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NATO AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY AGENDA

Preliminary Draft Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mediterranean Sea has three strategic entry points, providing access to the Atlantic Ocean, the Red Sea which leads to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the Black Sea which leads to the Russian world. Thus, the Mediterranean connects all the world's major political, economic and energy hubs. It is a crucial region not only for external actors such as Russia, China, the Gulf powers and the United States, but also for the countries that surround it, all involved in various ways in more or less elaborate multilateral networks. From the beginning of the 2010s, this region was also marked by a succession of political upheavals, brought to a climax in Syria, Iraq and Libya. These developments gave rise to an unprecedented migratory crisis for Europe and to new international security threats.

As a result, the Alliance has become increasingly interested in this space. A discussion forum was set up in the mid-1990s through the Mediterranean Dialogue. Later, the 2010 Strategic Concept took into account the political and military developments on the Alliance's southern flank. And since then, NATO has made significant progress. Within the Allied Joint Force Command Naples, the Southern Hub was established to boost vigilance and coordinate Allied maritime operations in the region. NATO also cooperates with other organisations there, such as the European Union and the African Union. Yet today, certain differences between Allies hamper NATO's ability to develop a constant, clear and coherent strategy that would specify its role in tackling challenges and threats from the South.

This preliminary draft report first presents the impact of the Mediterranean security landscape on Alliance security through three axes: the two areas under tension; transversal factors and challenges; and the role of external actors. It then assesses the Allies' role in promoting stability and security in the Mediterranean as part of the essential core tasks. Finally, it makes recommendations to strengthen NATO's programmes, initiatives and partnerships in the Mediterranean in order to promote regional stability.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. A sea “in the middle of land”, the Mediterranean has three strategic entry points: the Strait of Gibraltar, controlling access to the Atlantic; the Suez Canal, leading to the Red Sea and then onto the Indian and Pacific Oceans; and the Dardanelles Strait, which gives access to the Black Sea and the Russian world. It connects all the world’s major political, economic and energy players. It is thus a crucial region not only for major external actors such as Russia, China, the Gulf powers and the United States, but also for the countries that surround it, all involved in various ways in more or less elaborate multilateral networks. Moreover, starting in the early 2010s, this area was marked by a succession of political upheavals, which were brought to a climax in Syria, Iraq and Libya. These developments led to an unprecedented migration crisis for Europe and to new international security threats: first with the emergence of the so-called “Islamic State” group, and then with the return of foreign fighters to their countries of origin.

2. As a result, the Alliance has become increasingly interested in this geographic space. A forum for discussion was set up in the mid-1990s through the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD). With an emphasis on terrorism and cooperative security, the 2010 Strategic Concept took into account the political and military developments on the Alliance’s southern flank. The Warsaw Summit in 2016 approved reforms aimed at expanding this approach. Since then, NATO has made significant progress, for example in 2017 with the adoption of the Action Plan against Terrorism and its subsequent update. The Southern Hub was established within Allied Joint Force Command Naples to boost vigilance and coordinate Allied maritime operations in the region. NATO also cooperates with other organisations there, such as the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU). But differences between Allies have arisen in relation to specific security challenges, weakening NATO’s ability to develop a constant, clear and coherent strategy that would specify its role in tackling challenges and threats from the South.

3. This preliminary draft report deals with the instability and conflicts in NATO’s southern neighbourhood which impact the security of the Alliance. It first presents the Mediterranean security landscape through three axes: the two areas under tension; transversal factors and challenges; and the role of external actors. It then assesses the Allies’ role in promoting stability and security in the Mediterranean as part of NATO’s essential core tasks in the areas of collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. Finally, it makes recommendations to strengthen NATO’s programmes, initiatives and partnerships in the Mediterranean with a view to promoting regional stability through better military preparedness, deeper political engagement and enhanced cooperation.

II. THE MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY LANDSCAPE

4. The failure of certain states (Libya and Syria) along with the fragile political and socio-economic contexts in the Mashriq and the Maghreb – magnified in the case of the latter by destabilisation further south – have strongly amplified and interlaced migratory, environmental and criminal problems. In the Mediterranean, steadily growing illicit activities (trafficking in narcotics, arms and human beings, money laundering, hidden investments and oil smuggling) are now combined with instability caused by energy-related challenges and regional power projections. In addition, with the expanding Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese influence and an observed decline in US military presence, Europe’s southern flank is now an area potentially open to all forms of conflict.

