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Why and How NATO Should Adapt to a New Mediterranean Security Environment

Can Kasapoğlu

NATO faces a problematic threat landscape in the Mediterranean. The Alliance has to deal with hot topics that range from Russia's robust military posture and involvement in the Syrian Civil War to ISIS terrorism and the migrant crisis. To address all of these challenges, NATO should boost its engagement with partner nations, produce a new maritime security approach, and counterbalance Moscow's strategic foothold in the eastern Mediterranean.

Against the backdrop of Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Alliance's eastern flank has been the geopolitical epicenter of contention between NATO and Russia while the southern flank has taken a back seat. The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation enjoy clear superiority in their Western Military District over the Baltic NATO members (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Poland. Moreover, this correlation of forces is augmented by the strong combined-arms and mobilization capabilities of the Russian military. Notably, RAND's Arroyo Center conducted a series of war games in 2014 and 2015 simulating a Russian incursion into the Baltics. The findings, published in a special report in 2016, highlighted that Russian forces could reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga within 60 hours. These considerations put the eastern flank affairs at the forefront for NATO while the southern flank — and the Mediterranean in particular — remains an overshadowed flashpoint. Indeed, these war game reports concluded nightmare scenarios for capitals in the eastern flank, but key metropoles of NATO nations have already witnessed devastating terrorist attacks stemming from the south. The migrant crisis has plagued the Euro-Mediterranean area. In addition, as underlined by the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration, Turkey has been hit three times in the last four years by missiles launched from Syria. Finally, the Mediterranean witnessed the most dangerous chemical weapons use of the 21st century, which triggered US-led punitive strikes against the Syrian Baath regime. In brief, NATO's southern flank has gone through fire and water.

The Alliance faces two risk categories in the south. First, there is the rise of violent non-state actors, state failures, and human security issues. Second, NATO has to deal with state-led challenges emanating from Russia's rising military posture in the

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eastern Mediterranean. However, unlike the broadly accepted eastern flank narrative, the allies have yet to reach a consensus in the south.

Terrorist Threats and Spillovers

On November 13, 2015, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks shook Paris. Within five days, France's flagship Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier had left its home port in Toulon and sailed to the eastern Mediterranean to conduct airstrikes on ISIS. The carrier then passed through the Suez Canal to assume the command of the US task force in the Gulf (CTF-50) in counter-terrorism operations. Around the same time, then-French Prime Minister Manuel Valls told parliament that France could be at risk of a chemical or biological terrorism attack. In fact, only one year earlier, a laptop captured from a Tunisian ISIS operative in Syria revealed the terrorist group's plans for using weapons of mass destruction, including efforts to weaponize bubonic plague.

Similar patterns — namely ISIS connections or time spent with ISIS fighters in the Middle East and North Africa — were present in the 2016 Brussels bombings, the 2016 Berlin Christmas market truck attack (the Tunisian perpetrator was linked to an ISIS cell in Libya), the 2016 Ataturk Airport attack in Istanbul, and the 2017 Istanbul nightclub shooting, among many others.

The one and only time that the Alliance invoked Article V — the collective defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty — was in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, less than 24 hours after al-Qaeda targeted NATO territory. Thus, NATO had acknowledged that the fight against terrorism was one of its duties. In October 2001, NATO's Standing Naval Forces kicked off Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean, a counter-terrorism effort conducted in compliance with Article V.

There is little room for optimism regarding the terrorism challenge in the south. Al-Qaeda was largely the product of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, which attracted 5,000 to 20,000 foreign fighters according to various estimates. The Syrian jihad, on the other hand, mobilized up to 40,000 foreign fighters, with some 7,000 of those being from NATO countries. In other words, the real fallout from the Syrian jihad remains to be seen in the coming decades.

Failed and fragile states have become vectors for terrorism in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Syria and Libya may never function as "states" in a Weberian sense again, as militancy could turn into "institutionalized warlordism" in these countries.

NATO should grasp this trend in a geopolitically holistic way. Due to global demographic trends, intrastate conflicts increasingly tend to take place in urbanized areas. Coupled with the growing lethality of modern firepower, overwhelming migrant influxes will accompany each urban warfare case from now on.

Terrorist activity across the southern Mediterranean is complex in nature. Tunisia has a problematic home-grown militancy issue, and this jihadist potential has found a safe haven in Libya amidst the collapse of the Libyan state. Open-source intelligence suggests that training camps established in Libya were used to dispatch Tunisian foreign fighters to Syria. The militancy issue in Libya also threatens Egypt's Western Desert area and overstretches Egyptian security forces between the Libyan frontier and Sinai. In many cases, one cannot separate smuggling, terrorism, and violent extremism from each other in the southern Mediterranean. The Algerian national Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for example, is a key figure in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb as well as an infamous champion of organized crime. He is known as "Mr Marlboro" or "the King of Marlboros" due to his cigarette smuggling activities.

Overall, NATO does not have an easy way out. Much like its close cooperation with eastern flank partners, for example Finland and Sweden, the Alliance needs to boost its engagement in the southern flank with its Mediterranean Dialogue partners. In fact, the Mediterranean Dialogue is a product of NATO's post-Cold War efforts. Since its

establishment in 1994, the regional security environment has gained completely different characteristics. At present, the Alliance needs to initiate tailor-made assistance programs for border security, security sector reform, intelligence cooperation with NATO structures, humanitarian challenges, and counter-terrorism.

