



ΚΕΔΙΣΑ KEDISA

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

**NATO: Fronts, Risks and Challenges in
light of 2017**

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Research Paper No. 4



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Introduction

67 years after its foundation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization finds itself in its most critical juncture to date. The voices of those who discredit and call the Alliance obsolete and a post-Cold War remnant are anything but few. However, the constantly changing security environment is considered one of the main reasons why NATO today has tracked the fertile ground to transform itself from a merely defensive block of nations to a depository of international security, dealing with an array of challenges, from terrorism in its southern flank to hybrid threats from the east. In the current paper we aim to highlight the main fronts and challenges facing NATO in the upcoming year, under the guidance of the recent Warsaw Summit and its outcome, through the respective **Communique**.

Threat emanating from the East

In Warsaw, as in previous Summits and daily NATO rhetoric, the dominant Eastern threat is portrayed in Russian Federation's figure and its hostile activities. Cooperation between the two powerful entities – NATO and Russia – had been suspended in response to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and Russia is constantly considered as a major destabilizing factor as the Organization enumerates some of the major actions it perceives as credible threats to the Alliance's security and collective defense. Such actions are summarized as follows:

- The ongoing illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea
- The violation of sovereign borders and the general destabilization of eastern Ukraine
- The organization of large-scale snap exercises as well as other military activities in proximity to NATO borders (including the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean)
- Russian nuclear rhetoric
- The airspace violations on behalf of the Russian air-force
- The practical Russian support to the Syrian Regime and the utilization of military presence in the Black Sea, viewed as an effort to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean.

Since Russia – a state actor – poses the central threat at the Eastern flank, NATO has developed and enriched its deterrence and defense posture, mainly by ameliorating and solidifying its presence in the eastern part of the Alliance. However, the formal strategic objective, at least in public diplomacy and communication level, has been the risk reduction in the periphery. Therefore, the ultimate goal is not to confront the Kremlin, but to use all the existing political and military channels of communication with Russia and develop dialogue, a practical cooperation in areas of common interest and potentially a type of

partnership. It is important to mention in this regard that the vestigial re-activation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2016 reflected this point of view on behalf of the Alliance. In particular, the NRC meeting of July 13 managed to bring together the counterparts for the first time exchanging views from the Ukrainian crisis to the situation in Afghanistan.

One cannot deny that the confrontation between NATO and Russia goes well beyond the Ukrainian conflict, but the implementation and respect of the Minsk agreements on behalf of Moscow will significantly change the equilibrium in favor of the pursuit of a secure and stabilized eastern flank. Thus, the utilization of the political dialogue in any level between NATO and Russia, is not only the most precious remaining tool, but also a driving force for the re-establishment of a stable conventional communication and negotiation forum.

Threat emanating from the South

For NATO, the profound and prevalent threat originating from its southern periphery is the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) poses. The jihadist threat has become much more intense and direct over the last year, predominantly through the terrorist attacks its members have carried out in various Allies' territories, underscoring its proximity to the Western countries and at the same time the utmost importance of its eradication. In response to ISIL's grave threat to the wider Middle East and North Africa region, as well as to themselves, NATO Allies and many of the Alliance's partners are contributing to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. The Coalition's contribution has proved successful, resulting to ISIL incrementally losing ground and strategic points under its command in Syria and Iraq. The campaign against the jihadist group is highly likely to be extended throughout 2017 and the guerilla type of warfare that now prevails is likely to prove destructive for the last ISIL strongholds. However, the need for the members of the Coalition and particularly of NATO to retain the momentum is considered solemn. In this framework, NATO has recognized, at least in the rhetorical level that unharmed political transition and ultimately a political stability in Syria is a prerequisite for the effective and ultimate defeat of ISIL. From the same angle, the battle against ISIL and the containment of the repercussions to the regional security, stability and humanitarian situation will be judged by the extent to which the Alliance will contribute to the political normalization in Syria, which from its part requires a mutual understanding between the warring sides and in the bigger picture among Allies from the one side and the Russian Federation on the other.

In addition, a major factor that resulted from ISIL's activities, as well as from the general political instability and conflict zone in the Mid-East/North Africa region is the migration crisis. Apart from the cost in human lives, the crisis bears major humanitarian implications, as people smuggling and trafficking is taking place, exploiting people seeking for a better future or even salvation. In February

2016, on the request of Germany, Greece and Turkey, NATO decided to join international efforts in dealing with the evolving migration crisis. In this framework, NATO is currently cooperating with the European Union's border and coast guard agency, Frontex, under the provisions of International Law and the Law of the Sea. In practice, NATO's contribution consists of naval and aerial assets, (reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance of illegal crossings in the territorial waters of Greece and Turkey, and international waters). As regards the intelligence sector, NATO is sharing information with the Greek and Turkish authorities, while it shares real-time information with Frontex with a view to more effective and efficient monitoring of the crisis situation. NATO's supportive role is likely to be extended throughout 2017, although the results so far have not proved satisfactory for certain Allies and for the de-escalation of the migration crisis itself. Indeed, Turkey itself has doubted the added value of NATO's role in the Aegean with regards to the migration crisis and has expressed its unwillingness to continue supporting it for 2017.