A. LIBYA’S PROLONGED DISMANTLEMENT

5. The civil war into which Libya has sunk since 2011 is a complex web of issues and confrontations. On the political level, the opposition of two legitimate parties has entrenched a conflict between two camps, reinforced by the involvement of external actors. This radical

dismantlement has a direct influence on the fight against terrorism and the illicit flows of people and goods. However, the recent agreement opens up tentative prospects for a political solution.

6. In 2011, the violent repression of peaceful protests by Muammar Gaddafi's regime sparked a multinational military intervention under the aegis of the UN, in which NATO took part (*Operation Unified Protector*). It aimed to enforce an arms embargo and impose a no-fly zone, and precipitated the fall of the regime (NATO, 2015). In 2012, the first attempt at democratic transition led to a parliamentary crisis from which two rival governments emerged (Barthe, 2021). The transitional government in place in 2014 refused to accept the results of that year's elections, marked by a turnout of only 18%, while the newly elected House of Representatives formed a rival government in Tobruk (Al-Jazeera, 2014). UN-facilitated negotiations in 2015 attempted to reconcile the rival governments with the creation of the Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, the only one recognised by the UN and Allies. However, the Tobruk government continued to contest the GNA's legitimacy. Most international actors agree that Libya's lasting stability relies on the involvement of all Libyan stakeholders (Wehrey, 2019).

7. Several considerations explain the long-lasting nature of the civil war that was sparked by this political situation. On the one hand, each of these entities relies on multiple factors: a completely fragmented internal political space; a strong tribal and clan base (in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica respectively) whose fringes (in Fezzan) are extremely unstable and prevent the decisive victory of either camp; and a kaleidoscope of militias competing for access to resources (either natural or linked to illicit flows) (Ruffié, Gros and Tourret, 2018). On the other hand, the interplay of foreign powers prolongs this rivalry by offering the two camps concrete support in the form of weapons, troops and mercenaries (Wintour, 2021). The GNA, supported by Turkey and Qatar, is perceived as being under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood by its opponents, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These nations support the Tobruk government, seen as a bulwark against what they consider to be radical Islamism. Russia also supports the latter, mainly for geopolitical and economic reasons, through the Wagner mercenary group.

8. In this context, the agreement of 5 February 2021 on a transitional unified executive authority represents an important step in the Berlin Process for the conflict's resolution. This process acknowledges that a proxy war is being fought in Libya. It thus aims to create the general conditions for an intra-Libyan political process under the auspices of the UN, through dialogue with international actors who have influence over the opposing parties. As such, it offers a comprehensive framework to address all of the issues fuelling the Libyan conflict. In January 2020, in addition to the five permanent members of the Security Council, the Berlin Process brought together: Italy, the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria and the Republic of the Congo; the UN and the EU, but also the AU and the League of Arab States; the Libyan Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj and General Khalifa Haftar (German Federal Foreign Office, 2020). All the participants pledged to support efforts to resolve the conflict in Libya, to fully implement the arms embargo and to support the immediate withdrawal of all mercenaries and foreign fighters. The agreement was approved by the UN Security Council through resolution 2510, adopted on 12 February 2020. The Libyan National Army's offensive – launched on Tripoli in April 2019 – failed in June 2020 and further underscored the futility of seeking a military victory. The two Libyan parties finally signed a ceasefire agreement on 23 October. On 5 February 2021, the Inter-Libyan Dialogue, sponsored by the UN and composed of 75 participants, resulted in the appointment of a transitional unified executive charged with organising new elections on 24 December. Some reconciliation measures were also implemented by the foreign sponsors of the conflicting parties. Thus, an Egyptian delegation met the GNA in Tripoli, establishing the first diplomatic contact since 2014 (Wintour, 2021).

