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NATO'S SOUTHERN STRATEGY AT A CROSSROADS

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The security landscape in NATO's Southern neighborhood continues to evolve, broadening the alliance's physical and political challenges at a time when strains on transatlantic relationships are intensifying. If the alliance is to remain effective, these challenges, ranging from Russia's forward military presence in Syria to Turkey's more assertive, securitized outlook, need to be countered by a more sustainable and ambitious strategy for the Southern flank. NATO must protect, adapt, and advance its role in the neighborhood. In particular, the alliance must achieve consensus on the scope of its political role and on the division of labor between itself and the EU. Of course, this requires that NATO members place a common response to threats high on their agendas, alongside their national interests. Only then can NATO plan, resource, and monitor appropriate actions to prevent insecurity spillovers and escalation.

At a micro level, NATO demonstrates a degree of capacity and willingness to adapt, but it faces significant systemic obstacles. First and foremost, the alliance may be coming to a crossroads regarding its broader mandate and ambitions to project peace, security, and stability in the South. An assessment of some of the main structural transformations affecting the security landscape illustrates the urgent need to address the political conditions framing NATO's possible response, with the aim of setting the alliance on a well-defined path.

RUSSIA AS A SOUTHERN NEIGHBOR

Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war has resulted in a permanent Russian forward operating base at NATO's Southern doorstep. Over the past year, the conflict has enabled Moscow to leverage its military, economic, and political activities in support of an increasingly apparent strategic goal: weakening the

alliance. The effects are continuing to spill over Syria's border, further challenging NATO's foothold in the Southern flank. For example, President Vladimir Putin sees a similar opening to pursue Russian interests within Libya. His burgeoning relations with the Libyan strongman General Khalifa Haftar suggest that a second operating base near Benghazi might be under consideration.¹ Although Russia's direct military engagement in Libya remains limited, Haftar's visit to the Russian *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft carrier—which was en route back from conducting naval aviation operations in Syria—marked a symbolic milestone. If successful, calculated movements like these in the Mediterranean could dramatically alter the NATO-Russia military strategic balance and deepen the existing divisions within NATO on the allocation of resources between the Eastern and Southern flanks.

Regarding military leverage, the Syria campaign has served as a test bed for Russian weapon systems, allowing Moscow



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to greatly enhance its position as a global supplier of military weapons. More than 160 Russian-made systems, platforms, and munitions have been tested.² Some of these assets, such as the BMPT-72 (Terminator 2) tank support vehicle, were tested on Syrian soil before entering into service in the Russian Armed Forces' inventory. The campaign has also engendered a permanent anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) hub in the Levant region, which is reinforced by advanced electronic warfare assets. Coupled with the mounting Russian naval activity in the region, especially the submarine activity that has reached Cold War levels, Moscow's expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean aims to constrain NATO's freedom of movement in this theater. Notably, Russian pilots have gained significant flight hours under real war conditions over the Syrian skies. Open-source intelligence suggests that some 1,760 combat missions were flown between September 2015 and early 2017.³ Strategic bomber crews also gained valuable combat experience. This capability boost could have indirect effects in other margins of NATO-Russia competition—for instance, posing challenges to the Baltic Air Policing mission.

An important economic effect of Russia's intervention has been the boost in Russian arms sales. Since the start of its military campaign in Syria, Moscow has concluded arms deals with Algeria, Indonesia, and Vietnam to name only a few.⁴ The aircraft industry, which accounts for nearly 50 percent of Moscow's arms sales abroad, has particularly benefited. Russia now holds about 25 percent of the global combat aircraft market. Many platforms, which are subject to various defense contracts, made their debuts during operations in Syria (for example, for the Su-30, Su-35, and Su-34 aircraft fighters).

Russian air-ground operations in Syria point to a true revolution in military affairs—perhaps most evidenced by the Russian Aerospace Forces' enhanced use of precision-guided munitions; network-centric capabilities; advanced intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance assets; and state-of-the-art battle damage assessments. Lessons learned from the setbacks observed during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 informed these recent operational improvements.⁵ Furthermore, as indicated by General Valery Asapov's presence and death in Deir Ezzor, Syria, Moscow deploys the elite of its armed forces—in this case, the Russian Airborne Troops—to Syria and Ukraine on a rotational basis. This demonstrates that the

Russian operating base in Syria is not merely a Southern flank issue but also an indicator of Moscow's intentions to become the top global military power.

