NATO’S DEVELOPING ROLE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND GREATER MIDDLE EAST: OUT OF AREA BUT NOT OUT OF BUSINESS

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Introduction

This article analyses the growing involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the Mediterranean and greater Middle Eastern region since the collapse of the Soviet bloc and its significance for the alliance’s overall evolution. It will argue that, while many expected the alliance to lose relevance and wither away in the post-Cold War realities of international politics, NATO has managed to adapt to the changed international system and redefine its role. One of the most innovative features of this adaptation has been the establishment of ties with non-European states and the adoption of responsibilities beyond the territory of its member states, which is normally described with the expression (of) ‘out-of-area’ operations. While most of these operations were carried out in the Balkans during the 1990s, the alliance has also developed a role in a vast and heterogeneous geographical area, stretching from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to Pakistan. I will argue in this article that, while the origins of the alliance’s involvement in the Mediterranean and greater Middle East can be traced back to the Cold War period, NATO’s increasing attention to the problems of these regions reflects this institution’s evolution and its complex adaptation to the post-Cold War international system. While during the Cold War NATO played a modest and cautious role in these regions, in recent years the alliance has become a more influential actor. More specifically, following the attacks against New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the alliance has developed already existing relations with north African countries, established ties with the Arab states from the Persian Gulf region, undertaken peace support, crisis management and disaster relief operations in Afghanistan, Sudan and Pakistan, and contributed to the training of the new Iraqi army officers. I will conclude that, as part of its process of adaptation to the post-Cold War international system, the alliance is likely to increase its involvement in these regions, thus contributing to the establishment of more stable and secure societies in the Mediterranean and greater Middle East.
NATO, the Mediterranean and the greater Middle East during the Cold War

While not discarding the problems of the Mediterranean, during the Cold War NATO played a modest and cautious role in the Middle East. The containment of the Soviet Union was the main concern of the alliance and remained as such until the collapse of the Soviet bloc between 1989 and 1991. However, while making the containment of the Soviet threat in Europe one of the main concerns of U.S. decision-makers, the Washington treaty, which in April 1949 led to the establishment of NATO, included among its signatories a Mediterranean country - Italy – and also contained a reference to north Africa. More specifically, article 6 of the treaty incorporated the Algerian departments of France in the area covered by the alliance’s security guarantee. Although this decision was taken as a result of the insistence of the French government, which had also championed Italy’s participation in the new defence arrangement, it demonstrated an eagerness to extend the alliance’s common security commitment beyond the north Atlantic area¹. Although the second footnote that was added to the treaty in 1963 following Algerian independence effectively deleted any reference to north Africa, two more Mediterranean countries, Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952, following the alliance’s first wave of enlargement. Their participation was deemed necessary by decision-makers in Washington to consolidate the alliance’s south-eastern flank and create geographical continuity between NATO and the Baghdad Pact, the defence pact that the United States and Britain were sponsoring in the Middle East against the Soviet Union². The process of decolonisation and the diverging U.S. and European interests in the Middle East prevented, however, the alliance from developing a more active role in this region. More specifically, in 1956 the Suez Canal Crisis, leading to strong disagreements between the United States and its European partners, particularly France, which felt betrayed by the U.S. lack of support against the Egyptian regime, virtually forestalled for more than a decade any further involvement of NATO in the region³. The alliance’s attention to the problems of the Mediterranean and the Middle East increased once again during the 1970s as a result of the impact of détente on East-West relations. Following the conclusion of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975, some of the alliance’s southern members, particularly France and Italy which were also supported by Spain, sought to promote trans-Mediterranean co-operation in regional frameworks⁴. More specifically, proposals were put forward for a Conference on Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean (CSCM). This and similar initiatives failed, however, as a result of the deteriorating political situation in many north African and Middle Eastern countries, particularly Algeria, the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Libya’s increasing connections with international terrorist groups that during the 1980s prompted a major crisis in relations between the Libyan regime and the West⁵.
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NATO's out of area operations, the Mediterranean and the Middle East during the 1990s

NATO’s involvement in the Mediterranean and the Middle East was inevitably accelerated by the structural changes brought about by the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet bloc had profound implications for the alliance, prompting an intense debate about its future and the need for a concerted Western military policy under the guidance of the United States. More specifically, decision-makers in NATO’s member countries had to evaluate whether the alliance was still relevant and had a contribution to make in concrete political and military terms. Until 1991, however, the Mediterranean and the Middle East did not play a prominent role in this debate and in the minds of decision-makers in the alliance’s member states. By contrast, their initial reaction was inspired by an ostensibly conservative strategic argument: NATO was still needed to secure the link between Western Europe and the United States, to protect the countries of Western Europe against the risk of Russia’s resurgence and to contain the new unified Germany. This viewpoint reflected a traditional approach to the tasks of the alliance that made no distinction between the Cold War and the post-Cold War world. In other words, NATO was still needed to keep ‘the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down’. In August 1991 the attempt of some members of the Soviet politburo and of the heads of the Soviet military and security services to halt the reform course undertaken by Gorbachev briefly reinvigorated the argument that the alliance was still needed to contain a resurgent Russia.

