

# Warfare and Geopolitics in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood: Implications for NATO

by Camilla Vianini and Chloé Berger



## ABSTRACT

Europe's Southern neighbourhood has been for decades a highly unstable and contested region. The so-called Arab Spring has marked a particular turning point in the history of the region, accelerating the de-composition of the Middle Eastern regional security complex and fostering fragmentation in the South to an unprecedented degree. For the first time, all countries in the MENA region are involved, directly or indirectly, in one or more conflict(s), be it civil war, proxy war, state rivalries, etc. NATO's Southern neighbourhood reflects the fundamental change of the international security environment, caused by multiple factors, such as the promotion of new forms of influence by global powers as well as the growing significance of non-state actors in international relations. These elements, which are not completely new in the regional arena, have acquired a new degree of complexity, affecting the stability of the region by favouring the dissemination of new dynamics of violence. NATO Allies have significant interests in that broad South that stretches from the Sahel to the Asian neighbourhood of the Arab Gulf. Defence capacity building and counterterrorism are important priorities for the security of many Allies. At the same time, the South is experiencing an increasing penetration of Russia and China, seeking to advance their economic interests and secure some geopolitical gains in the region. In the context of the NATO 2030 reflection and in preparation of the next NATO Strategic Concept, Allies might develop a more comprehensive definition of security, considering the changing nature of warfare and rethinking the Alliance's approach to the South.

*NATO | Security | Middle East | North Africa | USA | Russia | China | Afghanistan*

**keywords**

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### Introduction

On 1 July 2021, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the NATO Defense College (NDC) organised, in partnership with the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, a closed-door workshop on "Warfare and Geopolitics in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood: Implications for NATO". This "hybrid" seminar was hosted at the IAI headquarters and joined virtually by speakers and participants, discussing NATO's current and future approach to the South, understood in the context of this seminar as encompassing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to a certain extent the Sahel region. The MENA region is an increasingly contested security complex, affected by the growing influences of external actors meddling in regional affairs. Non-state actors have also become more and more salient in recent years, adding another layer of complexity to regional issues.

The first session addressed the role of specific non-state actors and presented in great details the Russian and Chinese strategies of influence in the region. Reviewing regional trends characterising the nature of warfare in the South, participants offered different analyses of their implications for the Alliance security. The second session focused on the Alliance's approach to the South, and notably on NATO's partnerships in the MENA region. The presentation of an innovative conceptualisation of security fostered a constructive discussion about future NATO's contributions to the stabilisation of the South, in cooperation with the European Union, other international organisations and the relevant local actors.

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Report of the workshop "Warfare and Geopolitics in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood: Implications for NATO", organised in Rome on 1 July 2021 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the NATO Defense College (NDC) in partnership with the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation..

## 1. Warfare and geopolitics: Regional trends and local dynamics

The first session of the workshop explored regional trends and local dynamics linked to conflicts in North Africa, in the Sahel and the greater Middle East. Speakers and participants analysed the structure of alliances and cleavages that shape the balance of power in the South, indicating the existence of sub-regional ensembles within the broader regional security complex. Discussions also addressed the relations between local actors and regional powers in ongoing conflicts and their possible future evolutions, as well as the influence of international players on the characters of warfare in the region.

### 1.1 *Non-state actors*

The first panellist focused on the Greater North Africa regional security complex. Underlining the multifaceted relations that link the Maghreb and the Sahel, the panellist described both the historical, cultural, geographical and religious dimensions of these relations as well as the persistent rivalries among regional and global powers that affect the regional security complex. The dual nature of these connections explains the high degree of permeability that characterises the subcontinent, with conflicts, revolutions, and instability spreading from one area to another. The so-called "Sahel-isation" of Algerian terrorism that happened in the early 2000s, following the kidnapping of European tourists in the Sahara by Algerian militants in 2003,<sup>1</sup> was particularly illustrative of that security shift.

Two processes facilitated the dissemination across the region of these new dynamics of violence. Firstly, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt facilitated an "horizontal" West-East contagion, eased by pre-existing circumstances. The subsequent regime changes led to the militarisation of popular movements in Syria and Yemen, and to the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), pushing fighters from North Africa to join Daesh's ranks in these countries, as well as mercenaries recruited in Syria and Iraq to move to North Africa. Secondly, the revolution in Libya featured a vertical North-South contagion which resulted in the destabilisation of Mali and the broader Sahel region.