Adding to Russia's air and ground advancements, launching of the 3M-14T Kalibr-NK cruise missiles marked a key achievement for the Russian Navy, which continues to pound its targets in Syria by employing these smart assets.⁶ Up until now, Russian defense planners viewed long-range missile operations as a part of either strategic defensive missions or nuclear delivery. Since the first Kalibr strike from the Caspian, which flew over Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian airspace, respectively, the Russian Navy has developed a long-range precision strike regime.⁷ Coupled with the increased submarine activity, this improvement gives a true boost to Moscow's non-nuclear offensive strategic options.⁸ Furthermore, expansion of the Tartus base in Syria will soon enable forward homeporting for the Russian Navy's nuclear-powered warships. Finally, lessons learned from the *Admiral Kuznetsov* carrier's naval aviation campaign off Syrian waters will be used to bolster Moscow's aircraft carrier programs in the coming decades. When combined, these developments clearly hint at a possible return, albeit in the long term, of the Soviet-era Fifth Eskadra (squadron of warships) to the Mediterranean waters—this time complemented by the concealed, nonlinear, and nonmilitary approaches of the Gerasimov Doctrine, as well as the aspirant geopolitical vision of Putin and his military-security establishment known as the *siloviki* clan.⁹

NATO is being slow to update its maritime strategy in response to the developing threat environment, largely due to a lack of internal political consensus and an unwillingness to commit the necessary resources at the necessary scale. The allied naval posture in the Mediterranean has likely been surpassed by the Russian deployments, and relying on NATO's naval assets stationed in Rota, Spain, does not seem feasible. The priority for the Rota sea contingent is supporting NATO's ballistic missile defense missions. Neither the naval contingent in Rota nor the U.S. Sixth Fleet has a permanent carrier strike group deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Standing NATO Maritime Group Two—NATO's naval arm in the region that has four to eight carriers at the most—is insufficiently set up to exercise sea control.¹⁰ Moreover, the U.S. naval strategy prioritizes its two strategic hubs in the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf. At present, no economic resources are being allocated toward

reestablishing a major defense hub in the Mediterranean, as existed during the Cold War days.

The Mediterranean cannot therefore become a third or replacement second hub in the U.S. naval strategic posture. As a result, and against the backdrop of Moscow's investment in Eastern Mediterranean naval expansion, there is a need for a NATO solution, with less reliance on U.S. naval capabilities that are already overstretched.

SYRIA AS A NEXUS

Beyond being a node for Russian military and geopolitical posturing, the conflict in Syria has generated a security flashpoint for NATO. And it is evident that to prevent the spread and escalation of security risks in its Southern neighborhood, NATO needs a comprehensive Syria policy. While tensions between Russia and Turkey have cooled over the last two years, dangerous escalatory patterns in the eastern part of the war-torn country have driven the U.S.-backed forces and the Russian-backed Syrian Arab Armed Forces to the edge of direct confrontation. In addition, Turkey's recent maneuvering further into Syria—under the guise of defeating terrorism on its border—has fueled a growing chasm between its interests and those of other NATO members, especially the United States. Tensions are palpable between the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, comprising militia that Turkey believes are linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army.

Turkey, a key Southern flank nation, is now building forward operating bases 30 kilometers inside Syrian territory—largely made possible by Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield that aimed to eradicate the self-proclaimed Islamic State and other terror groups in northern Syria. However, the drastic differences of opinion between Ankara and Washington on the Democratic Union Party (PYD)-backed Kurdish militia, which Turkey regards as a threat and the United States regards as an ally, remains a serious drawback that hinders the possibility of brokering a NATO consensus in Syria.

Given that many allied nations for NATO are wary of becoming more exposed to the Syrian conflict, a policy or engagement strategy should be clearly defined and streamlined. There are concrete areas where NATO could add significant value. For example, NATO can pursue some of its more common goals in

Syria: mitigating the risk of chemical and biological weapons proliferation by the Baath regime and nonstate actors, denying freedom of movement to returning foreign terrorist fighters, preventing Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime from changing the demographics of Syria by intentional depopulation strategies, putting more pressure on the regime's key figures that are responsible for war crimes, and dealing with the black arms market flow into the country, especially improvised explosive devices and man-portable air defense systems. A more focused collaboration between the relevant NATO internal divisions—including the Emerging Security Challenges Division, the Joint Intelligence and Security Division, and the intelligence fusion centers—should allow the alliance to develop a more concrete and feasible Syria agenda.

NATO's goal to respond to the changing threats of terrorism is perhaps one of the most promising. The Islamic State is losing its last remaining strongholds in Syria, but this progress is creating a new challenge, with the potential splitting and disbursement of terrorists groups within and outside the country. In recognition, the alliance has shown some capacity to adapt and has officially joined anti-terrorist coalition efforts.¹¹ Potential foreign fighters returning to their countries of origin in Western Europe could pose the most serious threat for the NATO alliance. The first line of defense is utilizing the law enforcement and internal security agencies of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue partners, as well as member states. The establishment of the NATO Strategic Direction South Hub, designed to foster a more focused security dialogue with the alliance and its Middle Eastern and North African partners, is a step in this direction. Turkey would have a special responsibility in conducting tighter border controls along the Syrian-Iraqi frontiers. NATO must also foster a new intelligence sharing model with its partners and allied nations or at least seek to better standardize intelligence sharing. This would extend to cover counterterrorism operations as well. NATO has already appointed a new assistant secretary general for overseeing counterespionage, terrorism, and other activities such as mission support related to the Russia's hybrid warfare activities in the alliance's Eastern flank.¹²

TURKEY AS AN ALLY

Dubbed by some as a recalcitrant ally, Turkey's sixty-five-year-long relationship with NATO has never been an easy one.