9. The task of swiftly forming an inclusive government now lies with the new president of the Presidential Council (composed of 3 members from each region), Mohammad Younes Menfi (who is from the east), and the new Prime Minister, Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah (a businessman

supported by the west). Notably, 30% of future government positions must be reserved for women (Euractiv, 2020). At present, two key components of the agreement – the departure of mercenaries and foreign fighters and the embargo on arms trafficking – are still not being respected. More than 20,000 foreign troops remain in Libya, according to UN Special Envoy Stephanie Williams, and arms imports from each faction’s allies have not ceased (Wintour, 2021). The Euro-Atlantic community must therefore not relax its efforts to contribute to the peace process. On 22 January 2021, NATO’s Secretary General evoked the Alliance’s position as expressed at the 2018 Warsaw Summit, and its readiness to counsel Libya on the capacity-building of its defence and security institutions, given the right political and security conditions. There is nevertheless a near consensus within the Alliance that these conditions are currently inadequate. Moreover, during this delicate political transition, the Libyan people have made clear their desire to end foreign intervention; NATO involvement would thus send an ambiguous message.¹

B. ESCALATING TENSIONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

10. Throughout 2020 in the Eastern Mediterranean, tensions between Greece and Turkey reached levels not seen since the Cyprus crisis of 1974. The current escalation is one of the most complex between these two NATO Allies, both in terms of the number of actors involved and the points of contention. The central issue remains the status of the Turkish Cypriot community, internationally recognised only by Turkey as the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”. However, this dispute is now linked to other developments in the wider region, including the conflict in Libya, energy-related geopolitics, the renewed conflict over maritime borders and the refugee/migrant crisis.

11. The growing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have complex causes, mainly related to national sovereignty issues, but the stakes for regional actors have certainly increased with the discovery of several natural gas fields between 2009 and 2019. While the size of these reserves and the feasibility of extracting and transporting them remain to be determined, these findings have prompted states in the region to seek ways to secure their share of potential profits. In particular, Egypt, Cyprus and Israel have launched a platform to coordinate their efforts to explore reserves and potentially produce gas. Greece, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Italy later joined this initiative, which was named the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF). In January 2020, it formally became an international organisation headquartered in Cairo. An important element of the Eastern Mediterranean energy framework is the planned construction of the Israel-Cyprus-Greece-Italy gas pipeline as well as the use of Egyptian gas liquefaction plants (Tanchum, 2020).

12. These developments have set off alarm bells in Turkey. Energy security is a matter of strategic importance for Ankara, which has been importing over 70% of its energy needs since 2018 (Dalay, 2021). Ankara claims that it is excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean energy framework and that its legitimate interests are being ignored. Turkey’s exclusion can be explained in the context of broader political and security developments of the 2010s, notably: the territorial disagreements mentioned later in this chapter; Turkey’s divergent stance on the Libyan conflict compared to most EMGF members; Ankara’s criticism of the 2013 coup in Egypt; the freezing of Turkey’s EU integration process in 2018; and its chequered relationship with Israel. Amid shared concerns over Iranian influence in Syria and Turkish interest in Israeli natural gas, Ankara and Jerusalem formally resolved their differences in June 2016. Full diplomatic relations were restored. However, in May 2018 Turkey recalled its ambassador and asked the Israeli envoy to leave following violent protests on the border between Israel and Gaza (Berman, 2021).

¹ On the perception of NATO in this country and more generally in the region, see the NATO PA webinar from 18 March: “A Decade after the Arab Uprisings: Lessons and Implications” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Och5pJv8ihs&list=PL78ISMLjMVWoHiWjI5y9o1ddYRj-9qvSB&index=5>

13. During the 2010s, Ankara's relations with the two US administrations were also strained at times, mainly due to Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defence systems and American support for Kurdish forces in Syria. In the late 2010s, the United States stepped up military cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, including by lifting an embargo on non-lethal defence technologies in Cyprus, while withdrawing Turkey from the F-35 fighter programme. Nevertheless, the Trump administration spoke out against imposing sanctions under the so-called CAATSA Act (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) of February 2015, to be used against any country procuring military equipment from Russian companies. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 – passed by the outgoing Congress with the qualified majority required to override the veto invoked by President Donald J. Trump – today provides for additional sanctions against the Turkish defence industry (Reuters, 2021).

