

Emerging security challenges in NATO's southern neighbourhood

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Theme

NATO confronts an increasingly complex and risk-prone environment. A more assertive Russia poses specific challenges and the Alliance has made headway in addressing risks emanating from the east. NATO has been less explicit in addressing risks emanating from the Mediterranean and from the 'south' more generally. These risks are real and will make new demands on Alliance strategy in the years ahead.

Summary

NATO has always had a southern exposure. Since the early years of the Alliance, the question of how to understand and address challenges emanating from the Mediterranean and beyond has been on the NATO agenda in political and security terms. Today's strategic environment provides a new context for this traditional question, but also raises fundamental questions of geography, alliance politics and a shared approach to risks. Transatlantic relations and NATO burden-sharing will be elements in the equation as NATO looks south.

Analysis

The definition of the southern limits of the NATO area of responsibility was a key political issue when Algeria was still part of France and other members retained colonies in Africa and elsewhere. The earliest NATO enlargements were southbound, with Greece and Turkey. During the Cold War, the East-West military balance had a distinct southern dimension, alongside more focused threats on the northern and central flanks. But despite the considerable military assets and infrastructure deployed across NATO's southern region, the Mediterranean remained a secondary concern in Alliance strategy. The defence of Frankfurt and Athens were never really equivalent strategic priorities. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, challenges in the south were seen as local concerns, or linked to broader questions of global strategy, of interest largely to the US. The experience of two Gulf Wars reinforced this perception, with NATO's south serving, above all, as a logistical link to the Gulf. Formal NATO strategy continued –and continues– to treat Mediterranean challenges as a fully equivalent part of collective defence. But Alliance politics and the wider strategic debate are another matter.

Today, strategy looking south is experiencing a renaissance. Terrorism is a key part of the equation in both public and elite perception, and this concern is hardly limited to NATO's southern members. Power projection and crisis management in the face of a very unstable security environment from North Africa to the Levant is another key

element. Unease over migration pressures and hard and soft security challenges emanating from the global south are also driving the debate. Yet the sheer scale of the relevant geography, the diversity of risks and their diffuse character, and strategic distractions elsewhere continue to complicate Alliance thinking about the security environment across the 'southern neighbourhood' and how to address it.

What south?

The contemporary question of NATO's southern strategy has provoked a fundamental debate over what, precisely, is meant by the 'south'. The Mediterranean is the undeniable centre of gravity in this context. Developments across the Mediterranean space, at sea and ashore, touch directly on the security interests of the Alliance as a whole. NATO has a well-established partnership programme, the *Mediterranean Dialogue*, embracing North Africa and the Levant.¹ This initiative, celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2019, has evolved significantly over time. It has acquired a more practical orientation with the broad aim of capacity building and encouraging a shared security culture around the Mediterranean. It remains a vehicle for multilateral discussions in a setting that allows for few interactions between, for instance, Israel and the Arab states, or Morocco and Algeria. It could be even more active in this context if political conditions were more permissive.² The inclusion of Mauritania appears much less eccentric today against the backdrop of mounting security challenges emanating from the Sahel.

But it is increasingly clear that effective consideration of NATO strategy looking south cannot stop at the Mediterranean and its immediate hinterlands. NATO's southern exposure has broadened in political and practical terms. Beyond the Maghreb, Africa as a whole is now part of the strategic equation and is set to become even more important over time. Migration, spill-overs of terrorism and illicit flows of all kinds have made Africa an integral part of the European and transatlantic security calculus. The US, France and other NATO members now have a substantial military presence across the Sahel and West Africa. The latter is a growing focus of intelligence collection, surveillance and security partnerships. The deployment of new NATO assets, including Global Hawk drones based in Sicily, is clearly oriented towards risks emanating from this quarter. The enlargement of this security space implies closer cooperation with institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the *G5-Sahel*. Ultimately, countries such as Senegal, Nigeria and South Africa could be significant partners in NATO's effort to 'project security' (a somewhat unfortunate term) southward.

