

## 1. STRIVING FOR A MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN NATO

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# Striving for a more active role in NATO

COMMENTARY

BY GEORGE TZOGOPoulos \*

The term "Southern Flank" is of historical significance for NATO. At the beginning of the 1950s the Alliance formulated a strategy, involving Greece, Italy and Turkey, to integrate them into the Western defense system and contain the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era the "Southern Flank" term is still in use but is often replaced by that of the "South," including the Mediterranean Basin along with Portugal and Mauritania. Developments in Africa and the Middle East are of simultaneous interest for NATO due to their proximity to the southern region.

Since 2018, in particular, the Alliance has decided to place more emphasis on the South, announcing a relevant package and seeking to project stability. While some instruments such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative are partly contributing to the implementation of objectives, progress is not impressive. NATO is endeavoring to engage its partners and build cooperation schemes. An example is its commitment to strengthening Jordan's defense capabilities by elaborating on crisis management, exercises, border security, cyber security and countering improvised explosive devices.

Challenges are becoming more pressing in the Covid-19 era. The eruption of violence and terrorism and rising food insecurity in the Sahel region are adding to existing problems such as the civil wars in Libya and Syria, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's nuclear program, climate change and the refugee crisis. Moreover, Russia is becoming a key economic and military actor not only in Syria and Libya but also in other countries. Its engagement in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey and in the Sahel region is characteristic. Despite differences, there are still possibilities for collaboration between NATO and Russia in the South, for example in joining forces against terrorism. Russia enjoys popularity and political

acceptance in North Africa and some Eastern Mediterranean countries – also due to historical reasons. Against this backdrop, Greece has an opportunity to better study NATO's new priorities in the South, play a more active role in that regard and strengthen its regional position. Although disagreements among member-states – traditionally Greek-Turkish differences and recently French-Turkish spats and US President Donald Trump's demands for NATO's European partners to pay more – raise questions of unity, the Alliance remains very powerful and

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ambitious. It possesses political instruments and military might that can be hardly ignored.

A recent discussion organized by the Kyklos Ideon think tank with the author's participation that was moderated by former deputy prime minister Evangelos Venizelos shows the way forward. Greece needs to become a hub where NATO's important Mediterranean policies are analyzed and new ideas are proposed – dialogue that goes beyond the national boundaries of the country matters and has the potential of yielding positive results. This will impact on both Greek-Turkish relations and other Mediterranean affairs such as the inclusivity of the East Med Gas Forum.

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