14. The EU and Turkey maintain close ties in many areas. In recent years, however, relations have become strained for several reasons: the Turkish military intervention in Syria; the leveraging of migration issues; the degradation of the rule of law; and Turkey's illegal exploration and drilling in the Mediterranean. The EU has clearly affirmed its support for Greece and Cyprus on several occasions. Its member states have done so too, with different degrees of commitment. Some members – particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and on the Iberian Peninsula – may appear to support a more conciliatory approach to Turkey due to its important role in NATO. Seven countries in the south of the European Union (known as the MED7) have a common agenda to ensure respect for European sovereignty and international law and to promote de-escalation.

15. Ankara has reacted in response to what it sees as a collective attempt to isolate and contain Turkey. In 2018, Turkish naval forces prevented a ship from the Italian energy giant *Eni* from reaching its drilling site in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, in 2019 and again in 2020, Turkey sent a seabed exploration vessel, escorted by the Turkish Navy, to the disputed areas in the Eastern Mediterranean. These actions reflect Ankara's determination to protect what it considers to be Turkey's or the Turkish Cypriots' legitimate share of Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon resources. Ankara has also strengthened its ties with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), its key partner in the region and a body recognised by the UN in Tripoli. In November 2019, Turkey and the GNA signed two agreements that were crucial for both parties: one on delimiting areas of maritime jurisdiction in the Mediterranean, and the other on cooperating in the field of security and defence (see above for the latter).

16. The agreement on maritime jurisdiction areas is a radical representation of Ankara's view that the contours of a country's mainland, rather than its islands, should be the key factor in demarcating the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which Turkey is not a signatory, islands can also generate an EEZ, provided they are large enough to support populations. By postulating – contrary to UNCLOS – that the Greek islands, including Crete and Rhodes, do not generate EEZs, the Turkey-GNA agreement divides the maritime area between Libya and Turkey exclusively between these two countries. Ankara also claims that the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" is entitled to its own EEZ. From a Turkish perspective, the Turkey-GNA agreement means that the Israel-Cyprus-Greece pipeline project would cross areas under Turkish maritime jurisdiction.

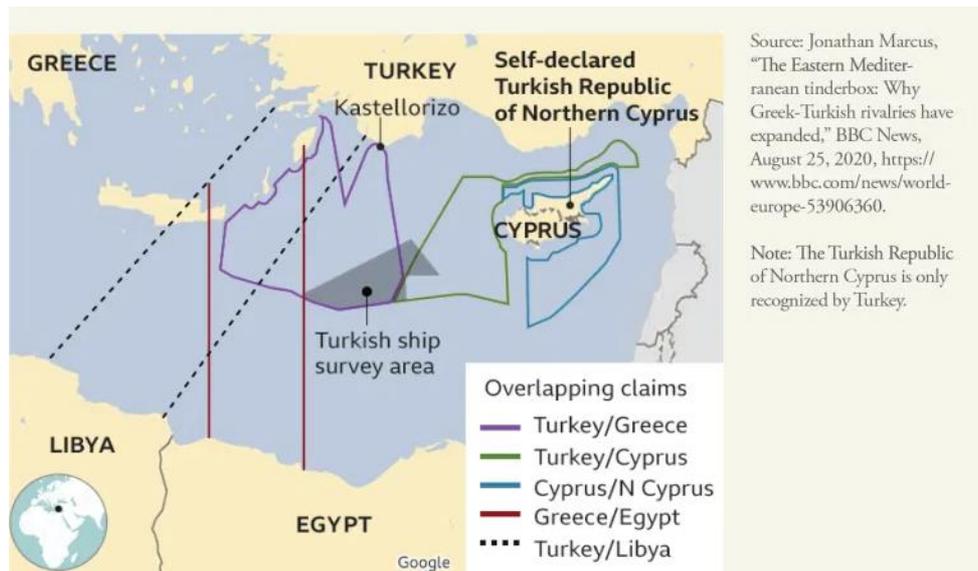


Figure 1. Overlapping maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean

17. Turkey's naval activities and deals with the GNA sparked a strong backlash across the region and beyond. In August 2020, Athens signed a bilateral maritime delimitation agreement with Egypt, directly challenging the Turkey-GNA agreement. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced Greece's intention to extend its maritime jurisdiction off its western coast from 6 to 12 nautical miles, which UNCLOS allows (Greece continues to apply the 6-mile standard on the eastern flank facing Turkey). Greece has also declared that it will increase spending and strengthen its defence capabilities. Allied nations have expressed their solidarity in various ways. France sent three Rafale planes and a frigate to participate in Greek military exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean, which were joined by Cyprus and Italy (DW, 2020). The United States authorised further security-related support for Greece and Cyprus and sent USS *Hershel Woody Williams* to Crete. In addition, the EU expressed solidarity with its members, Cyprus and Greece.