Ankara joined NATO to deter a mounting Soviet threat, but over the years, Turkish leaders have repeatedly questioned whether the alliance, particularly the United States, would honor its commitment to defend Turkey. Relations have become increasingly tenuous since Ankara adopted a new foreign policy in 2008. Turkey initially sought to boost its influence in the region and have an independent, albeit complementary, agenda to that of its partners. But in recent years, it has taken up an assertive and securitized outlook that sits at odds with the priorities of other NATO members. In the case of Syria, Turkey believes that its allies are prioritizing their short-term interests, such as counterterrorism, over Turkey's longer-term concerns, such as the permanence of the Assad regime and an emboldened affiliate of the PKK with game-changer hybrid warfare capabilities. The latter has been a key driver of the current turmoil in Turkey-U.S. relations. Reminiscent of Washington's decision to collaborate with Iraqi Kurds during the second Gulf War, Ankara has felt threatened by the expanding partnership between the PYD and the United States. Direct arms transfers to an actor that Ankara considers one and the same with the PKK has further entrenched the perceived unreliability of the United States and NATO.

Beyond security concerns, political differences have steadily risen since the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and have reached a tipping point with the latest arrests of U.S. consulate personnel.¹³ Turkey-EU relations stand at an all-time low, as the discussion around suspending Turkey's EU accession process gathers steam in Brussels.¹⁴ Despite prevailing tensions, however, a complete breakdown of NATO-Turkey relations seems unlikely. Turkish policymakers are keenly aware of the lack of better alternative security arrangements. The Turkish security and foreign policy establishment has never seriously considered an alternative to NATO.

Yet the widening gap between NATO and Turkey has already had consequences. Two main NATO rivals have been exploiting tensions as part of efforts to expand their presence along NATO's Southern flank. Through its Quds Forces, proxy militia network, and virtually unchallenged political influence over Baghdad and Damascus, Iran has managed to expand its regional influence to challenge both NATO and Turkish interests. The potential reevaluation of the Iran nuclear deal, though unlikely, would be another area for Tehran to exploit existing differences of opinion within NATO, as well as the divide between NATO and Turkey.

Russia has also benefited from the discord and gained a political and geostrategic advantage in NATO's Southern flank that was unimaginable a couple of years ago. Moscow has increased its leverage on Turkey as a key and inevitable actor in Syria, after overcoming a bilateral crisis that came to a head when the Turkish Air Force downed a Russian Su-24 aircraft upon the systematic violation of Turkey's national airspace. Turkey's potential purchase of the S-400 ballistic missile defense system from Russia could be a major achievement for Moscow in terms of penetrating the military establishment of a NATO country.

Turkey's government-backed allegations that link the 2016 coup attempt to the U.S. "deep state"—and the sidelining of the more Atlanticist wing of the Turkish military on grounds of complicity with Fethullah Gülen's movement—has complicated efforts to eliminate the trust deficit with NATO.¹⁵ Ankara and its alliance partners will need to identify common ground to start repairing and restructuring the relationship and develop a means of insulating the military partnership from bilateral political tensions. A failure to address these difficulties will increasingly affect NATO's ability to collectively design and implement a common response to the security challenges rising from its Southern flank.

A REORDERING OF NATIONAL PRIORITIES

The alliance's main structural handicap remains the unwillingness of NATO's members to grant it a wider political/military scope. Instead, they continue to prioritize national responses over a common alliance-led strategy—for example, evidenced by Italy's close monitoring of developments in Libya or France's singular focus on the Maghreb region. A possible upscaling of the NATO role is met with considerable resistance, incidentally by the same set of countries that are disproportionately affected by the security spillovers in the South. A related obstacle remains the ever-present divisions about the scope of NATO's political role between a Paris-led group of EU nations wanting to limit the alliance's political ambitions and the rest of NATO's members. The lack of consensus, compounded by unclear divisions of labor between NATO and the EU, bedevils efforts to foster a more ambitious Southern agenda.

NATO's operational challenges can essentially be subsumed under two different categories. The first category relates to the scope of the required institutional response—namely, whether NATO is able to respond to the range of threats by developing

the appropriate set of assets and capabilities. So far, the alliance has shown some capacity to adapt, but the progress is slow. The creation of a new division at the Joint Intelligence and Security Division and the decision to formally associate the alliance with the anti-Islamic State coalition are a few examples of moving in the right direction.

The second category relates to internal divisions over the regional allocation of resources and the importance of various threats. A more robust posture to address the security spillovers linked to the Southern flank has long been hindered by disagreements on the relative criticality and immediacy of the threat to NATO. Tension between the alliance members who prioritize the Eastern flank—where Russia's actions have certainly been more

concerning—and the remaining members who want NATO to devote more resources to the South is a permanent feature of the organization's internal dynamics. These disagreements are further compounded by the resistance of some NATO members to prioritize a common response. And current difficulties with a key country like Turkey have only deepened this gap.

A new sense of resolve and initiative within NATO is sorely needed. However, with the strains on transatlantic relationships growing, momentum can only be bolstered by NATO's European members. Their ability to bridge their political differences and jointly advocate a more ambitious role for the alliance will determine whether NATO can effectively respond to the security needs of its Southern neighborhood.

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