These changes drew a new security complex alongside these new fault lines, allowing non-state actors to increasingly endanger the regional stability.

Analysing the Libyan conflict, the speaker pointed out the influence (re-)gained over the recent years by state actors through proxy activities, filling vacuums left by the American and European down-scaled efforts in the region. According to the speaker, the reluctance of European countries to intervene in Libya in 2019 to support the legitimate government in Tripoli offered new opportunities for Turkey, as well as all state actors holding the necessary financial and political resources to

<sup>1</sup> "Five Months of Sahara Hostage Drama", in *CNN*, 18 August 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/08/18/algeria.tourists.timeline/index.html>.

secure a military and economic influence in the region. While Russia's military presence in the Greater North Africa has a destabilising effect, Chinese direct investments in the Mediterranean Basin are telling examples of how China uses economic instruments to gain some strategic influence in the region.

### 1.2 China

The second panellist delved further into the role of China in Africa<sup>2</sup> often described as an "under the radar influence". This influence is not primarily military as it extends to all elements of national power, in particular diplomacy, information, military, and economy as recalled by the well-known "DIME" approach. China has developed, in addition to traditional diplomatic means, cultural, as well as health diplomacy. The latter has recently gained a considerable role in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, allowing Beijing to strengthen its relations with its partners through the provision of vaccines. Furthermore, Beijing has successfully penetrated the media world in the Middle East and Africa, through its various Confucius Institutes<sup>3</sup> and heavy investments into local media networks, hoping to disseminate a friendly narrative about Chinese positions and a positive image of China among public opinions in the region. Emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT) are also instrumental in that domain. Littered with Chinese sensors, the South provides a wealth of big data to Chinese operators.

Thirdly, although the military dimension is not a major mean of influence for China in the South, the Popular Liberation Army is the second largest financial contributor to the United Nations' peacekeeping operations (UNPKO), after the United States – in 2020–2021, it provided 15 per cent of the total UNPKO budget – and provides 3 per cent of the total forces employed in peacekeeping missions.<sup>4</sup> China's leading role in peacekeeping missions is particularly relevant as the large majority of these operations takes place in Africa and in the Middle East, giving a footprint to Chinese troops in the South.

China's major advantage lies in the economic field, where Chinese companies have captured important shares of local markets through trade contracts and foreign direct investments (FDI). Seeking opportunities in booming sectors like green economy and natural resources, Chinese companies have gained a considerable influence on the rare earth elements (REE) market, a vital sector for the production of high-tech devices. However, the debate acknowledged that China's growing influence in Africa, especially through its FDI in infrastructures that are key

<sup>2</sup> See NSD-S Hub, *China's Relevance in the Security Domain in Africa and the Middle East*, June 2020, <https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/chinas-relevance-in-the-security-domain-in-africa-and-the-middle-east>.

<sup>3</sup> Confucius Institutes are partnerships between educational institutions in China and abroad, which have the purpose of promoting Chinese culture and language. For more information, see the website of the Confucius Institute U.S. Center: <https://www.ciuscenter.org>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping website: *How Are We Funded*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/node/28>; and *Troop and Police Contributors*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/taxonomy/term/17>.

enablers for economic growth, may play a stabilising role in the long-term.

### 1.3 Russia

The third panellist addressed the Russian strategy in the South,<sup>5</sup> comparing it with Russia's approach to NATO's Eastern flank. Russia is believed to have engaged NATO Allies in a "grey zone warfare", supporting kinetic actions conducted by militia forces below the threshold of aggression to avoid triggering an article 5 response from the NATO side. These actions are referred to as "hybrid activities" in the NATO context. The 2021 NATO Summit Communiqué recognised that "our nations continue to face threats and challenges from both state and non-state actors who use hybrid activities to target our political institutions, our public opinion, and the security of our citizens"<sup>6</sup> and "even allowed for the possibility of article 5 being triggered".

