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POLICY PAPER

RUSSIA'S STRATEGY IN THE MED: SECURING NATO'S SOUTHERN FLANK

Expert Roundtable

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ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

The invasion of Russia in Ukraine has changed the world in a way that has forced all actors to rethink a new security order. The recent NATO Summit in Madrid comes at a time of multiple challenges and possible scenarios. On the one hand, the summit positioned NATO in full support of Ukraine repelling Russian armies, while also straining to keep the alliance away from a direct conflict with Russia. The east flank will be highly secured with more troops than ever, amounting to more than a seven-fold increase of NATO's existing response force.[1] On the other hand, Finland and Sweden joining NATO forebodes a northward shift of the Alliance's centre of gravity. Their membership could bolster security in the northern flank, and potentially, this new array might leave NATO's southern flank less covered. In the south, while Germany and France have announced their withdrawal from Mali, Russia has amplified its presence in the Sahel zone. Russia further has fortified its military presence in Syria, Libya, and Algeria while building a fort near Port Sudan, in the South of Sudan. China is also growing its presence in the African continent with a military base in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa.

Within this context, the actor as far as NATO's future is concerned, the United States (U.S), is also on the verge of critical internal challenges. President Biden's approval rates are falling, and the more the U.S focuses on the Pacific facing growing tensions with China; Russia could take advantage of the opportunities in Africa. Moreover, NATO should be looking for future challenges since the remains of Trumpism are still alive in the U.S. The return of Trump to power could pose a threat to NATO's stability.

All these challenges and the new composition of the international order lead to Russia building its way to become a part in the many regional conflicts of Africa that have all the potential to spill over to Europe. Under this context, and NATO's celebrating the 40th anniversary of Spain's membership in the defense alliance at the Madrid summit; LVL and FNF joined forces to analyze the security threat in Europe's south. This analysis paper gathers the insights on this key issue by experts in diplomacy, security, military operations, hybrid threats, cybersecurity and geopolitics.

[1] Lili Bayer and Hans von der Burchard, „NATO pledges 300K troops then leaves everyone guessing”. POLITICO (https://www.politico.eu/article/jens-stoltenberg-madrid-nato-summit-pledges-300k-troops-then-leaves-everyone-guessing/?utm_source=dailybrief&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=DailyBrief2022Jun29&utm_term=DailyNewsBrief)

RUSSIA'S STRATEGY IN THE MED: SECURING NATO'S SOUTHERN FLANK

Vladimir Putin and tsarist Russia have historically conceived their world view under an imperialistic and colonial ideology divided under spheres of influence shaped and dominated by military-wise powerful nations. This mindset could be seen in the Syrian civil war where Putin supported Assad, thereby starting a refugee crisis in 2015 that brought more than 1.2 million refugees to Europe. In doing so Putin knew that he would bring the countries of the Western alliance on the verge of collapse. The rationale worked and Putin might be ready to deploy the same method again. In Ukraine the production and distribution of grain of one of the largest producers in the world has been disturbed. This has not only led to higher prices around the world, but also famine in many countries of Africa, where Russia is showing and growing more interest. Russia is a country with historical desires of expansion to gain and secure access to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Maritime trade and control of these areas is key since cargo ships transport 30% of world trade, and these regions unite key connecting areas such as the Middle East and Africa.

State failure is one of the biggest areas of opportunities for Russian influence. In the last two years, the west coast of Africa (Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Benin) has experienced political and security turmoil. These are vulnerable regions for terrorist activities, insurgencies, or political unrest. Russia is now more assertive beyond the eastern flank in the south with revised security activities in Egypt, Algeria, Syria as well as the Sahel region. The strategy towards ports and the relations with these countries has a clear purpose: to increase access to the MED. Moreover, 21st-century threats do not differentiate between borders. Cyberwarfare for example, is a major issue for the European Union (EU), and Russia is a pioneer in this field. Therefore, while Russia and China might have clearer strategies, it is complex for NATO to look beyond European borders.

