

NATO and Challenges to Regional Security in the Mediterranean - Key Insights



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Abstract: *On 3 November 2023, ELIAMEP organised a roundtable discussion in Athens on 'NATO and Challenges to Regional Security in the Mediterranean'. The event was sponsored by NATO Public Diplomacy Division and its academic coordinator was Dr George N. Tzogopoulos, ELIAMEP Senior Research Fellow. This report presents key findings of discussions structured around thematic units relevant to the current instability in the Mediterranean and its connection to the War in Ukraine, the evolution of different types of crises in the Basin and international antagonism.*

THE PHRASE 'COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT' has been an understatement in the Mediterranean for the last 10 years. It constitutes a cluster of new realities on the ground. It can be addressed as a region full of conflicts. Although this reality faded away after 9/11, now it is back and actively transforming regional security. In recent history, NATO officials and policies have addressed mainly two strategic flanks. The aforementioned may alternate if one takes into consideration the Arctic. Nonetheless, the Mediterranean and the Alliance's southern flank suffered in the name of 'deterrence'. The approach behind the above-mentioned structure corresponds to the then-existing narrative of the Alliance, again built around the concept of deterrence. It has to be mentioned that the concept itself relates to a clear and definable threat. In the past, and since NATO's inception, that used to be the Soviet Union. After 9/11/2001 that shifted towards terrorism. One can only wonder about present realities.

To that extent, different threat assessments, not in a holistic and comprehensive alliance-based manner, produce different sets of priorities and alternate points of view. However, the above is an issue in the study of this subregion. Now, for instance, the analysis includes plenty of fragile States (Lebanon for instance), an array of different -almost hybrid (in texture)- Poly-crises that stem from climate change, human movements, organised crime and demographics in Africa, ongoing conflicts and structural -to the international system- challenges. The Alliance, thus, when indeed does look towards the south, faces an assemblage and agglomeration of regional security issues and turmoil coupled with the inconstant notion of a much-needed of revision strategic concept and relations cohabitation with the EU. Moreover, it confronts a hybrid Polycrisis around the Mediterranean and rather crucially, finds itself in the midst of an antagonistic -in the process of reshaping- geopolitical environment.

NATO's strategic concept, regional turmoil and the European Union question

At first, Foresight and Strategic thinking have to be addressed. If one looks at NATO's relevant strategic concepts, the approach towards the South and the notion of counterterrorism are very vague indeed. Strategic thinking should not be circumstantial.

The events that took part on 9/11 constitute a turning point in the institutional structure. A gap emerged and solidified between the West and the Muslim world. The West does not appear to have a consensus with different parts of the world which in turn are emerging and becoming powerful. This is reflected in the incapacity of European and Western institutions to find a 'concord' on how reality unfolds. There is, therefore, a political and institutional vacuum. One of the points surfacing is that security can, and in some instances should, be achieved away from military means. On the other hand, there is no luxury to lay issues under the carpet, but rather appears a vital interest in trying to limit potential damage.

Evident from recent events is the fact that the 'Arab Revolt' has not yet finished. The awakening of armed conflict between Israel and forces in the wider Palestinian environment has the potential to reshape the region. If those crises are not to be addressed, the whole Middle East will implode.

Again, 9/11 was an abrupt wake-up call. The devotion to counter-terrorism policies and actions was indeed a failure. One that brings back an existential in-nature dilemma, which is of course the balance between conflict and peace. After WW2 the system reached a consensus, and a bipolar world spawned out of a US & USSR 'concert'. Then, a unipolar one followed again under the consensus of Russia. On 9/11, a non-state actor broke once again this established accord and ended the related status quo. Right now, Russia has broken this consensus once more and there's no power to impose a new institutional form. In the meantime, another exo-regional actor, China, is attempting to create solutions in both Ukraine and the Middle East. Indeed, Foresight and Strategic thinking have to be addressed. Normative consensus has to be taken into account. If the future, arising, concord is a non-Western one, away from multilateral approaches, if the Western-minded UN consensus collapses, then the alliance will face an extremely difficult reality. An example might come in the form of BRICS. If the enlargement of the above-mentioned organisation is to take place, then all of those members will have a very different -from the West's- normative approach to how the world works. The question is what if they eventually decide they might also develop a security approach?

On a supplementary note, historically speaking, every time there is a 'flare-up' in the area, there's always a peace agreement that follows. Returning to the question of regional turmoil and the European Union, it has to be mentioned that prosperity brings out peace. Europe is indeed the only safe haven in the area. Automatically, that constitutes a pull factor. However, nowadays, one witnesses a meltdown of multilateralism in an environment where -increasingly- everything ends up as a security point. The EU owes to invest more in its strategic autonomy because, in a very assured and pragmatic way, certain capabilities could help elevate the Union's status.

The aforementioned brings up a question regarding the separation of labour between NATO and the EU in the Mediterranean. The second lacks in strategic culture and does not do enough to further develop joint capabilities. There is not a 'South Policy' of Europe in the area, nor a NATO one to be frank. There's a gap where no one can afford its existence. Although Ukraine 2014 has been a wake-up call for both actors, parallels between Ukraine and the Middle East -to link the above- should not take place. The nature of the conflict is different. NATO has to think very carefully about its added value in the area, taking -primarily- into consideration Iraq and Afghanistan. NATO should not have a direct approach in the area. There is no feasible military solution at the moment. No matter the fact that the EU and NATO find themselves in the same strategic environment, the rest of the world does not, necessarily, agree. On the contrary, there is a need to forge partnerships with other regional actors, but one needs to understand the existence of non-compatible world viewpoints. The question 'is not what they want us to do for them, but rather what we should do with them, together'.

