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NATO's Soft Southern Flank

by Rolf Holmboe
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NATO SERIES

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► **Executive Summary**

NATO should engage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to contain Russian and Iranian anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) and to block Russian attempts to establish an axis of autocracies in the region. NATO should also support a coalition of nations to counter Russian and Iranian power projection, but in a way that helps resolve differences among the regional powers. By expanding military co-operation with key MENA partners, NATO can engage in defence capacity building (DCB). NATO also needs to enhance maritime and air assets in and around the region with a stronger focus on A2/AD and within the context of a new C4ISR¹ structure.

To assist in managing the challenges of destabilization and massive forced migration, NATO should expand its crisis management readiness. Key areas for development include stronger intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to counter human smuggling networks and to deepen the strategic dialogue with MENA partners on security stabilization, migration control, maritime security and counterterrorism.

NATO should also significantly scale up counterterrorism in DCB with partner countries and expand the scope of engagements to the “by, with and through” concept, ensuring NATO operational counterterrorism support on the ground with forces and strategic assets when needed.

NATO's approach to security co-operation must be one that stabilizes, rather than the opposite. For this reason, NATO should co-ordinate closely with the EU to ensure that engagements take place in a broader context of economic development and gradual reform in the region.

¹ C4ISR: Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (also known as C4ISTAR).



Not since the end of the Cold War has NATO been faced with such an array of complex security challenges as it is now. The most visible challenge has emerged from a re-assertive Russia that has become the major source of regional instability on NATO's eastern flank. Russia is blurring the lines between war and peace with hybrid warfare, including support for subversive groups, cyber-warfare and aggressive messaging. Russia is keeping things just below the red line that would warrant a stronger Western response.

With eyes turned eastward, we have somewhat neglected coming up with timely and comprehensive responses to the challenges emanating from NATO's southern flank. The ability of regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to stay in power after the Arab Spring with limited reforms, cosmetic government changes and shallow social payoffs is keeping the region gridlocked in a vicious circle of instability, slow economic growth, social stagnation and ensuing political radicalization.

In 2015, more than a million asylum seekers crossed into Europe from countries either affected by war or unable to provide livelihoods for their citizens. The Libya, Syria and Iraq wars have created an ungoverned space for the unprecedented rise in extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). This has in turn led to a significant rise in terrorism in the West. The mostly unrelated phenomena of migration and terrorism have significantly contributed to an atmosphere of xenophobia and to the rise of populism in the West. With no stabilization in sight in the regions of origin, the rise of inward-looking populist politics could enhance internal divisions and cripple resolve within the alliance.

Furthermore, Russian and Iranian power projection has offset a regional conflict that threatens to divide the MENA region and destabilize it even further. Bashar Assad's unchecked Syria onslaught has allowed Iran to expand its military control all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, benefiting not least from the vacuum created by the implosion of ISIS. To Israel, the perspective of Iranian military control in Syria and advanced missiles in the Golan is tantamount to a Cuban missile crisis.

Since 2015, Russia has re-engaged militarily in the region as the main sponsor of Assad and Iran, providing key military force-enhancing assets to Iran and Hezbollah, and a veto in the UN Security Council. Russia's long-term deployment to Syria and the Mediterranean of advanced and multilayered surface-to-air missile systems (SAM), advanced fixed-wing aircraft on new Russian airbases in Syria, and naval platforms with advanced SAM and anti-ship cruise missile assets, constitute a significant anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capability against NATO. It has already significantly constrained anti-ISIS operations in Syria, allowing Russia and Iran to be the main beneficiaries from the impending fall of ISIS in Syria.

Russia is also seeking to sponsor energy supplies from Iran and Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria, looking at re-establishing pipelines in Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean Sea. This could significantly strengthen Russia's grip on energy supplies to Europe, not least if the Gulf at some point becomes destabilized.



Russia is currently reaching out to regimes across the region in a divisive bid to sponsor autocratic rulers against Western calls for democracy, human rights and inclusive economic growth. For instance, Russia has sought to strengthen partnerships with rulers in Libya and Egypt and has reached out to Turkey and Jordan as well. This could potentially allow Russian A2/AD force projection deeper into the region, destabilizing and polarizing MENA even further.

NATO's southern flank has thus turned from challenge to potential threat in the span of just two years, linking the region to the multifaceted challenges stemming from Russia on NATO's eastern flank.

Since 2010, crisis management and co-operative security have been NATO core tasks together with collective defence, and NATO has responded to challenges from the south. In 2011, NATO's Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR successfully stopped Libya's Moammar Gadhafi from slaughtering his own population in response to uprisings. NATO conducted anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden from 2008 to 2016 that significantly contributed to eliminating the threat of piracy. NATO carried out training missions in Iraq from 2004 to 2011 that helped roll back the Islamic State in Iraq, the predecessor of ISIS.

But so far, NATO is not dealing in a comprehensive way with the region's main challenges: (1) Iran's and Russia's A2/AD power projection destabilizing the region, (2) the threat of new state failures and waves of forced migration in the wake of such destabilization, and (3) the continued spread of extremism and terrorism from the region.

What should we do?

The big question is how to respond to the expanding complex and multi-faceted challenges coming from the south and what role NATO should play in this, if any.