From its core mission, NATO was created with three main tasks to protect its members against Russian aggressions: defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. The central core mission of NATO is deterrence against Russia, not against the south or the east. Thus, the protection beyond its borders poses a great question in terms of what NATO can actually do, and what needs to be done which could be against its *raison d'être*. In this way, the security of NATO's flank might involve the EU as a state actor by categorizing conflicts according to their intensity level. The EU could tackle low-intensity, non-military conflicts, and NATO high-intensity forces. The EU and NATO should clearly be understood as two different entities but the EU could be an interesting toolbox for NATO in the sense that it is a space to promote crisis prevention through diplomatic relations, trade, and development cooperation.

INTEGRATED SECURITY IN THE MED: HOW CAN NON-MILITARY COOPERATION CONTRIBUTE TO A MORE SECURE REGION?

The traditional role of NATO is well known, but its non-traditional focus should be discussed. New challenges such as the relation between energy and security show the importance of diversifying sources. The current war in Ukraine has exposed the importance of a free energy market and the relevance of a vast supply. If Russia maintains its control over resources and continues its expansion to the Middle East, this could be an existential threat for the EU. Moreover, climate change represents an additional challenge in terms of the destruction of agricultural lands and environmental refugees due to drought and famine. These situations are already occurring in countries such as Yemen or Afghanistan where poverty and the lack of access to opportunities and basic services could result in terrorism and the growth of organized crime.

Historically the Mediterranean was a middle ground for progress and development. A space for exchange and peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, these situations have transformed the Mediterranean into a place of confrontations between religions and clashes of civilizations. It is one of the most uneven borders in the world, which at the same time makes it a perfect opportunity for countries such as Russia, which seek to expand their spheres of influence. It is in this sense, that the EU, not NATO, should offer partnerships on equal footing by not projecting or imposing a Eurocentric model, but rather understanding partners and supporting their development strategies according to their own culture and narrative.

Non-military cooperation can contribute to a more secure region only if the EU allows itself to understand that policies under “one size fits all” will not lead to peaceful environments. The EU’s strengths rely on the promotion of economic growth through regional and bilateral agreements, education exchanges, open technology transfer and the digital markets. In this way, it is key to note that including NATO in spheres beyond its core principles, could backlash by securitizing the agenda rather than promoting integration. If NATO is included where it does not have the capacity or a clear mission, it could lead to undesirable consequences. Hence, the EU should be given more credit for its diplomatic advocacy, and cooperation with countries in the south promoting the institutionalization of frameworks and peaceful resolution of conflicts under the rule of law. Under this rationale, Spain has a crucial role in driving regional integration and increasing non-military cooperation in the Mediterranean to contribute to a more secure region.

CONCLUSION

The world is rapidly changing, and everyday there are new threats to the world order. NATO is facing new types of threat in its southern flank: state failure in some countries, a more assertive Russia in the region, the presence of violent non-state actors, and hybrid warfare. Although NATO was created with a core purpose, some experts claim it should adapt to face the new challenges of our time by recognizing its flanks. However, it is also agreed that NATO and the EU should be conceived as two diverse entities with different, yet complementary, objectives. As mentioned previously, the EU has a key role to play in contributing to a more secure region through non-military cooperation.

In the upcoming years, Donald Trump might come back to power in the U.S, which could be a huge setback for NATO. Furthermore, Russia and China are increasing their influence in Africa, and the growth of non-traditional threats such as climate change, migration crisis, and food shortages, are on the rise. Hence, the EU and NATO should take action to prevent future threats coming from its southern flank. According to experts, the EU should listen more to its partners and not impose a Eurocentric perspective in development cooperation. NATO should focus on high-intensity conflicts safeguarding Europe. Thus, NATO's Summit in Madrid comes at a crucial time for the future of the alliance and the role of Spain in the promotion of a secure region. Spain has a key role and should participate in this new effort to turn the Mediterranean into a middle ground for progress, dialogue and development.

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