However, following the demise of the East-West division the members of NATO also sought to identify new tasks which the alliance could perform lest the disappearance of the Soviet threat may lead to the crisis of this institution. The new strategic concept adopted by the alliance at its Rome summit in November 1991 marked a first step in this direction, identifying new threats to Euro-Atlantic security which had no relationship with the reconstitution of a hostile Soviet Union and enhancing NATO’s political dimension. In the same year, the eruption of war in Yugoslavia and the European countries’ inability to stop it were a turning point in NATO’s evolution and adaptation to the new realities of international politics. More specifically, the conflict that erupted between the former republics of Yugoslavia and focused on Bosnia marked the first and most difficult step for the alliance towards the adoption of responsibilities beyond the borders of its member states. Despite the initial hesitation of U.S. decision-makers, in 1993 republican senator Richard Lugar’s statement that “NATO go out of area or out of business”, aptly summarised the point that the alliance may face irrelevancy if it did not adapt to a rapidly changing international system and undertake new tasks which had not immediate relationship with its original purpose. As a result of the concern that NATO may atrophy
and of the persisting inability of the European Union (EU) to halt the fighting, in the following year the alliance intervened in the Bosnian conflict, contributing to put an end to the war which since 1992 had taken place on the soil of the former Yugoslav republic. By intervening in this conflict, the alliance proved its ability to carry out operations which had not direct relationship with its original task, undertake commitments beyond the territory of its member states, and become an actor in conflict management and peace support operations. U.S. decision-makers and NATO’s then secretary general, Manfred Wörner, drew inspiration from the experience in Bosnia to accelerate the reform of the alliance and its adaptation to the changed geo-strategic scenario. As demonstrated by its successful involvement in the Balkans, NATO will maintain security in Europe, intervening to stop conflicts caused by the rebirth of traditional rivalries among nations, political disintegration and instability. In the following years NATO’s member countries deployed more than 60,000 troops to Bosnia to guarantee the application of the Dayton peace agreement, which in 1995 had put an end to the hostilities, and the maintenance of peace in the region. In 1999, the alliance’s ‘out of area’ projection was further enhanced as a result of the bombing campaign conducted against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). This operation, whose political legitimacy on the side of NATO was provided for by the alliance’s successful involvement in Bosnia, was motivated with the argument of stopping the violence and unrest in Kosovo. It allowed the alliance to become Europe’s premier security institution and reinforced NATO’s role beyond the territory of its member states. The establishment of ties with the former Soviet bloc enemies and the process of enlargement also contributed to the adaptation of NATO’s original mission to the realities of the post-Cold War period, increasing the alliance’s international legitimacy and consolidating its political dimension. Following the establishment of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1994, the alliance developed an advisory function for partner and prospective members, contributing to reform their defence ministries, restructure their armed forces and establish civilian control upon them.

However, while Europe and, particularly, the Balkan region remained the focus of NATO’s attention throughout the 1990s, the end of the Cold War, transforming the geopolitics of the Euro-Atlantic area, also heralded a new phase of NATO’s engagement in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Whereas western Europe had embarked on the road to unity and integration and the Balkan region was recovering from the conflicts unleashed by the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Middle East was increasingly perceived by the members of the alliance as an area of potential conflict as a result of the rise of Islamic extremism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, economic underdevelopment and growing demographic pressures. For this reason, as early as February 1995, NATO’s member countries decided to increase the alliance’s feeble involvement
in the region, by promoting a direct dialogue with north African and Middle Eastern states. This initiative, which reflected the agreements entered by this institution with former Soviet bloc countries within the framework of the PfP since 1994 and similar programmes developed by the European Union, had the objective of institutionalising consultation among the alliance’s member states and north African and Middle Eastern countries on political and security questions. Israel and four north African countries, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia, accepted invitations to join an institutionalised forum that has become known as the Mediterranean Dialogue. Since its creation, the Mediterranean Dialogue has contributed to the identification and development of areas of co-operation between the alliance and the participating countries, gradually enlarged to new members, strengthened its activities and deepened its agenda