President Donald Trump responded to the new situation during his visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, where he met with a group of key MENA leaders. He called for a coalition of nations to roll back terrorism and extremism and to contain Iranian power projection in the region, potentially growing into an "Arab NATO" down the line. He also more than hinted that his agenda would be driven by interests rather than by values, tantamount to stating that he would not be as critical of autocratic rulers as his predecessors had been.

Canada should first and foremost develop an opinion on the comprehensive policy responses that NATO needs to address the challenges. In an era of growing complexity, single and simple solutions are not likely to suffice.

Canada also needs to take a hard look at what the wider consequences of such choices could be. In a very fragile region, the overall aim should be stability.



Iran's and Russia's power projection

NATO should move to contain the Russian/Iranian A2/AD power projection into the MENA region, first of all because it appears as part of a Russian scheme to envelop NATO and Western liberal democracies with an “axis of autocracies”. Such an axis would be a significant force enhancer for Russia, linking it to a powerful Iranian military and Iranian ballistic missiles, as well as to proxy Hezbollah, Iraqi and other Shi'a militias. It also potentially links Russia to hybrid opportunities, such as enhanced energy supply control and potential lever control of diffuse threats such as the massive migration and spread of extremism currently arising from Syria.

Second, containment is also needed to avoid the negative consequences of a continued regional conflict pitting Iran and Sunni powers against each other. Europe will suffer far more from continued destabilization in MENA than Russia, and that makes destabilization a potential Russian strategic aim. In fact, destabilization in the Gulf is the single factor that would enhance Russian and Iranian power the most. On the other hand, a new negotiated regional balance of power between Iran and Sunni states would immediately reduce Russian influence in the region.

Therefore, a coalition of MENA nations to roll back Russia and contain Iran is an option, but it would have to be as part of a carrot-and-stick approach. If it only contributes to continued regional conflict, it risks further strengthening Russia and Iran. But if it succeeds in significantly challenging Iranian militaristic policies in the region and is complemented by diplomatic initiatives, it could open the door to negotiate a new balance of power between Sunni states and Iran and to reach a new agreement between the West and Iran. A real deal with the West could strengthen moderate circles inside Iran and decrease the allure of an Iranian alliance with Russia.

NATO should support a carrot-and-stick approach to containment as part of a new comprehensive strategy. NATO can contribute to denying Russia access and influence by expanding long-term defence capacity building (DCB) in MENA partner countries, by conducting joint exercises and establishing symbolic military presences (small mission elements).

NATO should enhance and ready its capabilities (NATO response force and specialized capabilities) to conduct or support interventions as needed in the MENA area as a deterrent to further Russian power projection. NATO should also strengthen Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) in the eastern Mediterranean within a new maritime strategy where A2/AD plays a more significant role. NATO ought also to enhance air force and anti-missile capabilities in the area within the context of a new and broader C4ISR structure (a shortfall identified during NATO's Libya campaign).

The threat of new state failures and waves of forced migration

NATO does not have all the answers to the challenges of stabilization and the management of reform and change in the region, but it is part of a solution. NATO needs to work in an even more integrated way with the EU, combining security, diplomatic and development instruments in a



comprehensive and flexible approach to meet the region's many challenges. For NATO, the new approach should combine crisis management, pre-emption and prevention.

NATO should further expand the scope of operations in Operation SEA GUARDIAN in the Mediterranean Sea, which since 2016 has been helping to secure NATO's maritime south with a much broader mandate than its predecessor mission, ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR, since 2001. NATO should in particular strengthen its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability to identify and target human smuggling networks, drawing upon the many lessons learned during anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. NATO should also deepen the engagement within the co-operation structures with the region – NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative. These should be the frameworks for strategic dialogue and co-operation on security stabilization, migration control, maritime security and counterterrorism.

The continued spread of extremism and terrorism from the region

NATO's priority should be to include counterterrorism capacity building and operational support to counterterrorism operations as a key element in DCB with regional partners. NATO can do this by building on its experiences in capacity building in Iraq from 2004 to 2011 as well as the lessons learned during Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. This would involve expanding the capacity building to a "by, with and through" concept, which would entail a limited force engagement in operations on the ground as well as advanced weapons support for local counterterrorism operations.

Constraints

One constraint is that for NATO to play a stabilizing role, engagements must contribute to reform and development in the region, even if this is gradual and long term. Engagements that are perceived as supportive of entrenched autocracies or even used to continue repressing a population will ultimately backfire. Security support cannot be carried out in a bubble irrespective of other developments in the countries in question without risking further destabilization.

A related constraint is therefore that NATO's engagements must be co-ordinated with a broader framework of support for economic development and gradual reform in the region. NATO should in particular co-ordinate with the EU as the region's main development partner and with NATO allies' bilateral development assistance. A benefit of broader co-operation is that the EU can complement NATO in areas where the latter does not have comparative advantages, such as countering terror financing, countering extremism and financial stabilization of governments.

Another constraint is that NATO will have to establish a completely new political consensus among allies to significantly strengthen its engagements on the southern flank. The need for additional force elements and financial resources will compete with other engagements, and may not come easily.



The West and NATO can no longer afford a hands-off approach to MENA's chaotic developments. NATO must engage in a comprehensive way and with multifaceted and flexible responses to the heterogeneous challenges it faces in the region and this must be done in co-operation with other partners, not least the EU.

► **About the Author**

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