The relevant geography for NATO is potentially even more far-reaching. Analysts and policymakers are focusing more directly on illicit flows around the Atlantic basin. Today, European and North American security interests are directly affected by the substantial flow of drugs and related trafficking from Latin America and the Caribbean across the

¹ Founded in 1994, the *Mediterranean Dialogue* now includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and Mauritania.

² See Ian Lesser, Charlotte Brandsma, Laura Basagni & Bruno L  t   (2018), *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue: Perspectives on Security, Strategy and Partnership*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/future-natos-mediterranean-dialogue>.

Atlantic to West Africa, Cape Verde and northward to the Maghreb and across the Mediterranean. This phenomenon is an example of trans-national threat *par excellence*.

Taking this approach even further, the 'south' could imply all those challenges facing NATO outside the confrontation with Russia in the east. It could easily embrace the entire geography from West Africa and its Atlantic approaches to South and even South-East Asia. Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf are already part of this southern calculus given the counter-terrorism and maritime security missions in which NATO members have already been engaged. Ultimately, this outlook converges with the steadily growing pressure for the Alliance to address risks generated by the rise of China and instability in the Indo-Pacific. Clearly, there are limits to this immense enlargement of NATO's operational space. Pressing defence requirements in Europe's east and disillusionment with the mission in Afghanistan have reduced the appetite of allies for expeditionary strategies.

Operationally, there are obvious limits to NATO's global engagement. But it is important to distinguish between the idea of NATO action in the global south and the role of the Alliance as a place where wider strategic concerns can be discussed and policies coordinated. In a political sense, NATO's south can stretch as far as allies agree to take it.

Thinking beyond crisis management

The Alliance has more than enough to deal with even in a limited definition of the south. The range of potential contingencies and missions around the Mediterranean, Africa and the southern Atlantic is substantial. Many of these challenges are of an unconventional or irregular nature, or involve long term political, economic and environmental pressures. But there are also some tangible territorial threats. Turkey faces potential Article V-type contingencies on its eastern and southern borders, and an unstable balance with Russia in the Black Sea. Experience in Libya, Syria and elsewhere encourages a view of Mediterranean security as an ongoing exercise in crisis management. This may be an inadequate template for the future. There will surely be crises requiring a concerted response. Yet the weakening of states around the southern Mediterranean and the prospect of open-ended conflict in places like Libya, raises the spectre of something closer to sustained instability or durable chaos. The regime in Damascus may well be able to secure its position, but will Syria ever return to the pre-civil war status quo? There is a very real possibility that Syria and the Levant will remain unstable and prone to proxy wars for years to come.

A vision of southern security in which instability and conflict is not an aberration but the norm underscores the importance of missions beyond periodic crisis management. In addition to making risks more transparent through better air, maritime and cyber surveillance –current situational awareness–, the Alliance will need to build its capacity for warning. This implies better sharing of longer-term intelligence and analysis of over-the-horizon risks. The NATO Strategic Direction South Hub in Naples can be one vehicle for this task. But the real capacity for warning is likely to come from bringing together the assessments of Alliance members and partners across the south.

New actors, new stakes

At the risk of restating the obvious, the source of the challenge to NATO in the east is clear, even if the dimensions of the security problem are complex, ranging from the nuclear to the conventional, the irregular to the digital and, ultimately, the political. In the south, NATO confronts immense diversity across the spectrum of risk. There are flashpoints, but no clear centre of gravity in security terms.

One of the key developments across this vast space has been the emergence of new actors and the return of some old ones. Russia has a long history of involvement in Mediterranean affairs dating to Czarist times. During the Cold War, Soviet strategy emphasised the cultivation of security relationships around the Middle East and Africa, north and south. The Soviet navy maintained a meaningful presence in the Mediterranean, even with the limited infrastructure available ashore in such places as Syria and Algeria. This presence essentially evaporated for more than a decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Russia is now back, politically and militarily. The Russian intervention in Syria is the most obvious facet of Moscow's return, alongside a longstanding relationship with Algeria, activism in Libya and a revived security relationship with Egypt. Russia has remained an influential political actor from the Balkans to the Levant. Moscow's relationship with Ankara has flourished even as Turkish-Western relations have deteriorated (the planned sale of the Russian S-400 air defence system to Turkey is now the central issue in a deeply troubled relationship between Washington and Ankara). In short, Russia is once again a political-military actor of some importance around the Mediterranean and beyond.