18. Increased maritime activity in the Eastern Mediterranean is multiplying the risk of accidents: in mid-August, the Turkish frigate *Kemal Reis* collided with the Greek frigate *Limnos* in disputed waters. The rapid escalation of the situation, particularly in August 2020, implicated NATO Allies and required urgent and comprehensive diplomatic intervention. NATO played a key role as an intermediary between its Allies, Greece and Turkey, as it has done in the past (Shea, 2020). In early September 2020, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg appealed to political leaders in Ankara and Athens and launched a series of technical meetings between Greek and Turkish military representatives at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. A bilateral military deconfliction mechanism was established on 1 October 2020. It is designed to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents in the Eastern Mediterranean and includes a direct telephone line between Greece and Turkey using NATO's secure communication systems and available 24/7. Greece and Turkey also cancelled their respective military exercises at the end of October, which helped de-escalate the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. NATO's Secretary General has repeatedly called Greece and Turkey "valuable NATO Allies". According to Mr Stoltenberg, the military deconfliction mechanism helps "to create the space for diplomatic efforts to address the underlying issues" (NATO, 2020).

19. The EU has acknowledged the confidence-building measures taken by Greece and Turkey, notably with vessels being redeployed out of the disputed areas and progress made in programming talks. Nonetheless, in December the EU agreed that additional designations would be acted if Turkish drilling continues. At the same time, European leaders decided to draw up a proposal to revitalise the EU-Turkey programme in areas such as modernising the Customs Union, people-to-people contacts and migration, "provided constructive efforts to stop illegal activities vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus are sustained" (European Council, 2020). Turkish President Recep

Tayyip Erdogan said on 12 January that he was ready to get relations between Turkey and the EU “back on track”. “Dialogue is essential, but we also expect credible gestures on the ground”, insisted the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, after meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mr Çavusoglu, on 21 January.

20. Germany – which held the EU presidency in the second half of 2020 – embarked on a mediation effort to help resume exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey. Sixty cycles of talks between the two countries already took place from 2002 to 2016. They resumed in January 2021 with a high-level meeting in Istanbul, and then again in March. Achieving progress in these talks will require strong political will and flexibility on both sides to accommodate differing views on sensitive issues such as national sovereignty and access to energy resources. A final resolution of the region’s geopolitical dilemmas remains a long-term goal and will require a compromise based on complex legal arrangements in line with international norms. To this end, mitigating hostile rhetoric and resuming dialogue can certainly help to de-escalate the situation and promote a stable *modus vivendi* between two NATO Allies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Holding a special high-level international conference, as suggested by the EU Council President, Charles Michel, could be a useful step towards a new comprehensive and lasting political and security arrangement for the Eastern Mediterranean. NATO and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly have a role to play in restoring trust among Allies. This involves strengthening the channels of military deconfliction, but also encouraging all Allies to prioritise standards of good behaviour and rules of good conduct between Allies within the framework of NATO.

C. THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN: AN EPICENTRE OF IRREGULAR FLOWS AND THREATS

21. The interconnection of the Mediterranean makes it a hub for official but also illicit flows between the various states of the region and beyond. The continuing instability and porous borders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region provide favourable conditions for violent extremist groups, smugglers and traffickers of people, weapons and drugs. Clandestine activities are facilitated by adverse socio-economic conditions in countries experiencing demographic pressures far beyond what their overwhelmed or even failing state authorities can handle (Ruffié, Gros and Tourret, 2018). These activities impact societies and countries of origin, transit and destination.

Movement of people

22. The violence unleashed by terrorists and warlords in the Levant, Libya and the Sahel is one of the main factors that caused unprecedented flows of refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean throughout the 2010s.

