



The 15th International Scientific Conference
**“DEFENSE RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
IN THE 21st CENTURY”**
Braşov, November 12th-13th 2020



NEW THREATS OLD CHALLENGES FOR NATO

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Abstract:

NATO has to adapt itself in order to meet the present and future security challenges. New threats are emerging from different sources: traditional opponents, new state actors, non-state entities to terrorists, social security failures, hybrid aggressions and cyberattacks. As a result, the Alliance has to prepare in conceptual, political and military terms to contribute to the security of its member states by developing a proper posture against The East and making southern neighborhoods more stable.

Key words: threats, challenges, NATO,

1. Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a political and military alliance between 28 European countries, the United States and Canada. Founded in the aftermath of World War II, the organization was established mainly for three purposes: deterring Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the European Continent, and encouraging European political integration.

At the beginning of 2021, the Alliance faces a number of challenges. Some of them are as old as NATO itself, and some are new and unpredicted. In particular, for the first time since 1991, NATO faces the possibility of a conventional confrontation. The probability of such a confrontation is fairly low, but nevertheless it has risen for the first time in the 30 years since the end of the Cold War.

This threat became a reality after the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. However, the process itself had begun earlier, with Russia's aggression in Georgia. Russia posed a test to the West, and, unable to go against NATO, flexed its muscles against a weaker opponent, an Alliance aspirant that was nevertheless unprotected by Article 5, not even part of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) process, but still strongly pro-Western. The West's response was largely rhetorical, leading to the question of whether it actually did anything concrete at all in answer to Russia's aggression.

The Alliance was facing a type of conflict that, although not new, has managed to capture it. The Ukraine aggression was a new challenge for NATO, which needs to reevaluate and revise its procedures so that it can respond in a timely and effective manner to this type of confrontation reinvented by the Russian Federation. In spite of the fact that, NATO's military strategies have always considered "*brute force*" in classical forms of combat to be the specific mode of action of the Russian armed forces, this time the approach was deferent, Russia used misleading and surprising concepts first to shape the confrontation environment, then to rapidly defeat the Ukrainian Army response and finalizing with strengthening the achieved objectives phase.

This "Old player", mainly seen as the threat from the East, has become now a common challenge everywhere: in the southern flank of NATO, into virtual space, or challenging from



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NATO inside by exploiting any vulnerabilities/ private disputes among the allies (egg. Turkey vs France, Turkey vs USA).

The threat from Russia continues, and left unchecked it may generate a serious challenge to NATO, moving the threat from the theoretical to the practical.

1. NATO’s New Challenges from the East

Not a threat, but o possible challenge for NATO in the future is represented by China.

At their meeting in London, in December 2019, NATO leaders “*recognized that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that states need to address together as an Alliance*”[1].

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated at the summit “*China has the second-largest defense budget in the world. They recently displayed a lot of new modern capabilities, including long-range missiles able to reach all of Europe, United States*”[2].

NATO’s mission has expanded since its creation in 1949 as a counterweight to the power of the Soviet Union. Its security mission is limited to North America and Europe, but NATO Secretary-General said “*China’s rising influence should not be ignored. Apart from making technological strides, Beijing was investing heavily in European infrastructure and cyberspace, and expanding its presence in Africa and in the Arctic*”[3]. The NATO chief stressed that the Alliance did not seek “*to create a new adversary but just to analyze, understand and then respond in a balanced way to the challenges China poses*”. In other words, NATO would likely take time to develop a China policy. In the long run, Beijing could represent a bigger problem but a slower burning one than Russia.

China has an increasingly global strategic agenda, supported by its economic and military heft. It has proven its willingness to use force against its neighbors’, as well as economic coercion and intimidatory diplomacy well beyond the Indo-Pacific region. Over the coming decade, China will likely also challenge NATO’s ability to build collective resilience, safeguard critical infrastructure, address new and emerging technologies such as 5G, and protect sensitive sectors of the economy including supply chains.

