

NATO and the South

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Speech delivered by Antonio Missiroli, NATO Assistant Secretary General, at the opening meeting of the project on the emerging security challenges in NATO's southern neighbourhood, Brussels, 24 April 2019.

At the grand old age of 70, NATO has undoubtedly had to change and adapt over the decades to survive and thrive. One of the most striking examples of its versatility is the turn the Alliance took to the South. If, at its inception, NATO was created to fend off challenges and threats emanating from its big Eastern neighbour, subsequent developments to its South prompted the Alliance to adopt a 360-degree shift in its approach to security. Not only did NATO have to develop the capacity to deal with threats irrespective of their geographical origin, it also had to develop a structured approach to challenges emanating from the South and a network of partnerships in the region.

The very notion of NATO's 'South' has indeed changed and evolved significantly over time. During the Cold War it was just one arena of the East-West confrontation, with a strong focus on the Eastern Mediterranean; the presence of the US VI Fleet in Naples conferred on all this a strong maritime dimension. After the Cold War and throughout the 1990s, the South came to represent a promising region for dialogue and cooperation with other countries while the conflict(s) in the former Yugoslavia were still seen through the lenses of a post-Cold War 'East'.

With and after 9/11, NATO's South became a major theatre for counter-terrorism operations and activities, extending as far as Afghanistan (ISAF) and the Horn of Africa (counter-piracy): in fact, in NATO parlance, Afghanistan is now part and parcel of its 'South'. With and after the 2011 Arab 'Awakening', the wider MENA region turned into a sort of 21st-century 'Thirty Years War' –with its own combination and overlap of territorial, religious and dynastic/political disputes fuelled also by external players–. The 2014 onset of the ISIL/Daesh 'Caliphate' in Iraq and Syria only made things worse, fuelling massive disruptions and displacements, while some of the drivers of the 'Awakening' seem to be still present, as recent developments in Algeria and Sudan seem to indicate.

And today? NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg likes to say that, as a Norwegian, the 'South' for him is basically Denmark. As NATO's leader, however, his 'South' now stretches across the Mediterranean and the MENA region, but also from the Sahel to the Horn and through the Indo-Pacific into South Asia.

¹ The views expressed by the author are his own and do not represent NATO's official position.

You are probably more than familiar with the challenges faced by this region: political instability and unrest are widespread, with the situation in Syria and Libya constituting its most extreme representation, contributing to increased and uncontrolled migration flows, as have water scarcity and worsening agricultural conditions –in particular in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa– accelerated by climate change.

Terrorism and violent extremism remain two of the most acute challenges faced by the countries in the region. While the number of deaths caused by terrorist acts continues to decrease, the threat is now spread more widely across the globe and set to increase in the near future in some areas. The collapse of ISIL/Daesh in Iraq and Syria has moved the group's activities elsewhere, in particular to the Maghreb and Sahel regions, most notably in Libya, Niger and Mali. Furthermore, al-Qaeda remains a resilient and powerful player, in particular through affiliates such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Shabaab in Somalia.

It is easy to see how many of these emerging security challenges are interconnected and intertwined, thus requiring an integrated and comprehensive approach to tackle them. NATO has been working for years to support international efforts to strengthen security in its 'South' and is committed to cooperative security as one of its core tasks enshrined in the 2010 new Strategic Concept (together with the other two: deterrence and defence and crisis management).

At the Brussels Summit last July, Allied Heads of State and Government endorsed a 'Package on the South', which includes a range of political and practical cooperation initiatives towards a more strategic, focused and coherent approach to the MENA region. The Package is underpinned by three main objectives: (1) strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence against threats emanating from the South; (2) contributing to international crisis management efforts in the region; and (3) helping our regional partners build up resilience against security threats.

To support these efforts, a Regional 'Hub for the South' was set up at the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples in 2018. The Hub reached its full operational capacity in July of that year. The aim behind its creation is to increase NATO's situational awareness of the threats and opportunities emanating from the MENA region, to support the collection, management and sharing of information, and to promote the coordination and conduct outreach activities with the Alliance's partners in the South, hence improving its cooperation with them to counter those challenges.

Yet NATO's work with its southern partners is longstanding. In 1994 the Alliance launched the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), a forum for dialogue and cooperation with southern partners including Israel, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Mauritania, Jordan (1995) and Algeria (2000). In 2004 the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) was established with the objective of contributing to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the broader Middle East region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO. Today the ICI includes Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. An ICI Regional Centre was set up in Kuwait in 2017 to allow closer cooperation with partners in the Gulf region and increased coordination of practical activities.

Over the years, cooperation in both the MD and ICI formats has increased and deepened, moving from dialogue-centred exchanges to a true partnership that is mutually beneficial and with a tangible practical dimension. Today, in both forums, partners come together in seminars, workshops and exercises to cooperate with NATO on topics that range from civil emergency planning to counter-terrorism and arms-control efforts, especially with regard to small arms and light weapons and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

At their request, we continue to build our partners' capacity to address the security challenges they face through individual, tailored partnership programmes aimed ultimately at making their respective security structures and institutions stronger and more effective, including, for instance, through the Defence-and-Security-related Capacity Building (DCB) packages. DCB packages provide tailored support to local forces by advising, assisting, training and mentoring them in specific agreed areas. Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia are among the recipients of the packages. In Jordan assistance is provided in areas that include cyber defence, countering improvised explosive devices (C-IEDs), civil preparedness and crisis management. In Tunisia, it includes cyber defence, C-IEDs and the promotion of transparency in resource management.

NATO is also strengthening its political and practical cooperation with Morocco in important domains such as counter-terrorism, cyber defence, science and technology, and defence against Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear agents. Morocco recently hosted a public diplomacy event in Rabat to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Mediterranean Dialogue cooperation.

