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NATO Towards Warsaw 2016 Summit: Challenges and Opportunities

by Francesca Monaco and Alessandra Scalia

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the key elements of a closed-door seminar hosted by IAI on 13 October 2015 within the framework of the project *Defence Matters 2015*. The initiative is aimed at stimulating the Italian debate on defence issues by engaging policy-makers, stakeholders and the public opinion. The seminar, in particular, was devoted to discussing the current threats faced by NATO with regard to both the Alliance's Eastern and Southern "flanks". The debate addressed the complexity of the ongoing international dynamics not only in terms of threats, but also of potential opportunities for reforming and modernising NATO. The present report aims at outlining the key points that emerged from the discussion, as well as further stimulating the debate concerning the NATO agenda in view of the 2016 Warsaw Summit.

NATO | Summits | Russia | Ukraine crisis

keywords

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Introduction

In the last few years, the issue of the fragmentation of declining defence spending across European states has raised major concerns in international fora. In particular, the risk of having in Europe several “bonsai armies”, too limited in size to fulfill their ambition to be usable in robust combat operations, might undermine the efforts towards developing effective and rapid response mechanisms to security threats. Whilst within the EU a process of pooling and sharing is underway with some results, especially in the air transport area, NATO has enhanced its interoperability and readiness throughout two main initiatives: Smart Defence and the Framework Nation Concept. On the one hand, Smart Defence, a concept embraced at the Chicago Summit in May 2012, encourages Allies to work in cooperation to develop, acquire, operate and maintain military capabilities. More precisely, this is done through a series of projects concerning a wide range of critical areas, such as: precision-guided munitions, cyber defence, ballistic missile defence, and Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR). On the other, the Framework Nation Concept introduced in 2013 aims at increasing sustainability and preserving key military capabilities throughout the development of multinational units led by a framework nation (i.e. Germany, Italy and United Kingdom).

However, new threats arising along the Eastern and Southern borders are posing additional challenges to NATO by exposing the eventual limits of the current initiatives and, consequently, requiring prompt adjustments. The Eastern and Southern flanks, objects of the discussion at the seminar hosted by IAI on 13 October 2015, will be analysed in the subsequent paragraphs. The conclusion will shed light on future developments of NATO in response to the current Eastern and Southern challenges.

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1. The Eastern flank: a renewed threat

The illegal annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine urged NATO to move towards the elaboration of a strategy to reassure its Allies feeling threatened by the Russian Federation, as well as to defend its Eastern European borders from the perceived threat stemming from Moscow. During the 2008 Georgian conflict, the Russian Federation had already started to modernise and improve the organisation, training and logistics of its army. However, the speed and scale of Russia's action in Ukraine took NATO by surprise. As addressed during the seminar, the crisis in Ukraine radically transformed NATO-Russian mutual perceptions: Russia sees itself in conflict with the West and, conversely, the Alliance has stopped seeing Russia as a partner.

In this regard, some among the participants in the seminar suggested the hypothesis of a normalisation of relations, at least in economic terms, between NATO and Russia. For instance, participants recalled the partnership with the Russian Federation of some European states (e.g. Italy and France). However, after the Ukrainian crisis the return to "business as usual" between NATO and Russia is not possible in current circumstances. As a matter of fact, since 1st April 2014 NATO members within the NATO-Russia Council have suspended all civilian and military cooperation projects with Moscow.

Although several aspects of the Eastern scenario are reminiscent of the Cold War, the round-table highlighted some differences with the pre-1989 era. The first evident difference concerns the position of the frontline. Rather than being in Berlin, as during the Cold War, the frontline is now on the border with the Baltic States. This fact constitutes an operational advantage for Russia. Although NATO's capabilities still outmatch Russian ones, Moscow's advantage lies in its capacity of deploying forces swiftly, as demonstrated by the mobilisation of dozens of thousands of soldiers in 72 hours along the border with Ukraine. On the contrary, due to the lack of strategic depth of the Baltic States, NATO faces major difficulties in elaborating effective and rapid response mechanisms in the area to prevent and repel an eventual Russian aggression.

The second difference consists in the role that the European Union (EU) is playing in the Ukrainian crisis, since the Union did not exist in its current form during the Cold War. The EU has at its disposal legal, political and economic means, that may be used to influence the strategic calculus of Russia at the initial stage of hostilities in similar situations. As a consequence, by adding the EU soft power means to NATO's military ones, the two actors might share the burden of securing the Eastern European borders. In particular, the EU contribution may be relevant in hybrid warfare scenarios, when the boundaries between internal and external security are particularly blurred.

Another difference pointed out during the debate is the hybrid character of warfare in Ukraine. Some of the participants underlined the innovative methods and the

unusual size of Russia's intelligence operations, as well as its interference with the media of neighbouring states. Other participants, however, stressed the continuity with the Cold War and recalled the characteristics of the Russian aggressive propaganda during the '70s. This, in particular, was mainly used for leverage in domestic issues. Nonetheless, the hybrid warfare in Ukraine has revealed the lack of soft power means at NATO's disposal to address similar situations. Moreover, the discussion stressed that hybrid warfare is not directly addressed by the mandate of NATO in terms of collective defence. As a matter of fact, at the initial stage of hostilities in Ukraine hybrid warfare was regarded as an internal security issue, and NATO was involved as far as the Allies at the border with Russia asked for its support.

