

## Security challenges in the Mediterranean: NATO's role

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As a meeting point for three different continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), the strategic and geopolitical relevance of the Mediterranean region cannot be overstated. Throughout the centuries, it has witnessed the development of glorious civilizations and flourishing trade routes<sup>2</sup>. In pre-modern times, it already experienced all known types of international systems: bipolar (Rome vs. Carthage), hegemonic/unipolar (the Roman 'lake'), and multipolar (the Medieval Italian seafaring republics, the fledgling European nation-States and the rising Islam). In the modern age, up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it lost centrality but not relevance, and remained a major arena of great power competition and commercial and cultural exchange.

During the Cold War, the Mediterranean was one of the arenas where the East-West conflict played out, thus witnessing a growing US and Allied military presence and robust transatlantic cooperation. After the Cold War, the region experienced a season of hope, building also on the peace process in the Middle East, but not without problems in the Adriatic (the violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia) or the Eastern Mediterranean (e.g. Iraq, Lebanon).

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2 For a fascinating historical overview see D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea*. Oxford University Press, Oxford-London, 2011.

Over the past few years, the Mediterranean has also been the theatre for some of the world's most defining developments and trends. Climate change, but also renewable and untapped energy sources; water and food insecurity, but also rising life expectancy; socio-economic instability and uncontrolled migration flows, but also increased access to education and information; weak states, authoritarian rulers, violence and terrorism, but also spots of civic progress and human development. And these are only some of the many, often intertwined and multifaceted issues that have made today's Mediterranean region a highly volatile, unstable but also dynamic environment.

With ten member nations and seven partner countries present in the Mediterranean, the region is now an area of increased focus also for NATO, well aware that the security of its surroundings - shaped by those and other developments - also means the security of the Alliance as a whole.

### ***New context, new concept***

This focus started taking shape as part of the overall transformation NATO underwent at the end of the Cold War, mindful of the need to adapt to the newly emerging security challenges in order to remain an effective player on the international stage. The implication that a stable Mediterranean region also meant a stable Alliance was for the first time formalized in the NATO 1999 Strategic Concept, which described the Mediterranean as "an area of special interest to the Alliance", whose security and stability is closely linked to that of Europe<sup>3</sup>.

Over the years, this idea was developed and expanded into a wider strategic concept for NATO's approach to its Southern flank—part of what, at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, was ultimately dubbed "Projecting Stability".

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3 NATO. (1999). *The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, para 38.

“Projecting Stability” simply means contributing - through enhanced regional understanding and situational awareness, and effective capacity building efforts in partner countries - to a stable environment in NATO’s vicinity and, consequently, to NATO’s own stability. This builds on a series of partnership tools developed by the Alliance to cooperate more effectively with its Southern neighbours and reinforced its role in the Mediterranean region, fostering political dialogue and practical collaboration and providing concrete assistance and support in its areas of expertise.

As the challenges in the region grew, NATO’s attitude towards the South became even more focused, its activities multiplied and a need for streamlining them soon emerged. At the 2018 Brussels Summit, Allied Heads of State and Government endorsed the creation of a “Package on the South”, which included a range of political and practical cooperation initiatives contributing to a more strategic, focused, and coherent approach to countries in the wider Mediterranean region.

The Brussels Summit declared *inter alia* the Full Operational Capability (FOC) of the new NATO flagship initiative, the Regional Hub for the South, located in Naples. The aim behind the creation of the Hub was to increase NATO’s situational awareness of the threats – and opportunities – emanating from the region; to support the collection and sharing of information; and to deliver coordination and outreach activities with the Alliance’s partners in the South<sup>4</sup>. If nurtured, there is potential for this to be a valuable asset for NATO – bringing together valuable expertise and functioning as a focal point for the strengthening of mutually beneficial relationships with partners. The Mediterranean region would be the most obvious beneficiary of this initiative.

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4 NATO. (2018). *NATO Brussels Summit Declaration*, para 55. [online] Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm) [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

## Three pillars, seven partners

If it were to be summed up schematically, NATO's role in the Mediterranean region could be seen as resting on three main pillars: helping partner countries build capacity, contributing to the international fight against terrorism, and maintaining a presence in the Mediterranean Sea.

### I.

NATO's *capacity building* efforts are implemented through a myriad of different frameworks, some of which are of particular relevance to the Mediterranean region.

Along with the Partnership for Peace (PfP)<sup>5</sup>, one of the oldest frameworks for cooperating with Southern countries is the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), a forum for dialogue and cooperation established between NATO and regional Partners in 1994. Initially comprising only Israel, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Mauritania, this framework welcomed Jordan in 1995 and Algeria in 2000.

At its inception, the MD was simply a forum for political dialogue. However, at the 2002 Prague Summit<sup>6</sup> and 2004 Istanbul Summit<sup>7</sup>, new dynamism was injected into this forum, with Allied leaders agreeing on a package of measures to upgrade it and shift from dialogue-centred cooperation to a true partnership framework, enhancing its practical dimension.

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5 Since the reactivation (2008) of its original membership (1995), Malta is currently the only Mediterranean member of the PfP, as Albania, Croatia and Montenegro have joined the Alliance.