From a Russian point of view, this type of warfare is an integral part of what Russia's Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, has coined "total conflict spectrum". This doctrine conceptualises the various possible phases of an escalation towards complete warfare. Until 2014, Russia restricted its attacks to countries of the former Soviet space, like Georgia and Ukraine. But since 2014, NATO countries have suffered multiple aggressions from Moscow, through non-military means, including: disinformation, election meddling, covert operations, and the manipulation of Russian-speaking minorities as destabilising actors. Russia resorts to specific tactics in the former Soviet republics by exploiting its cultural, historical and geographical interconnections with these countries. The speaker then shifted the focus towards the Russian approach to the South, where Moscow enjoys good relationships with some of regional and local actors. The strategic objectives pursued by the Kremlin in the region are not destabilisation as on NATO's eastern flank but rather the development of trade relationships and the penetration of new markets by Russia's main industries, notably in the energy and defence sectors; the expansion of its military foothold in the region; and the consolidation of its influence in the regional affairs in order to enhance its international stature. To that aim, Russia leverages its arms and energy exports to the region, its business partnerships, as well as the military assistance it provides to its partners in the region. Russian officials have cultivated over decades, sometimes dating back to the Cold War, personal connections with regional leaders.

Conditionality clauses linked to business partnerships with the EU and its members – requiring democratic progresses, or guarantees with respect to the protection of human rights and the reinforcement of the rule of law – have enabled Russia to

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: Cynthia Salloum and Chloé Berger (eds), "Russia in NATO's South: Expansionist Strategy or Defensive Posture?", in *NDC Research Papers*, No. 16 (January 2021), <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1523>.

<sup>6</sup> NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council*, Brussels, 14 June 2021, paragraph 31, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm).

present itself as a serious investor and partner, offering aid packages and trade agreements without apparent compensations. In sum, Russia has been quite successful in regaining some influence in the South over the recent years.

## 2. Implications and adaptations for NATO and its partners in the South

Building on the points discussed during the first session, the second panel identified some implications for NATO and its partners and investigated possible adaptations that might be considered by the Alliance. The debate opened on the necessity to change our common understanding of security to encompass new dimensions and better address conflicts and crises in the region. The question of the evolution of NATO partnerships with countries in North Africa and the greater Middle East was also addressed. Finally, NATO's added value vis-à-vis the efforts of Allies and other international organisations was delineated.

### *2.1 A changing understanding of security*

The first panellist opened the debate with a general reflection on conflicts and how they are understood by the main security organisations. Empirical and historical examples show the limitations of short-term solutions, focused mainly on ending violence. Without curing the cultural, economic, and social root causes, conflicts tend to re-emerge across time. Many of the current conflicts are the results of re-activation of inactive, or "cold", conflicts. The difficulty in predicting when and where a conflict will (re-)break out is especially severe for security organisations, as it affects their ability to design either preventive measures or long-term effective solutions. These considerations pledge for a change in conflict studies and management, going beyond the strict domain of warfare.

Such a "doctrinal" transformation should imply a more comprehensive reflection on the concept of security. The two major Western security organisations, NATO and the EU, rely currently on two different understandings of security: the first identifies it as "hard security", emphasising conventional warfare, technological superiority, counter-terrorism, etc; the second focuses primarily on "soft security", considering domestic issues, and, among others, human, food and water security. Both perspectives are somehow flawed, as only a comprehensive and all-inclusive understanding of the concept can lead to successful approaches providing long-term solutions. Both dimensions, hard and soft, need to be reconciled into a truly effective approach to conflict and security management.

The debate proceeded to discuss the role of NATO and its partners in the South. Among others, two main considerations were made. Firstly, one should note the shift of responsibilities within the Alliance concerning European security. Successive US administrations have reduced their engagement in Europe's Southern neighbourhood, shifting their strategic focus towards the Indo-Pacific area, and notably China, calling the European allies to do more for their own security

and the stability of their surroundings. Such a change might gradually lead to a re-organisation of the division of labour among Allies. Secondly, the renegotiation of the transatlantic burden-sharing agreement could foster cooperation between the Alliance and the European Union in the South, where both organisations are active. Currently, each institution carries out distinct – but complementary – types of operations. The speaker emphasised the disadvantages and drawbacks related to this traditional, and sometimes counterproductive, division of labour, advocating for a general rapprochement between NATO and EU, and more particularly in their common Southern neighbourhood.