Furthermore, although the establishment of the NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (2017) is a milestone for the Alliance, the hub can only make a meaningful difference if it can ensure the Mediterranean Dialogue partners' permanent engagements. Otherwise, this important effort might not be embraced by its target audience.

State-led Challenge: Russia as NATO's Southern Neighbor

As these risks from non-state actors persist, NATO has a new and ambitious neighbor in the Mediterranean.

The intervention in Syria has fostered the Russian military's combat readiness. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, more than 63,000 military personnel — including 434 generals and more than 26,000 officers — served in Syria. This includes about 90 percent of the combat pilots who have flown missions over the Syrian skies and 60 percent of the strategic and long-range aviation crews who have taken part in operations. Furthermore, Russia has tested more than 200 weapon systems through its campaign. The Syrian expedition has led to fundamental improvements in the concept of operations. Long-range precision-strike capabilities provided by Kalibr land-attack cruise missiles remain the most notable achievement in this respect. In October 2015, the Russian Navy first used these high-end missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea. The missiles reportedly traveled some 1,800 km before hitting their targets in Syria. The strikes marked a significant success for Moscow. In December 2015 and March 2017, Russian Navy submarines also launched Kalibr missiles from the Mediterranean. Thus, NATO should be worried about the strategic ramifications of this trend. The Russian Navy can now use its relatively small vessels for long-range conventional strikes and commission its submarines to attack strategic targets deep in enemy territory without passing the nuclear threshold.

Finally, Moscow has turned the Hmeimim Air Base into a "promotion path." Most of the current or recent military district commanders have previously headed the Russian Group of Forces in Syria. More interestingly, General Sergei Surovikin — another former top commander of the Russian contingent — now serves as chief of the Russian Aerospace Forces, marking the first example in this regard, as General Surovikin is not an aviator. Likewise, General Andrey Kartapolov, now in charge of the newly established Political-Military Directorate (an information warfare command), also made his way there through promotions at Hmeimim.

In brief, Moscow's military gains in the Syrian expedition inevitably affect the overall NATO—Russia balance.

NATO Needs a Stronger Mediterranean Posture

As reflected in the 2016 Warsaw Summit communiqué, the allied leaders have agreed on "projecting stability" on the southern flank. This strategy was based on the assessment that NATO members can be secure if their neighborhoods are stable. The Alliance learned this the hard way through the post-Arab Spring developments. In 2017, NATO officially joined the anti-ISIS coalition and, in the same year, the NATO Strategic Direction South Hub was inaugurated in Naples.

Another pillar of NATO's Mediterranean engagement is Operation Sea Guardian (OSG). The Alliance directly refers to the importance of ensuring maritime security to protect today's globalized economy when explaining the geopolitical grounds for the OSG. Indeed, nearly 65 percent of Western

Europe's oil and gas consumption passes through the Mediterranean. The OSG also supports the European Union's Operation Sophia to tackle the migrant crisis and human trafficking.

A stronger allied posture in the Mediterranean should be founded on an efficient maritime approach. NATO's current maritime strategy, approved back in 2011, falls short of addressing the complex problems discussed hitherto. The Alliance needs a comprehensive maritime strategy document to confront both state-led political-military ambitions — including the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) challenge — and troublesome human security threats.

Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

During the Cold War, NATO protected democracies of the Euro-Atlantic area from Soviet expansionism. After 9/11, the allies had to tackle the global terrorism threat. Now, the pressing situation in the Mediterranean necessitates ensuring maritime security, confronting human trafficking, preventing a foreign fighter influx into NATO territory, and counterbalancing Russia's aspirations.

NATO can only address human security problems and the terrorism challenge through a renewed cooperation model with its partners, because these risks are emanating particularly from the southern neighborhood due to instability.

When it comes to tackling state-led challenges, the reconstruction of Syria remains the primary leverage of the West. In this theater, the West should be capable of deterring Russia from turning the eastern Mediterranean into its backyard, but it should also be conditionally willing to cooperate with Moscow to ensure a stable Syria that does not produce and export instability anymore because it is "too fragile to ignore." As the SWP paper of Professor Volker Perthes (SWP Comment 7/2019) emphasizes, Europe may not like the military outcome in Syria, but compared to Iran's agenda, Russia's post-war design is not totally incompatible with Western interests.

Although Russia — largely — won the war in Syria, it badly needs Western support to win the peace. The World Bank estimates that the reconstruction of the civil war-torn country will cost between $200 billion and $350 billion. Russia cannot reconstruct housing and infrastructure in the absence of an international consensus. If left unaided, Moscow could obtain a naval base, an air base, a war-criminal Syrian President who can never be fully rehabilitated on the world stage, and local warlord profiteers. Thus, through reconstruction efforts, the West should encourage installing an internationally acceptable administration in Damascus so that displaced Syrians in Europe (as well as Turkey, which is the only NATO nation bordering Syria) will not turn into permanent refugees.

Moreover, the West should ensure Syria's full compliance with the chemical disarmament program — with the further aim of crippling the suspected biological weapons infrastructure.

Although there are many sources of pessimism in the Mediterranean for NATO as it marks its 70th anniversary, there is also hope. After all, the Alliance's top trait is adaptation.

Dr Can Kasapoğlu is the 2018 IPC-Stiftung Mercator Fellow at SWP.
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