China’s industrial policy and military-civil fusion strategy are central components of this systemic challenge. Its military modernization in all domains, including nuclear, naval, and missile capabilities, introduces new risks and potential threats to the Alliance and to strategic stability. Also, its approach to human rights and international law challenges the fundamental premise of a rules-based international order.

Grave risks are posed by China in some critical sectors such as telecommunications, space, cyberspace, and new technologies, as well as disinformation campaigns. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has conducted a disinformation campaign in numerous Allied states. At the same time, because of its scale and economic trajectory, China is a driver of global growth, trade and investment, and a significant investor in many NATO countries. It has begun to develop a strategic-commercial presence in the Euro-Atlantic area via the Belt and Road Initiative, numerous bilateral agreements, and its military-civil fusion strategy. For most Allies, China is both an economic competitor and significant trade partner. While China does not pose an immediate military



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threat to the Euro-Atlantic area on the scale of Russia, it is expanding its military reach into the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Arctic, deepening defense ties with Russia, and developing long-range missiles and aircraft, aircraft carriers, and nuclear-attack submarines with global reach, extensive space-based capabilities, and a larger nuclear arsenal. NATO Allies feel China's influence more and more in every domain.

2. NATO's Challenges from the South

In the south, the security situation in the Middle East and Africa has deteriorated, causing loss of life, fueling large-scale migration flows and inspiring terrorist attacks. It is a fact that a great number of the world's crises originate in the Mediterranean Basin - the spread of Daesh, Libya's instability, the Syrian war, new tension in Lebanon, the dangers posed by foreign terrorist fighters, the fragile situation in the Western Balkans, the migration crisis, and the list goes on and on. Instability in the southern neighborhood of the Alliance is indeed linked, on the one hand, to the terrorist threat and on the other to the migration crisis affecting Europe. The Mediterranean, a crossroads between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, is facing an unprecedented multiplication of regional crises. It is a home to multiple humanitarian, security and development challenges, which affect particularly vulnerable populations.

Terrorist activity across the southern Mediterranean is complex in nature. Tunisia has a problematic homegrown militancy issue, and this potential jihadist 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" due to his cigarette smuggling activities. Instability and conflicts in NATO's southern neighborhood, the related terrorist threat and the migration crisis, are all deep-rooted, complex and long-term challenges, which have worsened in the last seven years and are not expected to improve soon.

NATO is responding by reinforcing its deterrence and defense posture, as well as supporting international efforts to project stability and strengthen security outside NATO territory. The allies have long recognized the existence of threats and diffuse risks to Allied security from the "South", in addition to threats from the "East". A clear cut separation between the two flanks is losing relevance, however: the South and the East are joined at the seams (and geographically through the Western Balkans) with regard to Russia, which is acquiring an increasing role in the Mediterranean region. The intervention in Syria has fostered the Russian military's combat readiness. The Syrian expedition has led to fundamental improvements in the concept of operations. In brief, Moscow's military gains in the Syrian expedition inevitably affect the overall NATO-Russia balance. *"The Alliance faces two categories of risks 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 eastern Mediterranean[4]"*.



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In the next ten years, therefore, the 360-degree approach to security will become an imperative and the South will likely grow in importance for NATO. As a result, the Alliance has to prepare in conceptual, political and military terms to contribute to the security of its member states by making its southern neighborhood more stable. The Alliance has agreed that its approach in the South includes[5]: *“building the capacity of and engaging southern partners and neighbors”; increasing Alliance awareness and risk monitoring; increasing Alliance resilience and responsiveness to security threats and challenges arising from the South; working with the EU, African Union and other regional and international organizations, where relevant”*. Differences have arisen among some Allies about certain security challenges in the South. If not carefully managed, they may impair the Alliance’s ability to respond to security challenges in the region and risk the cohesion of the Alliance. Conversely, a stable South holds the prospect of realizing the immense latent potential of societies and economies in this region, with attendant benefits for the countries of the Euro-Atlantic area.