23. Since its peak in 2015, when around 1 million people crossed the sea to reach the EU, the influx of refugees and migrants into Europe from the Eastern Mediterranean has dramatically declined following the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016. However, nearly 5 million Syrians have taken refuge in neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, the latter taking in 3.6 million people with financial aid from the EU). Yet these countries are themselves now affected – very severely in certain cases – by an economic crisis. In Syria, six million people are still internally displaced. Exacerbated by COVID-19, the humanitarian situation is deteriorating. More than half of the population is facing food insecurity. The constitutional committee is at an impasse due to regime-imposed blockages. The UN Commission of Inquiry has documented violations and abuses across the country (UN, 2021).

24. Today, the Central Mediterranean has become the main entry point for undocumented migrants arriving in Europe by sea, mainly from Libya (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria have adopted repressive laws which the situation in Libya did not allow for). According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), up to 90% of those crossing the Mediterranean to reach

Europe leave from Libya. In October 2020, the International Organization for Migrants (IOM) identified more than 580,000 migrants in Libya, most of them (65%) from neighbouring countries, particularly Niger, Chad, Egypt and Sudan (EU Council, 2021). According to Amnesty International, tens of thousands of refugees and migrants have found themselves stranded in Libya, exposed to human rights violations and squalid living conditions, and unable to find legal exit routes. Those attempting to reach Europe are regularly intercepted and brought back to Libya (Amnesty, 2020). After the *de facto* failure to introduce an EU-wide refugee/migrant relocation programme, the EU and its member states have essentially tackled this problem by strengthening the capacity of Libya, and notably its coastguards, to control its borders. Through the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the EU has dedicated over EUR 400 million largely to train coastguards and improve border management (European Commission, 2020). The increased interceptions off the Libyan coast alleviate the problem but do not solve it: traffickers and smugglers constantly seek alternate routes. For instance, the EU reported a significant increase in departures from Algeria in 2020 (Council of the EU, 2021).

25. These perilous journeys have resulted in over 20,000 deaths since 2014. In 2019, more than 110,000 people entered Europe by sea, and nearly 1,900 people died during the crossing (Missing Migrants, 2021). The pandemic and lockdowns caused a significant drop in those numbers in 2020. According to Interpol, while travel restrictions may have temporarily blocked migrants, smugglers and traffickers are likely to explore more dangerous routes (and earn higher premiums). The pandemic “has only pushed human trafficking deeper into the dark and its victims further from possible detection and assistance” (Interpol, 2020).

26. NATO’s *Sea Guardian* and the EU’s *Irini* operations (and before that, *Sophia*) are primarily tasked with non-humanitarian missions; but, like all vessels, they have a duty to help when informed of the presence of persons in distress nearby, even if *Irini*’s rescue capabilities are limited by operational changes made in March 2019 (a shift from naval patrols to aerial surveillance). Another NATO operation in the Aegean Sea, led by the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2, has been monitoring irregular crossings in the Aegean since February 2016. It transmits information to the relevant Greek and Turkish coastguards as well as to the EU Frontex agency.

Terrorist groups and foreign fighters

27. Almost two years after the rout of its caliphate, the terrorist group Daesh reorganised in **Syria**, in the Badiya desert, which stretches from the central province of Homs to that of Deir ez-or, on the border with Iraq. It intensified its activities in 2020 and since the start of 2021 in terms of military operations and losses inflicted on opposing forces (Daraj, 2021). Although the group lost its base in Sirte, in **Libya**, in December 2016, it is still present throughout the country, particularly in the desert area of Fezzan to the south. In recent years, Daesh has changed its strategy and appears to be focused on accumulating financial resources, infiltrating smuggling networks and covert recruitment, including among populations in sub-Saharan Africa (Ibraghim, 2020). The **Sahel** is home to several violent extremist groups, in addition to the coalition of jihadist groups known as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), which encompasses Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has been active in western Niger since 2015, while in 2017, several Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups united in Mali to form the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) (Bensimon, 2020). These groups exploit porous borders, often changing their names, structures and alliances. They manage to recruit local populations to their cause by relying both on threats and people’s distrust of security forces, deemed incapable of offering real protection. Thus, the inability of regimes to meet their citizens’ needs is a leading cause of radicalisation (FEPS and IAI, 2019).² The Sahel is likely to

