

# NATO and the Mediterranean<sup>1</sup>

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4 April 2019 marked the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Washington Treaty, the founding document of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). A time for celebration, but also a time for reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the alliance, and its readiness to confront the threats of the future from both within NATO and beyond its borders. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted in his speech in front of the United States Congress, the organization faces an unprecedented set of challenges, including a generational fight against terrorism, containing a more assertive Russia, competition with China and the changing nature of warfare in the digital age. Internally, NATO is threatened by the uncertainty of enduring American leadership, inadequate European defence strength and a drift from its core democratic values by some of its members.<sup>2</sup>

Within this context, the Mediterranean, or NATO's southern flank, is of crucial importance and concern. It is a place where a lot of these external and internal challenges come together, testing both the relevance and unity of the alliance. It is also a place where NATO's current and future role is ambiguous and contested, both by its members and by regional actors. Finally, it is a place where NATO's partnerships will be put to the test, as they

play a central role in an effective strategy South. This article will take a closer look at the current and future challenges that the Mediterranean security environment poses to the alliance, discuss the evolving strategy of NATO towards the region and how that strategy is perceived by regional stakeholders. It will argue that, to remain relevant in the future, NATO must put more energy and resources into its partnerships and focus on the Mediterranean Dialogue partnership, as well as on cooperation with the European Union and other regional and international organizations.<sup>3</sup>

## Why the Mediterranean Matters

The Mediterranean space holds an enormous amount of challenges for NATO. Ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the war in Syria, the collapse of Libya, the risk of further state-breakings in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel due to economic, social and political inequality, and climate change are among the factors that have contributed to a situation of durable chaos, which will be difficult for the alliance to keep at arm's length. Under these conditions, NATO faces a set of diverse, interlinked challenges. Some are familiar, others new; some are from within the region, others from beyond its borders; and still others are looming on the horizon.

The fight against terrorism remains a core concern. Beyond the ongoing NATO-led combat operation

<sup>1</sup> This article was finalized in April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> BURNS, R. Nicholas and LUTE, Doug. "NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis." *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*. February 2019. [www.belfercenter.org/publication/nato-seventy-alliance-crisis](http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/nato-seventy-alliance-crisis).

<sup>3</sup> The analysis and recommendations are based on open source research as well as interviews with officials and experts from NATO Member States and from Mediterranean Dialogue countries conducted in 2018.

in Afghanistan and the debate on whether and how to reconsider this mission, the alliance will be increasingly challenged by the foreign fighters' phenomenon. Thousands of recruits from Europe, Russia, North Africa and the Middle East have travelled to Iraq, Syria and Libya, or have taken up arms with jihadist groups in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. As ISIS strongholds in Syria and Iraq have been progressively eliminated, these fighters will return home or travel to battlegrounds elsewhere. This process will produce a steady mutation in the nature and capabilities of terrorist networks across the Mediterranean region and NATO Member States. Migration also continues to be perceived as a major challenge and has increasingly driven the interest of the alliance European members in supporting NATO action in the Mediterranean. The traditional threat posed by ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Mediterranean still poses a risk, but much less than a decade ago. The exception is Turkey, which is affected by the situation in the Levant, where Iran's capabilities and the spread of weapons to its proxies in Syria and Lebanon are an issue of major concern.<sup>4</sup>

## The Mediterranean, is a place where NATO's current and future role is ambiguous and contested, both by its members and by regional actors

A crucial feature of the Mediterranean security environment is the destabilizing presence of other external powers in the region, notably Russia. Russia's military intervention in Syria, its engagement in Libya, Egypt and Algeria, its presence in the Levant and renewed naval presence in the Mediterranean suggest that confrontation with the West can not only happen in the East, but also in the

South. And Russia is not the only actor with competing stakes in the Mediterranean. As NATO increasingly focuses its attention on the looming challenge of global competition with China, this country's growing diplomatic and economic presence in the Mediterranean and Africa will become more of a priority for the alliance. The Gulf states and Iran play an increasingly relevant role in affecting Mediterranean stability, including the direct use of force in Syria, Iraq and Libya; the rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia; and in the case of Iran, its influence on Shia communities within countries in the Maghreb.