Cyber Defense

One of the major innovations that the Warsaw Summit brought about was the recognition of cyberspace as a ***“domain of operations in which NATO must defend itself as effectively as it does in the air, on land, and at sea”*** (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016). In other words, cyberspace has been officially recognized as a battlefield and the actions, reactions and counter-reactions inside it will be defined by a comprehensive strategy. This strategy will dictate in particular the specific modus operandi of the Alliance, including operations, protective measures, monitoring systems and security checks. The latter is not to be ignored as it indicates profoundly that NATO has adapted to the new era of cyber warfare. Conventional war tactics in an open battlefield have long been considered as anachronistic but it is true that before the Wales Summit, where cyber defense was symbolically declared as part of NATO's core task of collective defense, the cyberspace was hardly ever treated as it should be defensive-wise. What is formally expected over the following period is the effective organization of NATO's cyber defense and optimal management of its respective resources, skills and capacity. NATO's Enhanced Policy on Cyber Defense will definitely be solidified and optimized. At the same time, through the Cyber Defense Pledge, Allies are committed to enhance the cyber defenses of their national networks and infrastructure, contributing in the collective resilience of the Alliance in the long term. Hybrid elements are also not to be neglected in this regard.

Hybrid warfare

Hybrid warfare is a relatively new term in the Alliance's strategic planning. It initiated as such, but certainly does not exhaust solely to Russian courses of action. It consists of threats attributed both to state and non-state actors. According to its general characteristics, the hybrid threat implies a "**conflict that is integrated, adaptive, flexible, and mixing overt and covert operations**" (Lasconjarias & Larsen, 2015). Hybrid threats target the vulnerabilities either of the military assets or the societal welfare, establishing blurred lines between war and peace, and "**undermining traditional institutions and government on a possibly unprecedented scale**" (Lasconjarias & Larsen, 2015). One could argue that hybrid warfare is the updated version of a Cold War situation. However, if this is the case, then any non-conventional action can potentially be treated as a hybrid threat and then the term loses its scope by becoming all-inclusive. It is true that the concept has been used extensively to describe the Russian aggression in the Eastern flank, but it has been transformed during the course of 2016 to entail actions by perpetrators like ISIL. NATO has incorporated hybrid warfare in its collective defense and crisis management policies. In the meantime, it seeks those patterns and methodologies to build upon and adopt the necessary strategic and operational modules to counter every hybrid threat possible. These efforts include measures from the optimization of the cyber/electronic defense systems and the reforms in the intelligence-sharing to the adaptability and flexibility of the crisis communications channels, both publicly and internally. It is indisputable that NATO will feverishly work towards the adaptation to the new hybrid environment all along 2017 and this will reflect mainly in its military exercises.

Ballistic Missile Defense

Since the Lisbon Summit in 2010 and its official inauguration as a concept and as a tool realizing in practice the pillar of the collective defense, the Ballistic Missile Defense has undergone significant developments over the last years, which in essence left a footprint in Warsaw too. As the communiqué indicates "**we decided to develop a NATO Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) capability to pursue our core task of collective defense. The aim of this capability is to provide full coverage and protection for all NATO European populations, territory, and forces against the increasing threats posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles, based on the principles of indivisibility of Allies' security and NATO solidarity, equitable sharing of risks and burdens, as well as reasonable challenge, taking into account the level of threat, affordability, and technical feasibility, and in accordance with the latest common threat assessments agreed by the**

Alliance” (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016). In Warsaw, the Organization declared the achievement of NATO BMD Initial Operational Capability. In practice, this means that the BMD can actually be activated and respond to a missile threat and as the voluntary national contributions augments (including interceptors, sensors, hosting arrangements for the Command and Control C2 systems), so does the operational capacity of the anti-ballistic shield across the territory of the participating Allies. It goes without saying that Russia has criticized BMD, characterizing it as unacceptable and counterproductive and expressed its major concerns against it, arguing that BMD is targeting its territory and interests, thus responding with relevant threats about targeting Allies. Nonetheless, the Alliance has repeatedly reassured its Eastern neighbor that the BMD has no intention to strike against Russia’s strategic (nuclear) deterrent, but rather consists of a defense shield against potential threats outside the Euro-Atlantic area, focused possibly on the Middle Eastern region. Up until a few months ago, Iran was often portrayed as the prevalent potential target. The controversy is still ongoing and the BMD itself will continue to pose a thorn, at least in the context of the NATO-Russia relations.

Ukraine

For the Alliance, Ukraine is one of the open fronts of major concern. This was underscored by the fact that in Warsaw NATO and Ukrainian President Poroshenko issued a joint statement, recognizing Kiev’s right to self-determination and commitment to the values of democracy, protection of human rights and the rule of law, relating it directly to the Euro-Atlantic security. Needless to say, Ukraine’s orientation and approach to NATO has triggered tensions between the Alliance and Russia, reviving a Cold War era atmosphere in the eastern flank. NATO is also praising and pushing Kiev for major reforms that will enable the country to fulfil its transition to full democratization. NATO’s enhanced Distinctive Partnership with Ukraine does not, however, imply the existence of a credible deterrent against Moscow. On the contrary, Russia does not appear enthusiastic about deserting the Ukrainian issue, but rather utilizes the Crimean region as a boost to the alleged contestations. The possibility of a heated incident is highly unlikely, but the destabilizing factor of the situation up to date is taken for granted as regards the NATO-Russia relation.