NATO must, therefore, maintain political focus on building up military preparedness and response for the Southern/Mediterranean flank, in particular by revising and delivering its Advance Plans and strengthening the Hub for the South at JFC Naples. The Hub for the South (HUB is not a command and control entity and will not exercise operational control over assets but it is an essential and visible element of the Framework for the South that will provide a considerable enabling and support platform within Joint Force Command Naples (JFCN). The HUB is also the first tangible deliverable of the framework to be implemented. The local stakeholders share information with the Hub based on NATO and partner requirements and guidance. The HUB’s critical or unique tool is its depth and knowledge of the South.

Basically, it is about a holistic understanding of the South, derived from information gathered from those on the ground, who have a broad understanding of the local situation and share their perspective with the Hub. In this context, the Mediterranean region has to remain free to Allied navigation as a prerequisite to sustaining a military effort across Alliance territory. Maritime security is one of the dimensions of this enhanced cooperation, while NATO must remain the key actor in guaranteeing freedom of navigation. It should engage more with partners in the South, regional organizations, including African Union, League of Arab States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Gulf Cooperation Council and United Nations, to establish a cooperative security network across the region.

The political and strategic evolution of the southern flank is as important for the Alliance as the East (Russia & China).

3. NATO facing the terrorism challenge

Radical Islam, and its latest product the Islamic State, is another challenge facing NATO. The 9/11 events and six years’ ago attacks in Paris and Brussels have proved that ISIS is capable of striking NATO countries where it hurts most. The frequency of these attacks show that ISIS will continue to grow, and the present efforts to counter it will not be sufficient.

Terrorism is responsible for the death of more Allied citizens than any other security threat in NATO’s history. It also poses one of the most immediate, asymmetric threats to Allied nations and citizens. The only time that Article 5 was triggered was in response to a terrorist attack, but in general terrorists have been able to operate under this threshold because of the nature of their tactics.



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The 2010 Strategic Concept cites terrorism as part of the security environment but emphasizes mainly the need for enhanced analysis, consultations, and training of local forces. Since then, NATO has made important strides, including with the adoption and subsequent updating of the 2017 Counter Terrorism (CT) Action Plan. The evolving strategies and *modus operandi* of terrorist networks and groups and the emergence and spread of early detection technologies (EDTs) call for adaptive and innovative counterterrorism strategies, means, and methods. While the primary responsibility for countering terrorism remains with national authorities, as acknowledged by Allies, NATO adds value and has an important role to play in the fight against terrorism, not least to maintain NATO's perceived relevance amongst concerned home audiences. Displaying a united Allied stance against terrorism will remain a crucially important response to this threat. Together with relevant partners NATO should develop its role to match the evolving threat. NATO must focus primarily on the threat of terrorism in the Euro-Atlantic area, including terrorist threats emanating from NATO's southern flank. It should not continue to approach terrorism as a standalone phenomenon but instead focus on specific identifiable threats to Allies.

The Alliance should enhance the fight against terrorism as part of the hybrid and cyber conversation, and ensure that the threat from terrorism figures in exercises and lessons learned. It should continue to incorporate the CT dimension in military planning documents, where relevant and in accordance with threat assessments, with the aim of tackling instances of severe and organized terrorist threats originating outside of Alliance territory.

NATO should strive to improve current practices of intelligence-sharing among Allies to achieve better, common situational awareness in key areas including emerging safe havens and terrorists' use of EDTs, as well as hybrid tactics. Allied nations should improve resilience by strengthening their national capacities for civil preparedness and homeland security. NATO nations retain the primary responsibility for their domestic security, and for their own resilience, nevertheless, more determined, coordinated and integrated joint work to establish and pool capabilities to cope with contingencies with a low probability, but very high impact would be beneficial. NATO could offer a surge capacity to individual countries whose capabilities may be overwhelmed by e.g. a terrorist attack involving non-conventional means including chemical, biological, or radiological substances.

