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What's new on NATO's Southern flank

Security threats and the Alliance's role after the Warsaw Summit

Alessandro Marrone

NATO urgently needs to address a range of security challenges and threats that originate not only from the east but also from the south. The Warsaw Summit has brought relevant decisions in this regard, and more can be done in terms of counter-terrorism, stabilisation, defence capacity building, maritime security, and border control. There should also be developed a more strategic dialogue within NATO as well as with partners regarding the crisis affecting security in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The threats from the Southern flank have a direct and negative impact on Euro-Atlantic security: attacks organised or inspired by Islamic terrorist networks kill civilians in Europe and North America; massive flows of illegal migrants from war-torn countries put European societies under strain from a security, social, cultural and political point of view; enduring conflicts and instability damage trade and economic growth in Europe's neighbourhood. All of these security challenges have negative effects on European economies and societies, which are struggling to recover from recent crises. None of these threats is solely military. Instead, all of them have both a military and a political dimension, which are strictly interconnected.

As a politico-military Alliance, NATO could and should play a meaningful role in contributing to address these threats for the sake of Euro-Atlantic security. This role, however, is not new. For the last 25 years of NATO history, the Alliance has constantly committed itself both to stabilising the neighbourhood of its European member states (primarily in the Western Balkans since the 1990s) and to countering international Islamic terrorism via state building in former Islamist safe heavens (notably in Afghanistan following 9/11). Indeed, crisis management operations and cooperative security – the latter including partnerships – have been recognised, together with collective defence, as NATO's “core tasks” in the current Strategic Concept, approved by the Allied Heads of States and Governments in Chicago in 2010.

NATO has to be prudent in supporting the international community's efforts to counter Jihadist terrorism (nowadays with the Islamic State [IS] at the forefront), to stabilise the countries of origin or transit of migrants and refugees, and to manage the European maritime and land borders where thousands of people have died attempting to enter the EU. No doubt, there is no “quick fix solution” at hand. Even more, the broader international efforts to address these challenges will likely have greater chances of succeeding with NATO not in the lead. Yet, there is much the Alliance can do to support. At the recent Warsaw Summit relevant decisions have already been taken in this direction.

Steps forward for counter terrorism, stabilisation, and Defence Capacity Building

Regarding counter terrorism and stabilisation in the Middle East, the Warsaw Summit has put NATO Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) at the disposal of the coalition that is fighting IS in Iraq and Syria in order to enhance its situational awareness and intelligence gathering. This decision enables useful operational support for a campaign which is already seeing the military involvement of such Allies as France, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the United Kingdom, under US lead, but also of Arab countries and other partners. In any case, NATO should refrain from putting its flag on the anti-IS campaign as this could cause additional backfire. Yet, the more effective operational support the Alliance provides, the better. A further step could be taken in terms of intelligence. With the newly established Assistant Deputy Secretary General for Intelligence NATO may be able to increase its effectiveness and efficiency in this decisive field.

Stabilisation and counter terrorism are closely linked to Defence Capacity Building (DCB) in NATO's Southern flank. Indeed, local insurgents are better fought by local forces than by foreign troops, while the absence or the limited purview of state institutions – particularly but not only in the defence and security area – facilitates the growth of groups linked to international jihadism. The decision by the Heads of Government/States at the Warsaw Summit, to move the training centre of the Iraqi armed forces from Jordan to Iraq, will hopefully help to enhance the training outcomes. It should be kept in mind, however, that NATO already trained Iraqi armed forces when the US and its Allies successfully increased their efforts to stabilise Iraq between 2006 and 2011—bringing the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to the brink of extinction. As the US left the country, NATO left too, leaving behind a security gap that the Iraq security forces were unable to fill properly. Hence, within a few years, the ISI-successor IS or ISIL arose as a major threat, seizing big swath of land and almost bringing the country to the brink of collapse.

The experiences in Iraq, therefore, should teach Western countries a vital lesson: DCB has to be implemented as a long-term and patient approach. Even if it requires only a relatively modest investment, it has to be maintained until the partner is fully enabled to deal with security threats at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Since the results obtained in the early phases are often fragile and reversible, an too rapid abandonment of partners will likely create worse conditions, increasing the demand for another foreign intervention, with much greater costs in human, economic, and political terms.

This lesson seems to have been learned in Afghanistan, where a long-term partnership between NATO and the Afghan state has been established. Previous, unrealistic plans to further reduce Resolute Support troops have been reviewed in Warsaw, resulting in an extended, robust NATO mission with 12.000 troops to assist local armed forces. In Afghanistan and elsewhere a strong case can be made for maintaining a significant military presence on the ground to support partners sufficiently, rather than for moving in and out of the theatre with heavy military force. Italy – with around 1,000 troops – Germany, and Turkey are among the major contributors to the stabilisation efforts in a country that has been the second-largest source of migrants to Europe after Syria in 2016.