Finally, another difference compared to the Cold War era is the presence of Russian minorities in some NATO countries, as a consequence of the 2004 Alliance's eastward enlargement. In this regard, the discussion highlighted that a deeper integration of the minorities in these countries might contribute to stabilising Russia's relations with the Alliance, as well as to increase the resilience of Eastern members of NATO to hybrid warfare.

Notwithstanding the considerations concerning differences and similarities with the Cold War, it was unanimously recognised that relations with Russia are currently the main concern for NATO. By showing the underestimated weaknesses of the Alliance, the crisis in Ukraine has urged NATO to support its Eastern Allies in operational, technical and political terms. In particular, the crisis has highlighted the difficulties of NATO in deploying rapid response operational capabilities. As a consequence, in order to prepare NATO against such security threats, at the 2014 Wales Summit the Allies agreed on issuing the Readiness Action Plan (RAP). Measures adopted under the RAP include: increasing the number of fighter aircraft on air-policing patrols over the Baltic States; deploying fighter aircraft in Romania and Poland, as well as aircraft in Romania for training purposes; intensifying maritime patrols in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean with the Standing NATO Maritime Groups and Standing NATO Mine Counter-Measures Groups; deploying ground troops along the Eastern borders of the Alliance for conducting training and exercises on a rotational basis.¹ More generally, the Readiness Action Plan is a tool to make the NATO forces more ready to operate on both Eastern and South fronts.

Overall, the Ukraine crisis highlighted limits of the NATO forces and command structure, which have made difficult a swift response to sudden crises. Due to this, the RAP also envisages some long-term adaptation measures, such as enhancing NATO Response Force (NRF), as well as establishing the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs), and high readiness multinational headquarters.

¹ NATO, *NATO's Readiness Action Plan*, Fact Sheet, May 2015, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_05/20150508_1505-Factsheet-RAP-en.pdf.

In addition, the recent Russian intervention in Syria has attracted the attention of the round-table, which specifically addressed two aspects. First, due to logistic difficulties and the lack of public opinion's support for a land intervention in Syria, doubts aroused about Moscow's capacity to deploy for a prolonged period a substantial number of boots on the ground in Syria compared to Ukraine's case. Secondly, participants discussed the lack of NATO's reaction to the Russian initiative. In this regard, the different views among the Allies in a decision-making process based on consensus might have been an obstacle in facing these situations.

2. Southern flank: new threats

Whilst along the Eastern borders a well-known, unitary threat is challenging the Alliance, unusual, multiple threats (e.g. terrorism and massive refugees' flows) are affecting NATO's Southern flank. Concerning specifically the Southern challenge, several questions were raised during the discussion.

The answers concerning the involvement of NATO in this scenario stressed that prior outlining a strategic guidance for the South, the Alliance must clarify some crucial points. For instance, the identification of the threats and the applicable legal framework to face them should be addressed. In particular, some questions remain open whether it is only the so-called Islamic State or several terrorist groups that should be fought, and whether the present situation is a matter of defence or rather internal security. The Allies are, therefore, urged to define their ambitions in the Southern region – historically not the core of the Alliance's focus. According to the discussion, either NATO or the EU might be involved, Article five of the Atlantic Charter might apply or not, and requirements for the Allies might change. For example, currently the mandate of NATO does not include dealing with terrorist groups in terms of intelligence, as this is often considered a domestic security issue. Therefore, if Southern member states (e.g. Italy, Spain and Portugal) encourage NATO to be more involved in this scenario, this could possibly require a major change in the Alliance's mandate. Southern Allies, however, will eventually need to clarify their intentions before asking for an adaptation of the institutional structure. In addition, since the process of adaptation rests entirely on the political willingness of the Alliance's members, a strong leadership might facilitate the process. In this regard, unfortunately, the US has currently chosen to keep a "low profile" in the Middle East and North Africa issues, and NATO lacks a firm leadership in dealing with the Southern flank.

Nonetheless, changes in the mandate might be crucial for the Alliance in order to address and face emerging threats, as some of the participants in the seminar suggested.

Conclusions

The seminar focused on two scenarios that currently represent key issues for NATO, namely the threats faced on the Eastern and Southern borders of Europe. The Alliance will clearly need major changes oriented towards enhancing interoperability, readiness and adaptation in order to face the present international challenges.

On the one hand, the Wales Summit has promoted institutional and operational reforms in response to the Ukrainian crisis (e.g. the RAP) and several initiatives are underway. The 2016 Warsaw Summit will clearly be a crucial moment to address the objectives achieved since Wales and further pursue them. On the other hand, no measures have been adopted yet in response to the threats arising in the Southern scenario. By conveying the Allies' political willingness to address the security threats to the Alliance, the Warsaw Summit could serve as the starting point for enhancing NATO's capabilities in order to react against such threats. In order to do so, it is necessary, first and foremost, to deepen the understanding of the Southern challenge, as well as to clarify NATO's possible role about it.

Overall, the multifaceted situation currently faced by NATO might be considered also as an opportunity to reform the Alliance decision-making and forces structure in the light of a changing international security environment. In this respect, NATO is contemplating a comprehensive long-term adaptation that involves enhancing political and military unity among the Allies and fostering responsiveness on the Eastern and Southern flanks. Furthermore, NATO's initiatives are oriented towards developing closer collaboration with the EU, effective strategy and tools to counter-attack hybrid warfare, and, ultimately, political adaptation. As the vivid and intense discussion has stressed, the 2016 Warsaw Summit could be an important step towards advancing this path of modernisation for both NATO's institutions and its Allies.

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