To help combat one of the most pressing challenges emanating from the south, NATO launched in 2017 an Action Plan to enhance its role in the international community's struggle against terrorism. The Action Plan was updated in December 2018 with a renewed focus on upgrading efforts aimed at strengthening the defence and security forces and institutions of partner countries. Providing support and building up capacities in partner countries, in particular those of the South, in order to strengthen their ability to fight terrorism at both the operational and strategic levels is a key element of NATO's approach, as is the promotion of good governance and intra- and inter-governmental cooperation in the security sector.

The Alliance's enduring engagement in Afghanistan and the recent establishment of a new mission in Iraq are also a reflection of its counterterrorism commitments. In Afghanistan NATO provides –through its Resolute Support Mission– training advice and assistance to the Afghan security forces and institutions in order to create the conditions for lasting peace and to ensure that the country never again becomes a haven for international terrorists. In Iraq, after providing direct support to the Global Coalition to defeat ISIL/Daesh (with NATO AWACS), the non-combat training and capacity-building NATO Mission launched last summer provides training and advice to help Iraq develop more effective national security structures and professional military education institutions, thus supporting the Iraqi government in its efforts to stabilise the country, ultimately through the development of a self-sustaining cadre of Iraqi instructors. The mission helps to boost skills in areas like military medicine, countering improvised explosive devices and the reform of national security structures.

The transnational and interconnected nature of the challenges affecting NATO's southern neighbourhood also means that the Alliance cannot operate alone in this context and that international and regional cooperation is required. At a regional level, NATO has been working with the African Union (AU) for more than a decade and the relationship has strengthened over the years. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit and, more recently, through the 2018 Updated Action Plan, NATO committed to an enhanced relationship with the AU, including addressing common challenges linked to fighting terrorism. The AU has identified a requirement for counterterrorism capacity- and institution-building through education and training –and NATO is currently providing such support, including the Science for Peace and Security (SPS) programme–.

At an international level, NATO continues to cooperate closely with both the UN and the EU. Only a month ago, I had the honour and privilege of representing the Alliance at the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the implementation of a joint project with the UN on 'Enhancing Capabilities to prepare for and respond to a terrorist attack in Jordan featuring the use of Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) weapons'. This UN-NATO project builds on the existing NATO work with Jordan to foster its national crisis-management capabilities, and it will feature the development of a national crisis plan for dealing with threats posed by CBRN agents.

Moreover, in the context of exploring options for increased NATO-EU cooperation, Tunisia (and to some extent Iraq) was selected as a pilot country. Possible joint strands of work are being looked at in fields where relevant work has already been initiated, eg, on cyber defence and ammunition storage and safety. Staff-to-staff coordination and information exchange have been frequent, open and highly useful, favouring complementarity and mutual understanding, but we can surely all do more and better in those areas where one organisation can easily do what the other cannot, thus making our respective efforts complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Finally, as we are discussing *emerging* security challenges, it may be worthwhile to consider two additional aspects of the counter-terrorism policy file. The first has to do with the so-called Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs): since 2013 40,000 are estimated to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIL/Daesh, and roughly 7,000 of them have returned to their countries of origin (including many NATO nations). They do represent a high security risk, since 18% of terrorist attacks staged in the West between 2014 and 2017 were carried out by returnees. UNSC Resolution 2396 (2017) encouraged member states to swiftly exchange information about them and, accordingly, NATO agreed in July 2018 on a new data-sharing policy intended to exchange biometric data on FTFs collected on the battlefield, thus contributing to multilateral efforts and assisting Allies domestically also.

Terrorists are also making an increasing use of modern technologies. While there have been no cases of 'cyber-terrorism' –ie, no proved terrorist act carried out through cyber means only– terrorist groups have indeed used cyberspace for recruitment and funding as well as operational purposes. This is an area where intelligence agencies are very busy and alert, although these activities are unlikely to reach the level of sophistication and disruption that only State-sponsored groups can achieve in this domain. There is, however, a growing concern about the possible use of unmanned vehicles for kinetic terrorist attacks –and not only on the battlefield (where they have already occurred) but

also in civilian and especially urban environments—. What happened around Christmas 2018 at Gatwick airport in London was quite telling, especially in light of the commercial affordability and availability of such tools and their potential impact on civilian life. NATO has just launched a specific initiative to counter –on the battlefield but potentially also elsewhere– such a misuse of new technologies by terrorists.

The activities I have briefly touched upon just now reflect NATO's serious commitment to cooperating with its Southern partners to build up their capacity so that they can address more effectively the challenges they face.

Despite these numerous and often daunting challenges, however, to view NATO's Southern neighbours exclusively as part of a region fraught with instability would be reductive. Renewable and untapped energy resources in the Mediterranean and beyond, rising life expectancy in Africa, increased access to education and information, and spots of civic progress and human development are remarkable features of this wider region, often overlooked in favour of focusing on risks and threats. All combined, these diverse elements paint the picture of a highly volatile, but also dynamic environment, rich with challenges and opportunities alike.

It is only with a thorough understanding of the region that concrete ways to address both can be found. For this reason, the project launched today is particularly important. With its intention of both 'Understanding the South' and 'Responding to the South', the two-year project will contribute to enhancing strategic awareness in NATO's South and providing policy makers on both sides with suggestions for specific policy responses.

I thus congratulate the Elcano Royal Institute, the Moroccan Centre for Strategic Studies, the Jordanian Centre of Strategic Studies and the UK's Institute for Statecraft for being awarded this SPS grant, managed by the Division I have the privilege to lead, and I wish you all the best of luck in taking forward the project over the next two years.