² On this subject see also the 2020 report of the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region by Ahmet Berat Çonkar (Turkey).

remain a source of security challenges for the entire region in the years to come. There are signs that violent extremist groups are seeking to expand their operations to capture new sources of income (The Economist, 2020). A more concerted international effort is needed to stabilise the situation. To date, NATO's involvement in the Sahel has been limited to a small number of partnerships. In February 2021, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani agreed to launch an enhanced dialogue on counter-terrorism. The situation in the Sahel is complex, particularly due to the multitude of implicated actors and ongoing initiatives, which justified setting up a Coalition mechanism to ensure consistency. This complexity makes it difficult to organise a coordinated initiative in the region within a NATO framework. But the Alliance's political framework offers a particularly useful structure for strategic discussions that can increase the information garnered on these issues. The Alliance could thus play a role in mobilising Allies on Sahelian issues and ensuring that NATO resources dedicated to the Sahel match its ambitions.

28. As regional Daesh affiliates take root and gain autonomy and strength, they could offer the group new possibilities and options to conduct external operations. Daesh could regain the capacity to orchestrate attacks in different parts of the world in 2021. Outside of conflict zones, the living conditions linked to the pandemic mean that populations, and especially the youth, are now more likely to be exposed to propaganda and calls from Daesh as they withdraw into the private sphere and cyber space. This could lead to a sudden wave of attacks in certain countries once movement restrictions linked to the pandemic ease. At the same time, the socio-economic toll and political fallout from the pandemic could further exacerbate the long-term threat posed by Daesh and other terrorist groups, including by broadening the base of individuals susceptible to be radicalised and recruited (United Nations Security Council, 2021).

29. North Africa, and particularly Tunisia, has been a major source of foreign fighters swelling militant ranks in Syria and Iraq. In total, some 40,000 foreign fighters joined Daesh since 2014, including nearly 5,000 European citizens (Comolli & Milan, 2020). While many of them were killed in action or are being held in northern Syrian camps, large numbers have also returned home or have moved to other countries in the MENA region, continuing to spread deadly ideologies and combat methods. By late 2020, over 500 Tunisians had returned home from the conflict zone. Yet experts claim that this country lacks a coherent strategy and a deradicalisation programme to deal with returnees (Yerkes, 2020).

Illicit trafficking and clandestine activities

30. North Africa has become a hub for arms and explosives trafficking from Libya. The conflict in this country has led to an unregulated proliferation of various types of weapons throughout the region. Small arms, but also surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank missiles, grenade launchers, anti-personnel mines, grenades and stockpiles of ammunition are now part of the arsenal of groups in Syria, Libya, Egypt (Sinai), Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon and the Sahel region (Ruffié, Gros and Tourret, 2018). NATO has supported projects to secure Mauritania's munition depots and destroy obsolete munitions. Civilian populations face the direct consequence of this situation, as illustrated by the mass shootings of June 2015 near the city of Sousse and the suicide attacks of June 2019 in Tunis, claimed by Daesh. Egypt suffered a series of terrorist attacks in 2016-2017 – including in tourist spots – many of which are linked to Daesh. In this regard, the other area of concern in the Mediterranean region is the Western Balkans. Several threat assessment reports prepared by Europol have confirmed that it remains the main region from which trafficking toward the EU originates (European Commission, 2020).

31. Illicit flows of goods, primarily drug trafficking, are also a major source of concern. Libya, Morocco and Egypt are the main regional platforms, with increasingly sophisticated networks of traffickers who circumvent even the most robust policing efforts. But these networks benefit from

an impoverished civilian population that struggles to integrate reduced labour markets (Ruffié, Gros and Turret, 2018).

32. Following a peak reached in the mid-2010s, the past few years have seen a relative abatement of terrorist, extremist, trafficking and smuggling activities on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. The number of illicit sea crossings has likewise declined. Nonetheless, deep-rooted economic turmoil, ideological and ethnic divisions as well as demographic trends suggest that humanitarian and security challenges in the Southern Mediterranean region will continue to preoccupy Europe in the years to come.