It is not very clear what NATO and the EU can do in the region. It is clear though that defence and security are now very critically linked. The task and language between the above-mentioned organisations are more similar than ever. The two actors need each other more than ever before, amid this hybrid (in-nature) environment. Hybridity is the nexus of the area where the EU and NATO should move towards together and it all evolves around three key elements. Financing, Trust & Political Agreement and Geopolitics.

Navigating Poly-crisis in the Mediterranean

The term Poly-crisis refers to the above-mentioned hybrid environment concerning an array of threats, challenges and crises. Some examples are migration, climate change and religion. But it's rather necessary to address first the geographical definition, which is not enough to understand the complexity of the region. Here is where the term 'poly' in 'poly-crisis' appears to be potent. For instance, in the eastern flank, NATO can identify a clear threat. A clear point of focus. That is not the case in the South. Again, different regions need different approaches. Also, one has to take into consideration the change in great power competition. Russia was present in the Mediterranean before. It still is today. They are present in Africa as well, where the Sahel comes to mind. Hybrid threats are an indispensable part of the region. Hezbollah is an example. War, terrorism, and communications campaigns of similar organisations, another. The collective strategic approach of the West seems to not understand the lessons from Afghanistan (security, nation-building). The reality on the ground indicates a scenario where various regional actors prefer the 'Wagner Group' instead of the European Union in the Sahel and North Africa.

Another flaw is the complete absence of a serious discussion and approach around religion and religious issues, which indeed constitutes a critical factor in the wider discussion with Muslim States. Also, NATO never developed a multilateral dialogue. It only appeared to have a unilateral one, always at the discretion of various actors present. Functional cooperation was there for a long time

(as a point and thinking) the implementation though, never took place. Most of the crises that we are having now are works of the past. Moreover, in this region, there is a challenge directly to the rules, not the system, not the institution. That is evident in Syria where the UN has been bypassed. That has allowed the multilateral system to splinter apart. The fragmentation encountered in the past was a vertical one (meaning one or another). Nowadays, it is not vertical, it is horizontal.

Another issue, as mentioned, is the ever-important climate change which poses one of the key security risks in the Mediterranean. The region is a climate hot spot, which means that climate changes happen here faster than in other areas. COP27 has also negatively been marked by the shared approach of the international community in the multilateral process. The war in Ukraine changed everything. Nowadays, the system does not only delay the pro-environment processes but rather runs towards the opposite direction. The Palestinian crisis makes things even worse, specifically in the area where it takes place. The new COP28 that took place in Dubai, again, makes it even more difficult. Moving to clean energy solutions faster, benefits not only the climate situation but also the discussion about security. Rising temperatures will affect the demographics and movement of people, rendering them as climate refugees.

Touching upon the issue of immigration, the following owes to be noted. It is problematic to subscribe to migration as a crisis. It is not a sudden and eruptious event that takes place once in a while. It is a challenge, where up until now the West retained a focus on how to meditate and deter it. This is not the point though. The key is not to transfer responsibility to the other side, but rather to share it. Indeed, it constitutes a contradiction, but it has to be addressed as an opportunity and not a crisis. Forced migration is also an issue alongside labour migration, where the labour demand in the West has increased expeditionary.

On the other spectrum and in a different viewpoint though, 'polycrisis' by definition constitutes an opportunity. There is a long story of cooperation in the region. The dialogue between partners should be intercultural, not multicultural. It has to be a partnership on an equal basis with supportive and not empathetic listening. It has to be a pragmatical approach though. One that brings maximum benefits for the maximum number of people. An intraregional multi-region in parallel with time and technology that brings together old common values, empathy, and active listening, might allow us to go around these issues.

Antagonism

Regions are socially constructed phenomena. The security agenda in the Indo-Pacific is related to the Mediterranean they are interlinked, where the Mediterranean is a link between the West and East. As mentioned above, the region has been a hub of foreign influence, proxy actions and 'stage' for various geopolitical conundrums. It has been made clear how Russia exploits crises and challenges through specific tools such as the Wagner Group. China also cultivates an all-increasing presence in the area. There are few countries where China does not invest - yet that is because they are in turmoil or they constitute small markets. If there is a flare-up, China's role is to sit out and

observe. They arguably prefer to leave the security discussions to other actors, mainly the West, and watch them spend their resources away from the Indo-Pacific. Their 'neutrality' in terms of their approach is one that they carefully constructed.

Finally, the sea is also often forgotten, but that is a mistake. The North vs South distinction has collapsed and a Land vs Sea one has emerged. The West's relationship with the sea has changed because of interconnectivity, maritime infrastructure and of course geopolitics. In the first instance, green energy traditions are fundamentally connected to the sea. On the other side of the spectrum maritime infrastructures are indeed security challenges. Russia knows that and there have been 6 attacks on underwater sea cables in the recent past. China also takes note of the increasing importance of the seas. The Belt and Road initiative is evidence of this reality.

Conclusions

The alliance owes to examine its approach to the region, bearing in mind changes not only in the structure and texture of the international system but to the rising volumes of antagonism, the hybridity of crises and challenges that appear to this unique region. It has to reaffirm and change its approach to regional actors because losing them to the other side (whichever this side may be) is not an option. It has to closely cooperate with the European Union in light of this unprecedented compatibility in tasks, language and narratives. Most importantly though, it needs to adapt and introduce Foresight, Strategic thinking and a collective approach regarding its Southern flank policy.