One of the most prominent aspects of NATO's engagement in and for the South is the various partnership frameworks that the Alliance has established over the last three decades, which should be equally impacted by the shift of the security paradigm. The Alliance should thus aim at building up the defence capabilities of partner nations as well as at strengthening their political determination to act in unison. However, contrary to what has been often perceived as a "teaching or patronising attitude" from the West vis-à-vis the South, the Alliance can and should learn from its partners. This long-term process will surely benefit from the variety of knowledge and expertise brought by the more than 40 partners that NATO has all around the world, especially in conflict areas where international and regional security organisations often fail to achieve long-lasting peace processes.

### *2.2 NATO's approach to the South: Limitations and implications*

The second panellist reviewed the main trends that shape the character of warfare in the South, analysing the implications for NATO and its partners in the MENA region. The emergence of non-state actors – not only armed groups but also civil societies –, has contributed to the evolution of conflict patterns in the South.

The Arab Spring revolutions are a notorious example of such a phenomenon. Additionally, long-existing issues related to governance, affecting in a way or another all nation-states in the Middle-East, North Africa and the Sahel region have contributed to creating an environment conducive to conflicts and violence. The erosion of state authority and sovereignty across the region – from failed states to institutional weaknesses – has encouraged the development of new forms of warfare and militancy, with various implications: the creation of safe havens for violent extremist groups (VEOs) and criminal organisations; an overall deterioration of security conditions, especially in the Sahel region; the wild dissemination of social and political dissent. These are all factors that may set up a breeding ground for the emergence of VEOs.

The transformation of the regional security environment has important implications on how international organisations, and in particular NATO, approach the region. NATO's counter-terrorism strategy<sup>7</sup> has so far focused on raising situational

<sup>7</sup> NATO website: *Countering Terrorism*, last updated 14 September 2021, <https://www.nato.int/cps/>

awareness among Allies and partners, strengthening defence capabilities of partner countries (DCB programmes,<sup>8</sup> training and PME<sup>9</sup> activities), and supporting crisis management initiatives in the region. The example of counter-terrorism successfully delineates the limitations of NATO's current approach to instability in the South. NATO's instruments are not designed to address the root causes permitting the development of terrorism and insurgencies. The speaker delved further into the constraints that characterise not only the Alliance's overall policy in the region but also NATO's capacities and instruments, that have framed the Alliance's agenda for the South since the end of the Cold War.

The multifaceted character of warfare in the South is the "dark side" of the famous comprehensive approach. Integrated strategies for conflict management and stabilisation encompass all dimensions of security – soft and hard (military and development aspects) – and as such, pose structural and operational challenges for NATO. The Alliance is not equipped with the relevant instruments and resources to tackle conflicts' root causes in the South. Providing long-term solutions to the conflicts and drivers of instability in that region would require considerable efforts in the capacity building domain and significant investment in security sector reforms. All the more so since Russia and China seem ready to fill the voids left by Western countries.

For the reasons previously mentioned, the Alliance needs, according to the panellist, to develop a structured and comprehensive strategy for the South, overcoming the issues of both compartmentalisation – which leads to duplication of efforts and affects the coherence and the perception of NATO's activities on the ground – and scarcity of resources. NATO might also support the development of regional security architectures to address regional instability. The Alliance could back up partner countries' efforts in that domain, empowering them to deal with their own security issues and fostering interoperability with and among partners.<sup>10</sup> As suggested by the panellist, the most committed and active partners

[en/natohq/topics\\_77646.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Among Southern partners, Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq are recipients of Defence Capacity Building packages. These programmes help partners improve their defence and related security capacities, as well as their resilience, and, therefore, contribute to the security of the Alliance. They can include various types of support, ranging from strategic advice on defence and security sector reform and institution-building, to development of local forces through education and training, or advice and assistance in specialised areas such as logistics or cyber defence (see NATO website: *Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative*, last updated 9 June 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_132756.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132756.htm)). Other partners like Mauritania and Jordan have received Trust Funds to develop specific projects with NATO support (see ATT website: *NATO Assistance to Stockpile Management, Weapons Destruction, Reintegration Project in Mauritania*, <https://att-assistance.org/node/6706>).