The number of participating countries has increased from five to seven, after invitations were extended to Jordan in November 1995 and Algeria in February 2000. At NATO’s Madrid summit in 1997 a Mediterranean Co-operation Group was also established, bringing representatives of the alliance’s member states together with their peers from Mediterranean Dialogue countries. This initiative, although denoting NATO’s increasing attention to the problems of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, did not anticipate, however, a major involvement of the alliance in these regions. Until the conclusion of the 20th century, the process of enlargement, relations with Russia, and the stabilisation of the Balkans continued to absorb the attention of decision-makers within the alliance’s member countries and most of NATO’s diplomatic and military resources, thus condemning the Mediterranean and the Middle East to remain a secondary concern for this institution.

NATO, the Middle-East, and the ‘war on terror’

The alliance’s until then cautious involvement in the Mediterranean and the Middle East was dramatically accelerated by the terrorist attacks which on 11 September 2001 were carried out upon New York and Washington. While the United States originally declined offers for assistance from the other members of NATO in the war against the Taliban regime, the subsequent U.S. attempt to involve the alliance in the stabilisation of Afghanistan and in the war on Iraq marked a qualitative shift in NATO’s out of area role, leading to a significant increase in the alliance’s involvement in the greater Middle East. However, this process has not been unproblematic and straightforward. By contrast, it has originated one of the most serious crises in the alliance’s history, causing controversies which have opened up a rift in transatlantic relations whose consequences are still being perceived today. The origins of this crisis must be found in the nature of this institution: despite the growing emphasis on the alliance’s political
dimension, which is epitomised by the adherence of its members to a common set of liberal and democratic values, NATO remains an alliance among sovereign states. As a result, its fortunes, as those of any other international institution that is made up of sovereign states, decisively depend on the interests of its members. Inevitably, the convergences and discrepancies among these interests have also had an impact on the alliance’s Middle Eastern policy. While rallying behind the United States following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and agreeing to deploy NATO’s vessels to monitor shipping in the Mediterranean as a first collective measure to prevent and combat terrorist activity, the European members of the alliance, particularly France, Belgium and Germany, have not been willing to accommodate U.S. policy on Iraq and, more generally, the Bush administration’s conduct in the so-called ‘war on terror’.

Throughout 2002 the French, Belgian and German governments strongly opposed U.S. plans to attack Iraq and in February 2003 threatened to veto preparations within the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to begin shipping defensive equipment to Turkey, which is the only NATO member country bordering Iraq. The subsequent deadlock was broken only when the alliance’s then secretary general, Lord Robertson, proposed to bring the issue before the Defence Planning Committee, in which France does not participate. The disagreement among the alliance’s members on the Iraqi conflict marked the most serious rift in transatlantic relations since the Suez Canal Crisis in 1957 leading, as in that occasion, decision-makers in some western European countries, particularly France and Germany, to question the nature of the European relationship with the United States and the significance of NATO for European interests. These disagreements were so severe that, as former U.S. ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns aptly put it, amounted to a ‘near-death experience’. Ex-German chancellor Gerhard Schröder summarised European disillusionment about the nature of the transatlantic relationship, suggesting that NATO is ‘no longer the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and co-ordinate strategies’.