What makes the Mediterranean especially problematic for NATO is that issues related to Mediterranean security challenge the cohesion of the alliance itself. Europe and the United States clash on the two fundamental pillars of Middle Eastern geopolitics – Iran and Palestine – and are actively trying to undermine each other's actions in the region.<sup>5</sup> Turkey is crucial for managing many of the security threats on NATO's southern flank, but at the same time poses a challenge in itself. The US-Turkey crisis over the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria, coupled with Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defence system, have caused a serious rupture between the two NATO allies. A more existential threat is Turkey's drift from NATO's core values of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. These values, and the adherence of NATO allies to them, are fundamental for the alliance cohesion. The democratic backsliding in Turkey has posed the question of what the organization should do when its core values are attacked from within. And for now it does not have an answer.

### Why NATO Struggles with Its Strategy South

Tackling these challenges will require strategy and actions that go beyond traditional crisis management operations and capacity building. For NATO today, an

<sup>4</sup> For a more extensive analysis of the evolving Mediterranean security environment, see: LESSER, Ian, BRANDSMA, Charlotte, BASAGNI, Laura and LÉTÉ, Bruno. "The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue." *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*. June 2018. [www.gmfus.org/publications/future-natos-mediterranean-dialogue](http://www.gmfus.org/publications/future-natos-mediterranean-dialogue).

<sup>5</sup> See KAUSCH, Kristina. "Balancing Trumpism: Transatlantic Divergence in the Middle East." *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*. 12 December 2018. [www.gmfus.org/publications/balancing-trumpism-transatlantic-divergence-middle-east](http://www.gmfus.org/publications/balancing-trumpism-transatlantic-divergence-middle-east).

existential question is how to divide its resources and attention between the relatively simple but demanding problem of defence against an eventual Russian aggression in the East, versus a diffuse, but arguably more likely, set of threats in the South. Tackling this dilemma is further complicated by the fact that NATO's role in the Mediterranean is challenged by individual alliance members, who question the comparative advantage of NATO action in the region against a backdrop of political and military engagement undertaken by its member states on a national and multilateral basis. NATO's role is also challenged by regional stakeholders. There is a general uncertainty about the alliance aims in the South, and a sensitivity to questions of national sovereignty. Some partners retain images of NATO based on Cold War perceptions, others remain concerned about the aftermath of the intervention in Libya. In other cases, views of NATO are closely tied to perceptions of specific allies, above all the United States. Under these circumstances, it is worth considering how the organization sees its own role on the southern flank – and what its Mediterranean partners expect.

The fact that NATO struggles with its strategy South does not mean that it has not made efforts to develop one. The question of how a NATO strategy South should look like first emerged on the agenda of the Wales Summit in 2014, when an internal review process of the southern flank was launched with the purpose of better understanding the security environment in the region and determining appropriate reforms for NATO structures. This led to the adoption of a framework for the South at the 2016 Warsaw Summit. This framework provided a first step toward strengthening training, exercises and operations in the Mediterranean region, including the possibility of deploying the NATO Response Force, if needed. It also aimed to improve joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. After the Summit, NATO launched a new maritime operation, Sea Guardian, in order to carry out maritime security capacity building, provide support to maritime situational awareness and counter-terrorism, and help EU's Operation Sophia in addressing migration issues in the central Mediterranean. In February 2017, a new Strategic Di-

rection South (NSD-S) Hub was created, based at the Allied Joint Forces Command in Naples. The NSD-S Hub's mission is to contribute to NATO's situational awareness of the Mediterranean and adjacent areas and to better understand how to address them.

