
NATO and the south: opportunities for coherence and integration

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Theme

The evolving security environment to Europe's South poses important challenges to NATO, demanding coherence between projecting stability and collective defence.

Summary

Challenges from the south present opportunities in the context of Alliance adaptation and modernisation. Externally, shared interests in the south can catalyse further cooperation between NATO and its partners. Internally, requirements in the south can stimulate NATO's process of integrating strategic and operational planning for an omnidirectional, multi-domain approach to the defence of Europe.

Analysis

South is central

At their 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO Allies drew attention to 'security challenges and threats that originate from the east and from the south'. They noted that the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), agreed at the 2014 Wales Summit, 'responds to the risks and threats emanating from our southern neighbourhood, the Middle East, and North Africa', and established a 'framework for the south', aiming at improving situational awareness, strategic anticipation and projecting stability through partnership and capacity building.¹

At their July 2018 Summit in Brussels, Allies will build on their work since Warsaw to further upgrade their collective defence, and to project stability in Europe's neighbourhood. A shared understanding of the centrality of the south to *both* collective defence *and* projecting stability would help the Alliance modernise and solidify its relationships with partners, improving both coherence and cohesion.

When we talk about 'the south' in the context of NATO and Europe, we are talking about the Mediterranean world. It is difficult to overstate the centrality of the Mediterranean world, to Europe and to the entire transatlantic community. For most of human history, societies along the Mediterranean were more connected to one another than Mediterranean Europe was to Northern Europe. Even the new Atlantic world that arose

This paper reflects solely the author's views.

¹ NATO (2016), 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué', 9/VII/2016, last accessed 29/I/2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm?selectedLocale=en.

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in the 15th and 16th centuries –and which is embodied by the modern transatlantic community– is in many senses an heir to Mediterranean culture.²

It is also difficult to overstate the strategic centrality of the Mediterranean in the current security environment. Nine NATO allies (Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece and Turkey) have Mediterranean coastlines, which means they directly share this ancient and critical line of communication with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt on the Mediterranean's southern shore, and Syria, Lebanon and Israel on the eastern shore. Two EU members (Malta and Cyprus) are Mediterranean islands. The Mediterranean is also a conduit between Europe and the broader Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Mediterranean was the top venue for short sea shipping for EU ports in 2015, amounting to 29% of the total.³

Migration –particularly irregular migration– across the Mediterranean remains a strategic issue. While Mediterranean Sea arrivals in Europe declined from their high of over one million in 2015 to just over 170,000 in 2017,⁴ the movement and integration of migrants transiting the Mediterranean remains a topic of major concern for Europe,⁵ and even for the US.⁶ Our collective understanding of the security implications of trans-Mediterranean migration is still evolving,⁷ making clear transatlantic consensus difficult to achieve.

NATO's objectives in the south?

Given the importance of the Mediterranean, we might expect NATO to have identified strategic ends or mid- to long-term objectives for its southern and eastern shores. In a perfect strategic world, planners would align such clearly defined ends with available means and identify ways to achieve them. In the real world, however, strategy rarely functions like that. There is no 'end', and strategists function more like gardeners tending an ever-changing environment subject to endless variables, than like artists producing a final *chef d'oeuvre* and then moving on.

² Fernand Braudel (1949), *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Armand Colin, Paris.

³ Eurostat (2017), 'Maritime transport statistics – short sea shipping of goods', February, last accessed 18/1/2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Maritime_transport_statistics_-_short_sea_shipping_of_goods.

⁴ UNHCR (2018), 'Mediterranean situation', 17/1/2018, last accessed 18/1/2018, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

⁵ European Commission (2017), 'Fifth Progress Report on the Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration', Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, The European Council and the Council, European Commission, Brussels.

⁶ Although the US has accepted a relatively small number of refugees from the greater Mediterranean region in recent years, migration remains a salient issue in US politics. See, for example, Jennifer Epstein, Erik Wasson & Arit John (2018), 'Senator calls Trump's denial of 'shithole' comment 'not true'', Bloomberg Politics, 12/1/2018, last accessed 18/1/2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-11/trump-said-to-call-haiti-african-nations-shithole-countries>.

⁷ Vincenzo Bove & Tobias Böhmelt (2016), 'Does immigration induce terrorism?', *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 78, nr 2, p. 572-588.

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Ideally, NATO's objectives for the south would be publicly announced after being formally agreed by the North Atlantic Council, deeply informed by a military-strategic vision emanating from NATO's military authorities and by the objectives and capabilities of NATO's partners in the region –including the desires of their citizens–. Those objectives would be an integral part of a larger strategic approach. In reality, NATO's leaders do not have the luxury of such a neat, linear approach to strategy. Adversaries and events vote emphatically, leaving NATO and national planners to continually construct and maintain a strategic airplane while in flight, building consensus as they go under conditions of perpetual uncertainty.

Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg nonetheless summarised NATO's broad objective for the south thus: 'to protect our territory, we must be willing to project stability beyond our borders. If our neighbours are more stable, we are more secure'.⁸ Questions, of course remain, even as NATO begins 'projecting stability' to the south: do allies have a shared understanding of the meaning of stability? What is the relationship between stability and other interests and values Allies share, like support for liberal democracy and human rights? Are there trade-offs between these values and interests or are they mutually supportive? *Who* is to provide stability? The difficulty of these questions challenges consensus between 29 allies with differing situations and interests. NATO remains irreplaceable as a platform to reconcile those differences in the interest of a common approach.

Means required are not means available

This necessary ambiguity, at least in the near- to mid-term, means making do with means currently available. In the broadest sense, those means have increased since 2015, with allied defence spending rising in accordance with the pledge Allied Heads of State and Government made to one another at their Wales Summit: to halt or reverse declines in defence spending, and to move towards spending 2% of GDP on defence (and 20% of defence budgets on equipment modernisation) over the ensuing decade.

Identifying and providing the appropriate operational means to protect allied territory by "Projecting Stability," however, is challenging. NATO is continually adapting, and the current iteration of this process is driven by dual developments in the international system. First, rising revisionist powers are challenging the post-Cold War order of which NATO is a cornerstone. They are doing so across the continuum of conflict: engaging in political warfare without geographic boundaries, unconventional and conventional military actions, and strategic –even nuclear– posturing. Secondly, non-state actors are posing increasingly complex challenges to Western societies.

It is tempting to conceptualise NATO's approach to the south as related exclusively to this second development, but doing so risks an artificial fissure in overall strategic coherence and cohesion among allies, as well as an unnecessary resource challenge. NATO's ongoing process of adaptation and modernisation provides ways out of this

⁸ Jens Stoltenberg (2016), 'Projecting stability: charting NATO's future – Speech to the Atlantic Council, Washington, DC', NATO, April, last accessed 19/1/2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_129758.htm?selectedLocale=en.

impasse, ranging from adjustments to NATO's command structure to the integration of emerging operational plans.

Ways: making do and making it up

NATO has undertaken some formal and informal institutional adaptations aimed specifically at addressing Europe's southern neighbourhood, generally explained in terms of addressing the root causes that we presume to be driving terrorism and irregular migration. At the same time, the Alliance is undergoing broader adaptation aimed at more global challenges. Bringing coherence to these somewhat disparate efforts is likely to help address some of the difficulties in identifying clear objectives in the south, and concomitant challenges in appropriately resourcing those objectives.

One useful step would be to broaden our understanding of NATO's approach to the south to extend beyond the current focus on addressing urgent threats and challenges related to non-state actors and violent extremist organisations (VEOs). Specifically, the fact that revisionist state actors have proved willing and able to challenge NATO across domains, regions and functions means that the south is not just a place where allies go to help partners build capacity to mitigate threats from terrorists and VEOs. Rather, it is also an area in which rival states will challenge the Alliance across the spectrum of conflict. The likelihood of a permanent Russian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is but one instance of this phenomenon. Proliferation of ballistic missiles among both state- and non-state actors around the Mediterranean basin⁹ means that allied territory in the Central Mediterranean and key military and commercial transit points from the Bab-el-Mandeb, to the Bosphorus, to Gibraltar, can be held at risk. Given these challenges, achieving coherence between approaches to state actors and non-state actors should be central to the process of refining and integrating NATO's regionally-focused operational plans into a clear, 360-degree vision for the defence of Europe.

Effective integration also requires achieving coherence across a broad range of ongoing activities. NATO continues to refine its vision of Projecting Stability, requiring coordination between allies, partners and international organisations. NATO has actively engaged its wide network of partners to discuss military contributions to enhance stability in the south, while acknowledging the centrality of political, economic and social elements that can only be delivered by local governments –with help from organisations like the EU–.¹⁰ NATO's 'Framework for the south' includes a 'Hub for the south' to enable such engagements.¹¹ The Hub, along with initiatives to pool intelligence capabilities, also aims at improving situational awareness and anticipation.

⁹ Jean-Loup Samaan (2017), 'The missile threat in the Mediterranean: implications for European security', ARI, nr 79/2017, Elcano Royal Institute, last accessed 29/1/2018, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/ri/elcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari79-2017-samaan-missile-threat-mediterranean-implications-european-security.

¹⁰ Petr Pavel (2018), 'Opening Remarks at 178th Military Committee in Chiefs of Defence Session', North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 16/1/2018, last accessed 19/1/2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_150656.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹¹ Jens Stoltenberg (2017), 'Press Conference following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Defence Ministers on deterrence and defence', NATO, 15/11/2017, last accessed 23/1/2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_141109.htm.

But NATO's role in and around the Mediterranean goes beyond Projecting Stability. For example, the Alliance is also revisiting its maritime posture. While many of the Alliance's adaptations since 2014 have been land-focused, a vast majority of SACEUR's Area of Responsibility is, in fact, water. The maritime domain is one area in which NATO can build coherence around the multi-domain nature of state-centric challenges –and allied responses–. During the Cold War, maritime power was central to NATO's deterrence posture. During NATO's 'out of area' period, characterised by actions outside of allied territory, allies saw sea power as a supporting effort for such actions.