However, while the divisions created by the U.S. decision to topple the Saddam Hussein’s regime have caused a new rift in transatlantic relations and prevented the alliance’s from assuming a leading role in this region, all the members of NATO continue to have a major interests in the pacification and stabilisation of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. This interest has been made stronger by the crisis in which Iraq has plunged since the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the need to disarm terrorist groups operating in the region, whose appeal on the local populations has increased as a result of persisting political instability and economic underdevelopment that have led to popular exasperation and resentment. As a result, the alliance has made new efforts to intensify its activity, extend commitments and strengthen co-operation with local actors. A first step in this direction was the decision to upgrade the practical and politi-
cal dimension of the Mediterranean Dialogue. More specifically, since 2002 the items on the Mediterranean Dialogue’s agenda have been extended to include consultations on security matters of common concern and terrorism-related issues. While upgrading the alliance’s involvement, this decision represented only a transitional step on the road which may lead NATO to give a more vigorous contribution to peace and security in the greater Middle East. The member countries of this institution have, in fact, continued to demonstrate a willingness to do so on numerous occasions. At its 2004 Istanbul summit which, not by chance, was held in the capital of NATO’s only Muslim and Middle Eastern country, the alliance took at least three significant initiatives. Firstly, drawing on the experience of the PfP, it offered to elevate the Mediterranean Dialogue to a genuine partnership. Following this proposal, a first meeting between NATO and all Mediterranean Dialogue countries at the level of foreign ministers took place in Brussels in December 2004, when the programme’s enduring importance for both allies and Mediterranean countries was underlined. Negotiations on how to expand co-operation have continued in the following years, culminating in a significant meeting held in February 2006, in the Sicilian city of Taormina, between the defence ministries of the 26 members of the alliance and the 7 Mediterranean Dialogue’s north-African and Middle Eastern states. Secondly, the alliance established the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative (ICI) with the ambitious aim of reaching out to the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). Broadly speaking, the ICI follows the logic of the enhanced Mediterranean Dialogue, focusing on areas of common interest, such as co-operation in the fight against terrorism, defence reform and joint training. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are the partner states which have adhered to this programme, that also focuses on sharing intelligence-related data, border security, and the combat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the means of their delivery. However, NATO’s engagement has been limited to those areas where it can bring added value to the region and has not led to duplication or competition with initiatives that have been promoted by other actors and international institutions, such as the G8, the United Nations (UN) and the European Union. Thirdly, following a request from the then Iraqi Prime Minister Ilyad Allawi, at its Istanbul summit the alliance also agreed to provide assistance to the training of the new Iraqi security forces. As a result, in August 2004 NATO established a Training Implementation Mission in Iraq, running a training centre for senior security and defence officials on the outskirts of Baghdad. The alliance has also helped co-ordinate offers of equipment and training from its member and partner countries. On 9 December 2004, the foreign ministers of the alliance’s member states authorised the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) to expand the mission and changed its name from NATO Training Implementation Mission to NATO Training Mission-
Iraq. Moreover, in addition to in-country training, NATO has also been hosting mid and senior-level Iraqi officers at the alliance’s various educational centres in Europe. While establishing ties with the countries of the region and contributing to the creation of the new Iraqi armed forces has absorbed most of the resources that the alliance has until now invested in the greater Middle East, more areas of intervention remain open to the initiatives of NATO in this complex and heterogeneous region. Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not currently on the alliance’s agenda, a possible NATO role in contributing to resolve this long-running dispute has been discussed in political and academic circles. Indeed, commentators and analysts have proposed both extending a NATO security guarantee to Israel and a peacekeeping role for the alliance between a sovereign Palestinian state and Israel\textsuperscript{21}. However, while strengthening ties between Israel and NATO is possible within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue, alliance officials have repeatedly made it clear that three fundamental pre-conditions will have to be met before NATO could consider playing a more active role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These are a stable and lasting peace accord between the two parties to the conflict; agreement between Israel and Palestine about a role for NATO; and a UN mandate for NATO’s operation\textsuperscript{22}. Finally, in recent years the alliance has been providing logistical assistance and carrying out disaster relief operations beyond the borders of its member states. More specifically, since July 2005 NATO has been providing assistance to the African Union (AU) for Darfur, ensuring the co-ordination of strategic airlift of African peacekeeping troops into the region. Following the earthquake which on 8 October 2005 hit the northern regions of Pakistan, India and eastern Afghanistan, the alliance established, on request of the Pakistani government, an air bridge from Europe to Pakistan to carry vital supplies for the earthquake victims\textsuperscript{23}. More initiatives, such as providing assistance to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) following the torrential rains and flooding that on 10 and 11 February 2006 devastated camps around Tindouf in Algeria, are currently being discussed, demonstrating the alliance’s determination to provide a more vigorous contribution to the preservation of peace and security in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and to improve local perceptions of NATO and its evolving role.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to evaluate NATO’s increasing involvement in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and its significance for the alliance’s future. It has argued that, although NATO’s interest in these regions can be traced back to the early stages of the Cold War and the U.S. policy of containment, the alliance has been playing a greater and more active role following the collapse of
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the Soviet bloc. While during the early 1990s its efforts focused on establishing ties with local actors and strengthening confidence in NATO’s activities, the alliance’s engagement experienced a major quantitative and qualitative shift as a consequence of the terrorist attacks that on 11 September 2001 were carried out upon New York and Washington. As a result, NATO decided to upgrade existing initiatives and promoted new forms of engagement in order to prevent and combat terrorist activity. Although the persistence of divergences in the national interests of its members, that were exacerbated by the U.S. decision to attack Iraq, has prevented this institution from assuming a leading role in the pacification and stabilisation of the greater Middle East, the alliance has continued to increase its involvement within a wider process of transformation and adaptation to a changed international context, that has led NATO to undertake an increasing number of activities and operations outside the Euro-Atlantic area. I am convinced that the alliance’s involvement, while raising important questions for the future of NATO, is likely to continue to expand as a result of the U.S. inability to address on its own the enormous security challenges of this complex region and of the European Union’s persisting difficulties at developing an effective and convincing common security and defence policy. More specifically, stabilising the Mediterranean and the Middle East, solving the conflict between Israeli and the Palestinians, fighting the ‘war on terror’, and improving relations with Iran will require a multifaceted approach and a multilateral effort that can be guaranteed only by a complex institutional engagement, in which NATO will have a vital role alongside the UN and the EU.