6 NATO. (2002). *NATO Prague Summit Declaration*, para 10. [online] Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts/19552.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts/19552.htm) [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

7 NATO. (2004). *NATO Istanbul Summit Declaration*, para 36. [online] Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2004/p04-096e.htm> [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

To date, all of the MD countries have signed an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) with NATO. Each IPCP is tailored to the needs of the requesting country, and calls on the Alliance's know-how and assistance in areas such as defence institution-building, civil-military relations, and security sector reform (SSR).

Two of the seven participants of the Mediterranean Dialogue – Tunisia and Jordan – are also recipients of one of NATO's newest programme for building capacity in partner countries: the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative.

Defence Capacity Building (DCB) Packages are a core component of NATO's effort to project stability, not only in the South but also in the East. Launched in 2014, the DCB initiative aims at providing, upon request, tailored assistance to local forces by advising, assisting, training and mentoring them in specific, agreed-upon areas. In the South in particular, the work conducted under the DCB initiative has strongly contributed to countering many of the emerging security challenges affecting the area. In the wider Mediterranean region, Tunisia, Jordan and Iraq are DCB Package recipients.

Relevant areas touched upon by DCB Packages include cyber defence and countering Improvised Explosive Devices (Tunisia); military exercises, civil preparedness and border security (Jordan); military medicine, civil-military cooperation and security sector reform (Iraq)<sup>8</sup>.

Hopefully Libya, the major absentee from both the DCB Initiative and the Mediterranean Dialogue, will also at some stage become a recipient of a DCB Package. NATO intervened in Libya in 2011 with Operation Unified Protector, with a UN Security Council mandate

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<sup>8</sup> In Iraq, all DCB-related activities are now delivered within the framework of NATO's new non-combat, training mission, launched in late 2018 at the request of the Iraqi Prime Minister with the main aim of helping the country develop its capacity to build more effective national security structures and professional military education institutions.

to protect civilians from attack during the regime's brutal response to the local outbreak of the Arab Spring<sup>9</sup>. Since the fall of Gaddafi and the ensuing internal chaos, the Alliance has received multiple formal requests from the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) for support in stabilizing the country and training its security forces. Allied Heads of State and Government at NATO Summits have reiterated their readiness to step in and provide assistance to build Libya's security institutions, in coordination with the UN and other relevant actors.

## II.

Overall, much of the assistance provided under the framework of DCB packages is relevant to the second area on which NATO works in the Mediterranean region. **Counter terrorism** (CT) is regarded by regional partners as one of the toughest challenges they are confronted with.

NATO's current enhanced focus on CT, highlighted by the large number of initiatives undertaken under this umbrella, exemplifies the Alliance's ability to adapt and evolve to the fast-paced changes occurring in the international environment.

Ten years after 9/11 and the historic decision to resort to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, policy guidelines were adopted in 2012 setting out NATO's need to be **aware** of the terrorist threat, **capable** of countering it, and **engaged** to this end with partners and international organisations. In May 2017, the Alliance issued an ambitious Action Plan on *Enhancing NATO's Role in the International Community's Fight against Terrorism*.

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9 In March 2011, a coalition of NATO Allies and partners began enforcing an arms embargo, maintaining a no-fly zone and protecting civilians and civilian-populated areas from attack or the threat of attack. The final UNSC mandate (UNSCR 1973) was under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

The 2017 document set the framework for the Alliance's role amongst those other international organizations active in the global fight against terrorism. It outlined a clear operational agenda playing to NATO strengths and focused on those areas where its contribution would provide added value, mindful of national sensitivities in dealing with the issue.

Providing support and building capacity in partner countries – in particular those in the South – in order to strengthen their own ability to fight terrorism is a key element. The Alliance's approach is two-pronged: on the one hand, it aims to enhance its partners' capacity to fight terrorism at an **operational** level, for example by training first responders to deal with the consequences of a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, or Nuclear (CBRN) attack, or instructing them on how to dispose of Improvised Explosive Devices. On the other hand, it seeks to have an impact at a **strategic** level as well, providing assistance and advice in restructuring defence institutions or in strengthening civilian-military cooperation across government. Understanding partners' needs and assessing the gaps in their national counterterrorism efforts is fundamental to ensuring that these initiatives have a substantial impact.

This said, NATO's main contribution to the fight against terrorism is - first and foremost - what it is doing on the ground in Iraq and especially, of course, in Afghanistan (a region that is often considered, internally, as part of NATO's "South"). In addition, in December 2018 NATO Foreign Ministers approved an update of the Action Plan, polished and reinforced to adapt to emerging terrorism trends and threats. New initiatives undertaken within this updated version aim to address concretely one of the most relevant issues in the Mediterranean region – the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). Since 2013, over 40,000 fighters are estimated to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS, and roughly 7000 of them have returned to their country of origin. This constitutes a high security risk, as an estimated 18% of terror attacks staged in the West between 2014 and 2017 were carried out by returnees<sup>10</sup>.