The lesson also need to be applied in Libya, as the Warsaw Summit opened up the possibility for NATO to train Libyan coast guards and navy personnel as well as to provide advice in the field of defence and security institution building, following a request by the Government of National Accord. Despite the support by a UN mission as well as by a large part of the international community (including such NATO members as the US, the UK and Italy), as of today, this government is still struggling to build consensus among various power brokers and tribes in order to restore state authority in the country. Like in the fight against ISIL, the Alliance should not take the lead for the international efforts in Libya. Instead, as already clearly indicated in the Warsaw Summit communiqué, NATO should embed DCB in the multilateral Mediterranean Dialogue framework and hereby contribute to a broad and long-term international partnership with Libya.

Finally, DCB should not only be understood as a reactive mean after or simultaneous to conflicts and crises, as in Iraq and Libya, but also as a preventive tool. Therefore, NATO should better support Tunisia and Jordan, which are islands of stability on the troubled horizon of the Southern flank, helping them to make these countries a role model in terms of stabilisation. The consolidation of functioning statehood in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) would not only help to counter terrorism and stabilise the region, but also to reduce and manage the flows of migrants towards EU maritime and land borders.

In conclusion, NATO's role in DCB in Iraq and other countries in the Southern flank is crucial because of at least four reasons: it facilitates a broader commitment by the North American and European Allies; it balances different Allied views on capacity building efforts; it brings in the integrated military command and various tools of the Alliance; it encourages a greater sustainability of Western efforts over the long term.

Border control and maritime security: support the EU

One should clarify from the outset that migration is not a security threat as such. Yet, a massive and unprecedented flow of millions of migrants has weakened European political systems at national and at the EU level. It is fuelling a climate of fear and xenophobia, especially in the context of terrorist attacks on European soil, and – as a consequence – the rise of populist and extremist movements. Interlinked with the economic difficulties of several NATO and EU members, this phenomenon constitutes a crucial challenge for the political stability and security landscape across the Atlantic. Therefore, addressing the migration crisis indirectly helps Euro-Atlantic security as a whole, while NATO can play an important role in this regard.

First and foremost, NATO can support the EU in managing external borders by countering the smuggling of human beings and ensuring maritime security. As a consequence, at the Warsaw Summit it was decided to terminate Operation Active Endeavour, initiated in 2001 with a narrow task against terrorist activity in the Mediterranean Sea, and to launch the new Operation Sea Guardian with a much broader mandate in terms of maritime security. Additionally, it has been made clear that it is of utmost importance to coordinate all naval operations in the region, including the EU managed operations Sophia and Triton, NATO's Aegean Sea operation as well as Italy's Mare Sicuro, to avoid redundancies and to enable mutual benefits. Following this idea, NATO members agreed in Warsaw that upon EU request, NATO naval and air assets can contribute to Sophia in the areas of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and logistics.

Other steps forward could be discussed to further support maritime policing: useful lessons can be drawn from the experience in the Gulf of Aden, where the successful cooperation of NATO's Operation Ocean Shield with EU and UN counterparts has led to a significant reduction of piracy attacks in the last 10 years. Hence, it comes almost without a surprise that the Alliance decided in Warsaw to terminate its operation in that area, a decision which makes naval assets available to be deployed in the Mediterranean.

NATO's political double role

As highlighted before, the threats from the Southern flank have a strong political dimension. Consequently, as a politico-military Alliance, NATO has to play an important double role – on an internal and external dimension. First, in accordance with Article 4 of the Washington Treaty, it should act more as a forum to increase consent among Allies regarding threat analysis, national agendas, and defence policy in the Euro-Mediterranean region. For example, as of today, NATO members are still at strife on how to stabilise Libya and on whom to support there. But how can Libya be stabilised if NATO members cannot agree on whether to support the Government of National Accord or the Tobruk parliament (dominated by General Haftar),

which opposes the former? Therefore, it's crucial that the Alliance revitalises its function as a forum where Allies can engage in a frank debate on what to do in the Southern flank and work out a common approach.

Second, through its bilateral and multilateral partnerships (Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative), NATO has to foster a strategic dialogue with the countries in the region as well as among these countries. This may prove crucial for counter-terrorism and stabilisation purposes as well as for maritime security and dealing with the migratory crisis. It is also important because DCB is not just an operational or technical issue: Western countries need to understand who they are training and equipping in order to do what, and to have a strategic dialogue with these countries.

Such dialogue is even more important in a region without frameworks for and experience with confidence building and regional diplomacy. For instance, NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue is the only regional multilateral format where Israel, Turkey, and most Arab countries sit at the same table – together with Western nations. Moreover, several countries in the Middle East have a tendency to look to Western allies for counterbalancing regional powers perceived to be hostile, such as Iran, and there is a need to discuss security relations between NATO members and states in the region in order to avoid miscalculations and escalation. On the other hand, as mentioned before, there is no “quick fix solution” to threats from the Southern flank, and it would be counterproductive for NATO to play a mediating role for ongoing major crises. This is better performed within other frameworks, such as the Vienna process for Syria, which have to be politically supported by Allies.

To sum up, bearing in mind all the caveats and cautions necessary in light of the Alliance's reputation and track record in the MENA, more strategic dialogue on the Southern flank within and from NATO's side would be beneficial for most of the stakeholders involved in the security in that region.

Alessandro Marrone is a Senior Fellow at the International Affairs Institute (IAI) in Rome and teaches Strategic Studies at the University of Perugia. This article reflects the personal opinion of the author.