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NOTES

1 During the negotiations the French representatives threatened to veto Norway’s participation had France’s Algerian departments and Italy been left out of NATO.

2 The Baghdad Pact was established in 1955 as a bilateral alliance between Turkey and Iraq. It became the Middle East Treaty Organisation (METO) following the adhesion of Britain, Pakistan, and Iran. In 1958, as a result of a military coup Iraq withdrew from the alliance, which changed its name to Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). In 1979 the new Islamic regime in Iran also withdrew the country from CENTO, thus leading to the virtual dismantling of the defence arrangement.

3 In 1966, under the leadership of general De Gaulle, France, although remaining a member of the alliance, withdrew from NATO’s integrated military structure, as a consequence of the loss of confidence which had been caused by the U.S. conduct during the Suez Canal Crisis.

4 Spain was admitted to the alliance in 1982, although since the early stages of the Cold War bilateral U.S.-Spanish agreements had allowed the access of American troops to Spanish naval and air force bases.

5 In 1986 the U.S. aviation bombed Tripoli and the region of Benghazi, accusing the Libyan regime of direct responsibility for terrorist attacks against Western interests. Relations between the United States and Libya were resumed only in 2004, after Colonel Muammar Gaddafi settled terrorist claims and agreed to give up its programme of developing weapons of mass destruction.

6 This sentence is usually attributed to Lord Ismay who was NATO’s first secretary general between 1952 and 1957. An additional motivation for the preservation of the alliance was to prevent a re-nationalisation of security and defence policies in Europe. Robert J. Art, ‘Why Western Europe needs the United States and NATO’, Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 111, No. 1, Spring 1996.

7 The strategic concept adopted by the alliance at its Rome summit in 1991 is available at www.nato.int/docu/comm/9-95/e911107a.htm.


11 The argument that NATO’s operation in Bosnia provided some kind of legiti-


14 The deployment of NATO’s forces to patrol the Mediterranean began in October 2001 and was formally named Operation Active Endeavour. Initially limited to the eastern Mediterranean, in March 2004 it was extended to the whole Mediterranean basin with the aim to help detect, deter and protect against terrorist activity.

15 France and Germany have also opposed, for different reasons, the merging of the International Stabilisation Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) with Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. led operation that focuses on Al-Qaeda and the leadership of the Taleban. ISAF was established in December 2001 and has been under NATO command since February 2003.

16 The decision sheet agreed on 16 Feb. 2003 by the Defence Planning Committee can be consulted at www.nato.int/docu/pr/2003/p030216e.htm.

17 By contrast, the alliance’s new recruits from the former Soviet bloc were supportive of American policy, leading U.S. defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld to deride France and Germany as ‘old Europe’, while rewarding the new eastern European members of NATO with the flattering, as much as contentious, expression of ‘new Europe’.

18 This statement was made in a speech delivered by Schröder’s then Minister of Defence Peter Struck at the 41st Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2005.

19 The evolution of the Mediterranean Dialogue from a modest forum for cooperative security into a genuine partnership seems to appeal to other Mediterranean countries. The Palestinian Authority, for example, recently expressed an interest in joining the programme and in March 2005 open exploratory contacts were opened between NATO and the Palestinians.

20 C.Masala, ‘Rising expectations’.
Ronald Asmus has argued that NATO should assume a leading role in providing security in Iraq and be prepared to help enforce an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. See Ronald D. Asmus, ‘Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance’, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 82, no. 5, (Sept./Oct. 2003), pp. 20-31.

C. Masala, ‘Rising expectations’.

This mission came to an end, as on schedule, on 1 February 2006.