Afghanistan

In Warsaw, the Alliance decided once again to sustain its forces in Afghanistan, prolonging its presence in the country beyond 2016 through a different cooperative model, together with the EU, in response to its role as a trustee of stability and with the goal not to allow Afghanistan to become once again a safe

haven for terrorist or other threats to security. In parallel, the ultimate goal is that Afghanistan becomes capable of providing for its own security, good governance, economic and social development and respect for human rights. In practice, NATO finds itself in a standstill in Afghanistan, as thirteen years after the launch of the Allied involvement it has still been impossible to proceed in an unhampered full transition of power to a new 'confident' Afghani government. The Resolute Support Format with its largely military elements has been transformed to enhance enduring Partnership and a more supportive role in logistical terms. However, the truth is that NATO is not eager to leave the Afghani territory, as it is not confident that the stability will be a *modus vivendi* for the long-suffering country. To the contrary, the possibilities of Afghanistan becoming a rogue state in the long term remain high, bearing also in mind the general deteriorating situation in the broader region.

Kosovo

During the Warsaw Summit, the situation in Kosovo was assessed as ***“broadly stable”*** (Warsaw Summit Communiqué), in favor of KFOR, the NATO-led international peacekeeping force responsible for establishing a secure environment in Kosovo since 1999. Despite the raging challenges, the progress up to date was praised, the Alliance's commitment to support the development of security organizations in Kosovo was underscored and Kosovo's request for an enhanced relationship with NATO will be treated by the end of the year.

Cooperation with International Organizations in cooperative security and crisis management

NATO reaffirmed in Warsaw its commitment in working closely with several other international organizations, seeking to achieve a ***“comprehensive political, civilian and military approach in crisis management and cooperative security”*** (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016). UN, EU and OSCE are prevalent in the Alliance's international cooperation approach, besides partner nations.

Practical cooperation and enhanced political dialogue are already in place between NATO and the UN and the two international entities interact, complement and support each other in UN peace operations, in building defense capacity for countries at risk and numerous other fields of mutual interest.

Cooperation with the European Union also plays a key role for the security challenges they share, like terrorism and the migration crisis. Their strategic partnership is likely to augment both in quantitative and qualitative terms,

including but not limited to the enhancement of the European defense, cooperation in countering hybrid threats, and the facilitation of resilience, cyber defense and maritime security.

NATO also highly appreciates the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in addressing security challenges in the Euro-Atlantic area, through its multi-disciplinary approach (political-military, and economic-environmental-human security dimensions). Thus, for the upcoming year, NATO will seek to further foster cooperation with the OSCE, both at political and operational level, according to the Warsaw Summit declaration.

Although the cooperation scheme between them appears quite different compared to the abovementioned organizations, the African Union and NATO will most probably continue cultivating cooperative channels, especially through capacity building support, tailor-made training and exercises, but also at a political level.

Partnerships and their role

The various partnership schemes the Alliance has formulated and fostered over the past years- namely the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative – have proved to entail a major strategic role, through the establishment of political dialogue and practical cooperation in the security field, thus calibrating a solid cooperative security network. However, as the Alliance admitted in Warsaw, the dynamic nature of the contemporary security threats demand further alignment, consistency and coordination among NATO and its counterparts-members of the partnership platforms. Via these cooperative platforms, the Organization has succeeded in enhancing its reach both inside its neighborhood and beyond. Practical proof for the abovementioned statement can be traced at the deployment of partners' forces in NATO operations and missions, their substantial economic contribution to the Trust Funds, as well as the service alongside several Allies, which enriches the interoperability aspect. On this basis, in Warsaw, the Defense Ministers Interoperability Platform endorsed a roadmap as a guide to joint preparation for crisis management and further developments are expected to take place in the following months.

Conclusion

The challenges in the global security environment are both numerous and dynamic, and tend to evolve exponentially over a limited period of time. For an international organization dealing with collective defense, cooperative security and crisis management, the situation becomes far more complicated. The Alliance and its leadership are hopefully aware of these factors and that is the reason why they firmly stated that **“we seek to contribute more to the efforts of the international community in projecting stability and strengthening security outside our territory, thereby contributing to the Alliance security overall”** (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016). It hence becomes apparent that NATO bears a very precise and realistic view of its posture in the global security environment. It also evaluates itself as a part in the chain of global security guarantors. In parallel, NATO recognizes the fact that the attainment of a secure environment within the Allied territory is inextricably linked with security and stability beyond its external borders. However, the Euro-Atlantic Organization disposes different capacity for the various fronts briefly analyzed above and the respective challenges are to be confronted in a different manner, some demanding simple monitoring activities, and others being in need of a reformulated approach.

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