But maybe a greater challenge to NATO is the lack of willingness of its members to fully commit to strengthening security and empowering the Alliance. This is well demonstrated by the approaches of individual countries to their military establishments and national defence. The NATO members' military expenditures demonstrates that a critical majority of NATO countries have gradually stopped taking national defence seriously since the end of the Cold War[5].

The World Trade Centre attacks and other events of 9/11 were a wake-up call, but this was gradually forgotten, and especially neglected after the 2008 financial crises. The lack of resources also demonstrates an apathy towards defence in most of the European capitals. And, while everybody is very vocal on their concerns about such things as Russian aggression and the expansion of ISIS, very little practical action is taken.

NATO faces both conventional and unconventional challenges; it lacks resources and new ideas, but nevertheless continues to be the most affective military and political alliance in history. In



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fact, NATO is the only alliance to have survived its initial purpose, in this case, to contain Soviet aggression and win the Cold War.

I think there are two issues to discuss. The first is whether the old threats were greater than those we face today or may face in the foreseeable future. The second is whether NATO is equipped to address today's challenges and the most appropriate institution for the task. When most people talk of modern security threats, they think, above all, of that posed by terrorism, or rather terrorisms. I use the plural because there is no agreed definition of terrorism and clearly terrorism comes in many different forms, each of which must be treated in a different way.

The biggest early challenge to NATO in terms of terrorism was 9/11. The Alliance engaged vigorously with this new threat, and its actions were considered as a success, especially the first years of ISAF campaign. From the current perspective, however, it has become more complicated and less successful.

NATO introduced a number of new approaches to make itself more suited and able to counter new threats. Some of these were presented by NATO Secretary Generals, each of whom felt it necessary to leave NATO with some new catchy phrase that would serve as a slogan for some time. These slogans presented NATO's new strategic approaches, which would supposedly transform the Alliance into a much more effective and modern organisation.

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer's "niche capability", Anders Fogh Rasmussen's "smart defence," and of course Jens Stoltenberg's "STRATCOM" and "hybrid warfare" are fine examples of this tradition. Here are some detailed extracts on how NATO viewed these problems and solutions.

"NATO unveiled a new Strategic Concept at the Washington Summit in April 1999. This new Strategic Concept still includes the main principle that NATO must have the capability to prevent aggression directed against any one or more of its members. However, the strategy also suggests that NATO must look beyond traditional collective defence and establish the capability to deal with threats."[6]

"Smart Defence is a cooperative way of thinking about generating the modern defence capabilities that the Alliance needs for the future. In this renewed culture of cooperation, Allies are encouraged to work together to develop, acquire, operate and maintain military capabilities to undertake the Alliance's essential core tasks agreed in NATO's Strategic Concept. That means harmonising requirements, pooling and sharing capabilities, setting priorities and coordinating efforts better. Projects cover a wide range of efforts addressing the most critical capability requirements, such as precision-guided munitions, cyberdefence, ballistic missile defence, and Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, to name a few."[7]

"The 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war demonstrates the ability of non-state actors to exploit the vulnerabilities of conventionally stronger militaries and devise appropriate counter-measures. The deployment of hybrid tactics is inherently destabilizing for the stronger opponent. An inherent weakness to hybrid warfare, however, is that it is often a range of tactics lacking a strategy, causing its adherents problems in the long term. In the post-2014 international security environment, there is no uniform definition of hybrid warfare, as there is no uniformity in the way that it is and can be used.



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The tactics can be scaled and tailor-fit to the particular situation. Hybrid tactics as used by Russia are not inherently anything new for the Alliance. The Soviet Union often sought to manipulate domestic issues inside of NATO member states, creating grey zones of ambiguity surrounding the degree of its involvement. Today, Russia seeks to create a grey zone of ambiguity along NATO’s eastern flank-attempts at domestic political and economic destabilization and manipulation of states along the eastern border regions of NATO from the Baltics to the Black Sea have driven many political leaders to claim that they fall within this grey zone already, and that it will only expand. A key difference, however, between Soviet and today’s Russia’s use of hybrid tactics is that, while the Soviets used them primarily to soften their opponents, president Putin seems to be using them as a means of achieving his objectives of a politically restructured Europe.”[8]

4. Conclusions

Speaking of new threats and challenges for NATO, I think they are not actually that new at all. The Cold War could be considered as example of hybrid warfare. During the confrontation, both sides tried to gain the upper hand by using different methods such as political, military, informational, social, financial and many others.