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10 Global Terrorism Report 2018: *Measuring and Understanding the*

As part of a series of measures to address this threat, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 2396/2017, which urges its member states to “expeditiously exchange information [...] concerning the identity of foreign terrorist fighters”<sup>11</sup>. NATO Allies agreed in July 2018 on a new data sharing policy that would support their “ability to identify returning foreign terrorist fighters and other threat actors and to comply with UNSCR 2396”<sup>12</sup>. This illustrates the willingness to increase information sharing in the face of a common threat that needs to be tackled jointly.

### III.

The picture of NATO’s role in the Mediterranean region would not be complete without considering its *maritime presence*. While not being directly involved in the management of migration – another major challenge emerging in the region in recent years – NATO has contributed within a limited scope to international efforts to tackle the crisis.

In February 2016, the Alliance mandated the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) to conduct reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance of illegal crossings of the Aegean Sea, in cooperation with and in support of the Turkish and Greek national authorities as well as the EU agency FRONTEX, in their efforts to fight the illegal smuggling of migrants and refugees. A few months later, in July 2016, Operation Sea Guardian was launched in the Mediterranean, with the trifold objective of supporting maritime situational awareness through information sharing; bolstering maritime counter-terrorism efforts; and contributing to maritime security capacity building. As part of its mandate, OSG is to support and

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*Impact of Terrorism*, [online] Sidney: Institute for Economics and Peace. Available at: <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports> [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

11 United Nations. (2017). *UN Security Council Resolution 2396(2017)*. [online] Available at: [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396(2017)) [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

12 NATO. (2018). *NATO Brussels Summit Declaration*, para 11. [online] Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm) [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

contribute to the European Union's migration-focused Operation Sophia by increasing situational awareness (through enhanced information sharing) and by providing logistical support.

## **EU too**

As a major stakeholder in the region, the EU also does its own work to “project stability” in the South, and the Mediterranean basin can offer a golden opportunity for close cooperation with the Alliance. Some practical and effective collaboration strategies are already in place, as demonstrated by the support provided by Operation Sea Guardian to Operation Sophia. As in other circumstances where their respective activities meet, NATO and the EU look to cooperate closely so as to avoid any possible duplication or waste of effort.

In the context of the common set of proposals endorsed by NATO Foreign Ministers in their Statement on the implementation of the NATO-EU Joint Declaration signed in Warsaw in 2016<sup>13</sup>, for instance, Tunisia was selected as a pilot country in the region. The aim was to explore increased cooperation between the two organisations in areas where relevant work had already been initiated, e.g. on cyber or ammunition storage and safety<sup>14</sup>. Staff-to-staff coordination and information exchange have been frequent, open, and highly useful –favouring complementarity (whenever desirable and possible) and mutual understanding, and offering just another practical manifestation of transatlantic cooperation and solidarity.

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13 Statement by the NATO Foreign Ministers on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2016). [online] Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_138829.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_138829.htm) [Accessed 19 Dec.2018]

14 Progress report on the implementation of the common set of proposals endorsed by NATO and EU Councils on 6 December 2016. (2017). [online] Available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/170614-joint-progress-report-eu-nato-en-1.pdf> [Accessed 19 Dec. 2018].

The turn to the South that NATO took in recent years is evident and tangible, and surely well justified by the number and type of threats stemming from the region. The flurry of activities and initiatives outlined above reflects a serious commitment on the part of the Alliance to cooperate with its Southern partners - wherever possible, in parallel and concert with the EU - to build their capacity so that they can address more effectively the challenges they face.

## **Conclusions**

Since the end of the Cold War, the Mediterranean basin has indeed been overcrowded with efforts at regional transformation: from the Barcelona Process (1995), aiming to better integrate the EU with its neighbouring South, to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and its imported top-down democratisation blueprint; from the Union for the Mediterranean (2008), with its focus on practical cooperation, to the Arab Spring's wave of bottom-up democratisation attempts. NATO's distinctive focus is on cooperation and assistance, with special (operational) emphasis on Iraq and - further afield - Afghanistan.

Looking ahead, there are some emerging trends worth monitoring, beside and beyond the playing out of the civil conflicts in Syria and Libya. Cyber, maritime and border security remain high on the list of priorities for partner countries, especially in relation to the fight against terrorism. And while remaining focused on the use of its current tools, NATO will continue to assess the importance of such factors as water, food and energy security, climate change and socio-economic problems which could potentially fuel new conflicts or exacerbate old ones. The increased presence in the region of external actors like Russia and China – the former through military and diplomatic activities in (and beyond) Syria, the latter through increased investment and trade-related initiatives, and both through joint naval exercises – is another example of new trends and threads which need to be monitored, along with are the potential implications of the discovery of undersea gas and oil deposits.

The Mediterranean region remains a highly volatile, unstable and dynamic environment and its unravelling could have major security consequences, in particular for the Southern members of the Alliance. For that reason, NATO has a stake in ensuring that partner countries in the area continue to strengthen their defence institutions and enhance their resilience. The Alliance has made progress through its valuable contribution to the fight against terrorism, its strengthened maritime presence and its effective partnership frameworks. As the security environment continues to evolve, NATO will continue to keep pace with emerging threats and challenges and play a relevant role.

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