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At the Brussels Summit in 2018, the alliance leaders declared the Hub fully operational and adopted a package for the South, outlining three core objectives: (1) to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence against threats emanating from the South; (2) to contribute to international crisis management efforts in the region; and (3) to help NATO's regional partners build resilience against security threats. NATO leaders announced the launch of a non-combat training and capacity building mission in Iraq, continued commitment to their longstanding relations with Jordan and Tunisia, and support for the political process in Libya.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why NATO Must Work More and Better with Partners**

NATO's evolving southern strategy has increasingly put emphasis on capacity building and partnerships, which suggests that its successful implementation will depend to a considerable degree on the effectiveness and legitimacy of its cooperation with countries in the region and other organizations. NATO's Mediterranean partners' interest in working with the organization on shared security concerns will be crucial. Since 1994, NATO has been engaged in political dialogue and practical cooperation with Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria (since 2000) under the Mediterranean Dialogue. This partnership has evolved significantly over more than

<sup>6</sup> Full text of the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration can be found here: [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm).

two decades, especially in the field of practical cooperation, which has intensified and become more tailored to the needs of individual countries. Research suggests that there is an opportunity for NATO to put the tools of the Mediterranean Dialogue at the core of its southern strategy, as regional partners have an interest in deeper engagement with NATO as an influential strategic actor, and as a practical contributor to their security needs.<sup>7</sup> But to consolidate this interest, the alliance must urgently address two interrelated limitations from which the Mediterranean Dialogue – like other NATO partnerships – currently suffers: too little money and too little focus. Overall, less than one percent of NATO’s budget goes to partner programmes. The alliance must rely on member states’ national contributions, sometimes placed under a NATO flag, while most of them implement their own programmes.<sup>8</sup> There is a need for a more systematic approach to surveying the range of these national projects to avoid duplication and promote alignment between these and NATO activities.

### The alliance must urgently address two interrelated limitations from which the Mediterranean Dialogue currently suffers: too little money and too little focus

The Mediterranean should also be central to new joint NATO-EU initiatives. Both institutions have an interest in capacity building and security sector reform, and their list of strategic priorities is, essentially, shared.

NATO should support the EU in areas where it has a comparative advantage rather than duplicating operations with similar objectives. Much more can be done also to share information between NATO and EU missions in order to improve crisis awareness and response times. In addition, other regional initiatives have the potential to contribute to Mediterranean security and could become more significant interlocutors for NATO in the years ahead. NATO should seek (deeper) partnerships with the African Union, the Arab League, the G5 Sahel and the Gulf Cooperation Council. These organizations could all benefit from NATO’s experience in building a political institution and framework for regional military cooperation. These partnerships would not have to replace NATO’s current Mediterranean Dialogue or bilateral partnerships, but over time could significantly increase the impact the alliance has beyond its borders.

To sum up: NATO faces a daunting set of different challenges on its southern flank. Its potential to effectively confront them is limited by the absence of a comprehensive strategy, negative public perceptions toward NATO action in the Mediterranean, and a lack of resources and focus from NATO members. Within this context, the organization will have to increasingly rely on its partners to guarantee its security vis-à-vis threats from the South. Compared to potential competitors, NATO still enjoys a strategic advantage in the Mediterranean, today and for the foreseeable future. But this strategic advantage can only be sustained by nurturing its partnerships. The alliance would therefore be well advised to invest more resources into its partnerships with the Mediterranean Dialogue countries, the European Union and other regional organizations.

<sup>7</sup> For a more extensive analysis of the evolving Mediterranean security environment, see: LESSER, Ian, BRANDSMA, Charlotte, BASAGNI, Laura and LÉTÉ, Bruno. “The Future of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue.” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*. June 2018. [www.gmfus.org/publications/future-natos-mediterranean-dialogue](http://www.gmfus.org/publications/future-natos-mediterranean-dialogue).

<sup>8</sup> BURNS, R. Nicholas and LUTE, Doug. “NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis.” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*. February 2019. [www.belfercenter.org/publication/nato-seventy-alliance-crisis](http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/nato-seventy-alliance-crisis).