Although NATO's 2011 Alliance Maritime Strategy aligned NATO's maritime posture with the three core tasks identified in the 2010 Strategic Concept, there was no particular emphasis on deterrence and collective defence. But the focus has begun to shift. Maritime power is particularly suited to address the 360-degree complexity of the challenge specifically posed by Russia, which Vice-Admiral Clive Johnson, Commander Allied Maritime Command, has described as 'omni-directional and threatening of our freedoms and of our infrastructure, whether you see them as an enemy or not', highlighting the extension of Russian area denial capabilities into the Eastern Mediterranean.¹² A sharpening focus on maritime posture and capabilities from the perspective of collective defence may help NATO integrate its regional postures, and at the same time improve coherence between Defence and Deterrence on the one hand, and Projecting Stability on the other. Continued work on operationalising the Alliance Maritime strategy is thus key to addressing defence and deterrence in the south.

Improving relations with other organisations is also critical to NATO's approach to the south. While working with organisations like the African Union to achieve a regional approach is important, success starts closer to home: with the EU.¹³ Twenty-two of NATO's 29 allies are currently EU members. Not only do NATO Europe and the EU share essentially one set of forces, they also largely share one set of economic and diplomatic instruments. Inter-organisational coherence is elemental to a comprehensive approach to the stability of the south.

There are several areas in which coordination is critical. European allies' capabilities depend largely on resource allocation decisions that are shaped by economic and fiscal policies agreed by EU members. An ongoing dialogue between NATO and the EU regarding the security implications of fiscal and economic policies (and vice versa) would benefit members of both organisations as they seek to develop critical capabilities in a resource-constrained environment. NATO's recognition that stability in the south requires a whole of government or integrated approach implies coordination with the EU to avoid duplicative efforts.

¹² Clive Johnstone (2017), 'NATO's maritime moment: a watershed year in Alliance sea power', Allied Maritime Command, 17/1/2017, last accessed 19/1/2018, <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2017/nato-maritime-moment-a-watershed-year-in-alliance-sea-power.aspx>.

¹³ The President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation noted the importance of such inter-organisational cooperation in their Joint Declaration Signed at Warsaw of 8/VII/2016.

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Areas in which the EU has particular strengths and has identified a central role for itself are the promotion of good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights; economic development; migration and mobility; and security. If NATO and the EU could build on initial cooperation on migration issues¹⁴ to successfully map and coordinate their efforts, and those of their members and partners, NATO would be able to focus on the areas where it can add the most value: collective defence (which it provides directly in the form of, for example, a robust maritime presence in the Mediterranean) and defence capacity building (which it provides in cooperation with regional partners). NATO is, in fact, already doing a great deal in the realm of Defence Capacity Building: focusing, for instance, on counter-terrorism in Tunisia, and further developing Jordan's security forces and institutions.¹⁵

Local ownership of efforts across this spectrum is key to success. This requires NATO to facilitate coordination *between* partners in the region and between those partners and the EU where possible and necessary. Developing a common picture of the gamut of activities being undertaken on the ground has proved a significant challenge – conventional and special operations forces currently present can work in conjunction with diplomats to provide data for fusion into such a common operating picture–.

Such assets, of course, require effective command and control. While NATO's Hub for the South and Framework for the South are beginning to support enhanced situational awareness, assessment and coordination, NATO's work on adapting its Command Structure will need to bring such efforts into the Command Structure in a more formal way, likely emphasising the role of Allied Joint Force Command Naples. As NATO integrates regional operational plans and seeks to achieve coherence across domains and regions, it is appropriate to consider enhancing the regional focus of its operational commands.

Conclusions

The south is indeed central to NATO's strategic future. The key questions facing the Alliance are how to define objectives for the region around which Allies can achieve consensus, how to identify and make available appropriate means to achieve those objectives and how to ensure coherence among various activities aimed at supporting them. There will not be an end point where all these key questions are answered to the satisfaction of all Allies, to say nothing of regional and organisational partners. But there is reason to be optimistic that ongoing processes of adapting NATO's Command Structure, integrating Allied operational plans at the theatre level, focusing on a 360-degree maritime posture and systematically engaging front-line partners to take the lead in stabilising the region will yield incremental progress. As NATO develops its approaches to upgrading collective defence and projecting stability in its neighbourhood in preparation for its July Summit, a shared understanding of the centrality of the south to *both* of those projects can help achieve coherence, cohesion and strategic integration.

¹⁴ NATO (2016), 'Assistance for the refugee and migrant crisis in the Aegean Sea', NATO, 27/VI/2016, last accessed 24/II/2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_128746.htm.

¹⁵ Jens Stoltenberg (2017), 'Pre-ministerial press conference', NATO, 4/XII/2017, last accessed 24/II/2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_149330.htm?selectedLocale=en.