Russian activism bridges NATO's eastern and southern concerns in some tangible ways, not least in terms of Black-Sea security. As in the Baltic, the growing friction between Russia and NATO has led to a heightened risk of military incidents in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, where forces are operating in proximity. The current level of Russian engagement on NATO's southern periphery may or may not be sustainable over the longer term. But, for the moment at least, Moscow is back.

A transatlantic debate

Emerging challenges and NATO strategy looking south take on special meaning in the context of the current transatlantic security debate. US engagement and transatlantic burden-sharing are likely to play out in distinctive ways on Europe's southern periphery. As in Eastern Europe, fears of US disengagement across the region have so far proved to be exaggerated. Deterring and defending against a revived Russia –an existential issue for the Alliance in the East– can hardly be contemplated without US nuclear and conventional contributions. For all the sharp rhetoric around Washington's pointed pursuit of rebalancing in European defence, the US security presence in Europe has increased in recent years. This is evident in the south, too, although the posture is clearly in flux (as seen in the rapid growth and equally rapid reduction in US forces deployed in West Africa and the Sahel). Washington remains a leading diplomatic and security actor from the Maghreb to the Indian Ocean, from the Black Sea to sub-Saharan Africa. To be sure, the US naval presence in the Mediterranean does not resemble its Cold War form, when the Sixth Fleet kept at least one carrier battle-group in the area. The current pattern was set during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when European naval forces took over

much of this Mediterranean role through NATO's Operation Active Endeavour. But the US maintains substantial command, air and rapid deployment assets in and around the Mediterranean. The bulk of the ballistic missile defence capacity is afloat in the region.

The US presence in the south is, however, subject to uncertainty over time. A major crisis in Asia could draw substantial US attention and presence away from Europe's southern periphery. Indeed, allies are already concerned about the durability of US engagement in the Middle East and North Africa. Persistent crises and calls for intervention in the region are unlikely to be well received by the Trump Administration –or by its possible successors–. The Sahel and the Balkans are already seen as areas for European security leadership. The US strategic class tends to see these as places Europe can reach and should be able to manage in security terms. Calls for European 'strategic autonomy' and new EU defence initiatives, if they amount to anything, should be felt first and foremost in the south where European allies already deploy significant forces. As an area where low-intensity maritime, humanitarian and counter-terrorism contingencies abound, this is a particularly promising theatre for NATO-EU cooperation. Operations in the south are also redefining US priorities for bilateral military cooperation in Europe. Today, France is arguably Washington's leading security partner.

Conclusions

There is an evident asymmetry between the scale and character of NATO's security challenges in the east and the south. But the Alliance politics in these settings is less clear-cut than is sometimes assumed. To be sure, NATO's southern members are more inclined to focus on risks emanating from a wider south. Poland and the Baltic states have their own well-founded concerns. But beyond these obvious differences, security perspectives across the Alliance are more nuanced and complex. For most of Western Europe, the risk of terrorism and political violence emanating from the south trumps the fear of Russian aggression. Terrorism below the level of 'super terrorism' and uncontrolled migration –both emblematic of challenges emanating from the south– may not pose an existential threat in strict terms, but both can be politically existential for the societies affected.

Some southern members may be characterised as softer on Russia. Growing Russian activism around the Mediterranean, at odds with southern European interests in Libya and elsewhere, may lead to a hardening of attitudes over time. In short, geography may be a declining guide to strategic priorities in a time of trans-regional risks. The contours of the NATO debate about strategy south –a traditional issue in political and defence terms– are changing rapidly under pressure of emerging challenges and evolving ideas about what exactly is meant by the 'south'. Whatever the geographic parameters, the weight of these southern challenges in Alliance planning is likely to increase as part of a broader, global rise in risk.