<sup>9</sup> NATO offers more than 1,000 Training and Professional Military Education opportunities to its partners, including trainings delivered on the field (Mobile Training Teams), courses proposed at the various Centres of Excellence, the NATO School Oberammergau, the NATO ICI Regional Center, or the NATO Defense College. See NATO website: *Education and Training*, last updated 23 August 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49206.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49206.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Several Southern partner countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates)



could be offered the opportunity to host regional hubs that would contribute to the dissemination of expertise and good practices among partners and facilitate the mutualisation of capacities.

Finally, the debate offered some considerations about the future role of NATO for and in the South. Firstly, with respect to collective defence and deterrence, Allies may reinforce their posture in the Mediterranean Sea, clearly signalling to Russia and other actors in the region their determination to protect their interests and to prevent any further Russian and Chinese expansion in the region at the expense of the Alliance. Secondly, efforts initiated by the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division and the Public Diplomacy Division in the strategic communication domain to better "explain" NATO's ongoing operations and activities in the South might be reinforced, and may be supported by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom CoE).<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, within the cooperative security realm, revitalising the political dialogue with partners might help identifying priorities among partnership activities, and define effective criteria to select local partners in order to reinforce the long-term and strategic effects of DCB activities.

### 3. Conclusion: A further reflection in light of lessons from Afghanistan

The points highlighted during the workshop are particularly relevant in the context of the termination of the NATO and US-led missions in Afghanistan. After twenty years of engagement in that country, it is necessary to draw some lessons from the various initiatives implemented by the international community there and reflect upon the strategic and long-term impact of these stabilisation efforts. The Afghan case study is all the more important for the Western defence community since the engagement in Afghanistan has contributed to shaping Allies' warfare approaches and model of armed forces.

Moreover, Afghanistan has served as a playground for state and non-state actors to test new warfare approaches, in particular the so-called "grey-zone" tactics and technics. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for the Alliance to analyse the various phases of its operation engagement in Afghanistan (ISAF, Resolute Support Mission) and identify some lessons with a view to the next NATO Summit and the release of a new Strategic Concept. Is the Alliance still prepared and fit for out-of-area long-term operations, stretching Allies' logistic and communication lines and diverting resources from NATO's other collective defence and deterrence core task? What did the Allies learn from the implementation of the comprehensive approach in Afghanistan, especially with respect to the coordination of civil-military efforts?

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participate to NATO Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), a framework that helps partners preparing their forces and capabilities to take part to NATO-led missions and operations, as well as exercises. See NATO website: *Partnership Interoperability Initiative*, last updated 24 August 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_132726.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132726.htm).

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see the official website: <https://stratcomcoe.org>.

The collapse of the Afghan military and security forces consecutively to the withdrawal of US and NATO forces does question the sustainability and efficiency of local forces' capacity building programmes.

More generally, the fall of Kabul raises doubts about the efficiency of the institutional reform programmes established in Afghanistan, and shed some light on the weaknesses of stabilisation approaches without adequate strong political agreements among major local groups. In the Afghan case these discrepancies will offer new opportunities to Russia, China as well as Iran, to exploit local grievances and needs to strengthen their influence in the country and reinforce their regional footprint in Central Asia. These prospects raise a number of questions regarding any potential role for NATO in the future of the country and the region.

Twenty years after 9/11, the remembrance of these terrorist attacks tragically recalls that the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Afghan monarchy and the Soviet armed intervention contributed to the emergence of various international terrorist organisations, and the dissemination of their nefarious ideologies across the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, with some major implications for the Alliance and its partners' security. Such historical background should be considered when assessing the two decades of Western politico-military engagement in the country and its end.

Against this backdrop, it is necessary to develop robust analysis instruments to increase NATO understanding of security-related issues in the South, and anticipate destabilisation attempts and threatening behaviours from both state and non-state actors. The negotiation process that has ultimately led to the departure from Afghanistan has revealed some frictions and divergences among Allies, as well as some weaknesses in the analysis and planning process. If the mission in Afghanistan would have come to end anyway, it could have been done under different circumstances and lessons should be drawn in this regard.

All these factors pledge ultimately for an adaptation of NATO approach to crisis and conflict management, and a broadening of Allies' security understanding to take into consideration the various drivers fuelling regional instability. NATO's next Strategic Concept may bring some necessary adaptations in that domain and promote a revamped approach to crisis management and cooperative security.

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### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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