and new generations of future leaders and citizens to make it perceived more positively. Such a course of action would also strengthen their societal resilience.

The current and future security challenges can only be eased if different international actors are willing to act together by providing their distinct value-added as part of a comprehensive approach. Therefore, further strengthening NATO’s coordination and cooperation with other IOs to make international efforts more effective and efficient would be essential.

The EU is an active partner of NATO in the south. However, frankly speaking, the effectiveness of EU’s efforts is somewhat questionable. Both its mission in Iraq, and the Irini operation that it launched off-the coast of Libya proved to be detached from broader international efforts. A more effective, coordinated NATO-EU cooperation in the region could certainly yield more effective results and bring genuine added value. The example of cooperation in the past such as Iran nuclear dossier is noteworthy. This could expand to a future diplomatic effort for the Middle East Peace Process. But a willingness to cooperate and coordinate must be mutual. And the EU should consult with NATO, just as NATO does the same with the EU.

NATO should not lose sight of the importance of engaging with other regional organisations. Earlier I referred to G5 Sahel, the African Union, and the League of the Arab States. Seeking more proactive engagement with Islamic Cooperation Organisation and GCC would also contribute to NATO's stance and image in the South.

Conclusion

The reflection on the south was a timely and relevant undertaking for NATO. The Independent Experts Group Report provides ways and means as to how NATO can operationalise certain proposals in the period ahead. Appointment of a Special Envoy for the Southern Neighbourhoods will no doubt provide a clear focal point for partners as an interlocutor. In that respect the appointment of a Coordinator for fight against terrorism dedicating his/her full-time to this important question (whose duties are currently fulfilled, among many other responsibilities, by Assistant Secretary General for Operations) would also sharpen the focus in confronting one of the major sources of threat that NATO faces. Other proposals in strengthening NATO's engagement with southern partners, including NATO's effective public diplomacy efforts in these countries, deserve the attention of all Allies in making this engagement not only a demand-driven but also an interest-driven exercise. In any case this report should not suffice to "tick a box" in the bureaucratic machinery of NATO, but rather serve the Alliance's 360-degree approach in real terms.