In many aspects, most of the new initiatives which NATO is putting forward are actually already part of NATO’s organisational and structural philosophy. Rebranding is a very complicated task, and one should ask what exactly needs to be transformed in NATO. We do agree that capabilities and structure should be subject to constant review and improvement. NATO should try to be very efficient to new threats and challenges. However, its philosophy and values should remain constant. NATO was founded on principles of common defence and security. Article 3 and Article 5 define NATO as a collective security organisation, and this should remain a major cornerstone of NATO’s existence.

New ideas and initiatives are attempts to bring additional capabilities to NATO, and they are more than welcome. However, in a reality of limited resources, each new spending should be a matter of very careful consideration. Every organisation needs new ideas, and they are useful. But NATO has the choice of whether to divert resources to new initiatives, or prioritise territorial defence. The lack of resources makes the outcome of this choice inevitable. It is obvious that implementing new ideas while continuing to focus on established core priorities is increasingly difficult, almost impossible. NATO is in the business of winning wars, and it always has been. It is much harder, though, for a military organisation operating with limited military capabilities to win the peace. ISAF is an unfortunate example of this.

Sometimes, the political side of NATO, or more correctly the political leadership of individual Allies, is often trying to use the Alliance to solve all problems. NATO performs admirably in the first stages of conflicts where a conventional, kinetic approach is predominant, demonstrating its readiness and effectiveness. Afterwards, though, it struggles with the stabilisation phase. There are many reasons why militaries struggle to win the peace. Their training doctrines, equipment and capabilities are designed to win a war, and trying to use any military force to win the peace is a simple misuse of a very effective and expensive tool.



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Using NATO in situations where militaries should not have a major role creates conditions for a very questionable outcome, even failure. Of course, with sufficient resources, there would be nothing wrong in engaging it in such initiatives. Indeed, it would be very beneficial. But the existing limitations on resources demand that they are used efficiently. Therefore, NATO should focus on its traditional, conventional capabilities. In other words, it should further enhance its ability to win wars.

NATO needs to rebuild its image as a very strong conventional alliance. By projecting this image and sending the proper signals, NATO would prevent any further threats of new conventional confrontation, or at least make it less tempting to challenge the Alliance. Some statements and declarations of NATO officials and Allies' leaders are in line with this approach. The security conference in Munich (February 2016) was an example of how NATO should demonstrate willingness and resolve to engage if necessary.

Both strengthening the eastern borders and increasing the presence in the Black Sea are welcome initiatives. However, words should be back up by actions. NATO should continue to strengthen its core capabilities and enhance conventional structures. Russia, and any other potential challenger, will be watching closely. There is necessary NATO collectively unquestionable declaration and plan, and supported by the resources of each individual Ally, aimed at dramatically updating and increasing NATO's conventional Article 5 capabilities. Anything less would be considered, by the Kremlin in particular, as the Alliance backing down.

Undoubtedly the future of a credible and effective Alliance will be key to make this complex world more stable and it will be the only liable legacy to leave to our future generations. However, a step forward would be to use the whole NATO toolbox as a politico-military alliance to address two key factors of instability, which are intimately interlinked. On the one hand, there is the clash of regional powers which use force, covertly or openly, to protect their interests and extend their influence, in an increasingly aggressive way. On the other hand, there is the lack of state control over certain countries, because of civil war and/or the collapse of statehood, such as in Syria, Libya, Yemen.

In an environment where emerging challenges and threats can occur from anywhere, addressing those challenges require a strong network of allies and partners that look to develop peaceful and friendly relations in order to promote peace and stability.

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