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by Roger Hilton
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CGAI PRIMER

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Later this week, NATO defence ministers will hold a two-day ministerial meeting via teleconference to assess the current security challenges facing the transatlantic community. Returning to bread-and-butter security issues for defence ministers is a welcome change of pace from their previous day-to-day agenda which has almost entirely been consumed by the pandemic. This summit could not have arrived sooner. From Russian escapades on both sides of the Atlantic to Chinese military signalling toward Taiwan and India, these events have confirmed that COVID-19 does not kill the geopolitical impetus of many nations. When ministers return to business, it promises to be a jam-packed schedule with internal tiffs to overcome and external threats to address.

In April, defence ministers held a special session dedicated to the coronavirus to discuss its long-term implications and make the necessary preparations for the expected arrival of a second wave. Meanwhile, previously unknown organs of the Alliance like the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, as well as the NATO Support and Procurement Agency garnered more visibility. Their supreme utility in aiding members to stem the virus's spread by delivering medical equipment and facilitating the transportation of patients between countries for treatment has been a welcome development.

The current health crisis has also heaped more attention on the need for the Alliance and its members to be more resilient, as outlined in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, amid the changing nature of conventional and non-conventional crises. This initiative links well with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's creation of an expert reflection group tasked with ensuring NATO can match current and future challenges. Greta Bossenmaier, former SIGNIT chief and national security advisor to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, will be representing Canada and is an expert of the highest pedigree.

Despite these developments, an ugly cloud will be hanging over the June meeting. The Trump administration's decision to pull a third of its permanently stationed troops from Germany totally blind-sided Chancellor Angela Merkel and is hardly a good omen with the resumption of defence activities. Friction between the United States and Turkey over the future use of the Hagia Sophia is another unwelcomed political distraction. This squabble compounds their already complicated bilateral relationship, due to Ankara's controversial decision to purchase the Russian-made S-400 missile system and its subsequent expulsion from the F-35 program.

A sliver of good news to offset this arrived on June 12 with NATO granting Ukraine "Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP)" status. Ukraine's desire to obtain EOP status dates to 2016; its new privileges will facilitate deeper co-operation with NATO vis-à-vis security consultations, and access to interoperability programs, exercises and information. Any further ability for Ukraine to defend itself against Russia in the Donbass is crucial, given that ceasefire violations continue, according to [reporting](#) from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission.

When it comes to the most pressing policy issues, it is reasonable to discuss the U.S.'s intention to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, as well as future arms control regimes like the New



START and NPT. NATO's 2019 categorization of space as a new operational domain could even make the agenda. Another major policy project requiring attention is the "Four Thirties" initiative. This ambitious pledge calls for the deployment of battalions, 30 battleships and 30 air squadrons within 30 days or less. It was supposed to be ready by 2020, but issues like existing barriers to military mobility and the pandemic may force a new target date for activation.

Furthermore, ministers should allocate some time to review the current landscape of hybrid threats facing the Alliance. Although Twitter and Facebook have [cracked](#) down on state-backed linked social media accounts, ministers would do well to provide national updates to evaluate and catalogue the development of any new hybrid warfare patterns or tactics, given the anxieties over the pandemic and ongoing social unrest over racial inequality across the transatlantic sphere. The Polish presidential election scheduled for June 28 could be fertile ground to test these hybrid programs in the run-up to the U.S. presidential election in November.

Further key items to be discussed include emerging developments on NATO's eastern and southern flanks. The beginning of the ministerial meeting will coincide with the conclusion of the Baltic Operations (BALTOPS 2020) exercise. This year marks its 49th edition, which brought together 19 NATO allies and partner nations to participate in live training events simulating air defence, anti-submarine warfare, maritime interdiction and mine counter-measure operations. Ensuring readiness in the Baltic Sea area remains of the utmost importance for NATO's deterrence posture.

Although Russia's normal miscreant activities vis-à-vis its neighbours have slowed due to the pandemic, it has still used the opportunity to muddy waters in member states. Latvia received the brunt of this Russian exhaust when propaganda outlet Sputnik promulgated the theory that "very smart biologists and pharmacists" in Latvia created COVID-19. Also, the Canadian-led Enhanced Forward Presence battle group was [targeted](#) with a pandemic-related disinformation campaign designed to reduce political solidarity and deployment confidence. Vigilance against the Kremlin remains the watchword of the day, as frequent incursions into European and North American airspace continue. One notable episode that could arise at the ministerial meeting is Russia's March reconnaissance of [ICEX 2020](#). Fears of Russia looking to obtain electronic intelligence on American submarines that were taking part in a three-week exercise featuring multiple Arctic transits, a North Pole surfacing and other training elements is a legitimate concern that would profit from further Alliance introspection. Finally, the status of Russia's major Black Sea exercise, Kavkaz-2020, in September should be reviewed.

South of NATO's borders, the complexity and fragility of the security picture cannot be overstated. Although France recently confirmed the death of a senior al-Qaida terrorist in an operation in northern Mali, it is nothing more than a temporary Band-Aid. A surge of terrorist attacks executed by both al-Qaida and Daesh stretches across West Africa and even extends to Mozambique. If the resurgence of terrorism were not worrisome enough, the struggle for proxy supremacy in Libya is approaching a critical phase. Turkish intervention and [support](#) to the UN-backed Government of National Accord (NGA) in Tripoli has repelled Gen. Khalifa Haftar, a client strongman of Russia. With Libya possessing an abundance of natural resources, including gas and oil, as well as over



1,700 km of strategic coastline in the Mediterranean, the current calm in hostilities is by no means permanent. Although the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub in Naples was designed to increase awareness, the current predicament will take a whole-of-Alliance effort to handle the challenges animating on the southern flank. As far as NATO's Mission Iraq goes, the coalition training mission has been [frozen](#) since the American assassination of Iranian Qasem Soleimani and persists due to the pandemic. Given the priorities for NATO outside of the area, no one should expect major change in Iraq.

The last major policy issue under consideration will be Afghanistan. It seems like an eternity since the February [announcement](#) that the U.S. and its NATO allies agreed to withdraw all troops within 14 months if Taliban militants upheld their side of the peace deal. The current deal is hanging by a thread, as the recommencement of violence has threatened the possibility of the Taliban and the government reaching a power-sharing agreement. Continued [escalation](#) of military actions by both the Taliban and the government has diminished the likelihood of success. This dilemma puts the pressure squarely on U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper to whom Allied ministers will be looking for clarity and possible contingency plans should the peace deal fall apart.

For almost the last six months, NATO and its defence ministers have been laser-focused on combating COVID-19. When they settle back for their regularly scheduled programming of transatlantic security issues and difficult decision-making, they may be asking themselves if they missed it all.

► About the Author

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