33. However, diverging views among Allies undermine the effectiveness of the response in the Central Mediterranean. In June 2020, these disagreements culminated in a serious incident which opposed the French *Courbet* frigate, then under NATO command, and Turkish vessels protecting the *Çirkin* freighter, suspected of violating the UN-decreed embargo on arms to Libya. The incident was discussed both in NATO and the NATO PA. NATO defence ministers considered the incident at their meeting on 17-18 June. They decided on an action plan to avoid a repeat of such a situation, underscoring the rules of conduct, use of identifiers, and above all reaffirming the cardinal principle of respecting the embargo. The NATO Secretary General also reaffirmed the Alliance's commitment to the UN-led process and the implementation of UN decisions, including arms embargoes. On 8 July, the NATO PA held a special meeting on the situation in Libya and NATO's role in supporting the UN-led process. The meeting was open to all members, since the topic of unity and cohesion within the Alliance concerns them all. NATO Parliamentary Assembly President Attila Mesterhazy recalled that "*Whatever serious differences Allies have had in the past, they have been able to overcome them through dialogue and a common commitment to NATO and the unique bond binding NATO members together. I am confident that today's situation will be no different*". Over the past few weeks, the statements made by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan indicate a desire to ease tensions. This must be welcomed and put into effect in Libya, notably by ousting foreign fighters and recognising the legitimacy of controls carried out by *Operation Irini*. One essential point remains divisive, however: the cooperation between NATO and European operations in this zone (*see below*).

D. THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE REGION

34. The growing involvement of external actors in Mediterranean affairs, particularly Russia, China and the Gulf monarchies, further complicates the political and security landscape in the region.

35. **Russia** has resolutely seized opportunities to fill the void left by Western nations reluctant to play a more active role in regional conflict resolution.³ Unlike its predecessor, the Soviet Union, Russia cannot provide economic assistance or serve as an ideological model for MENA region countries. Moscow is mainly interested in the region as a means to enhance Russia's prestige, both internationally and nationally, while also testing its power projection capabilities. In addition, Russia benefits directly from the exposure of its military equipment in combat situations in terms of arms sales – its second-largest national export sector after hydrocarbons.

36. The illegal annexation and militarisation of Crimea in 2014 provided Russia with deployment support to the south. With the rise of the Black Sea fleet and its "kalibrisation", guaranteeing a powerful "conventional deterrence" in the wider Black Sea region, Crimea has provided a base for Russia to become a key player in southern theatres of operations, particularly in the Middle East (Soller, 2019). The Kremlin's resolute intervention in Syria alongside the Assad regime has

³ The question of Western and in particular US involvement arose twice: in August 2013, when a red line on the use of chemical weapons was breached, and in October 2019, when the green light was given to the launch of the Turkish "Source of Peace" operation.

enabled it to establish a presence in the Syrian port of Tartus. Logistics and military shuttles between the peninsula and the port of Tartus have multiplied in support of the intervention in Syria. This previously modest naval facility is being transformed into a naval base capable of supporting a larger presence of Russian warships and submarines in the Mediterranean (Clarke, Courtney, Martin, & McClintock, 2020). As such, it is becoming Russia's first real foreign naval base (Soller, 2019). In 2020, the Tartus base hosted seven Russian platforms, including a frigate and two attack submarines armed with Kalibr cruise missiles (Berger & Salloum, 2021). The programme of six Bykov-class offshore patrol vessels also illustrates this southern advance: intended for the Black Sea fleet and designed for anti-piracy missions, they could be deployed in the Red Sea, where Moscow is notably building ties with the Sudanese government (Soller, 2019). Since May 2019, the two countries have been linked by a seven-year military cooperation agreement. In late January 2019, in the midst of a political crisis in Sudan, the Kremlin acknowledged that Russian military instructors had been present alongside Sudanese government forces "for some time already" (Le Monde, 2020). In December 2020, it was announced that Russia had reached an agreement with Sudan to establish a naval base on the Red Sea for up to four ships and 300 personnel, which would give Russia an important foothold in this strategic region (MacKinnon, 2020).

37. Russia has also made a concerted effort to assert its influence in Libya. It actively supported Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), largely through the intermediary of Wagner, a private military company with 1,200 personnel, considered to have close ties to Russian military and political structures.⁴ In addition, in May 2020 the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) published images indicating that at least 14 Russian fighter planes had been deployed on the Libyan airbases of Al Jufra and Al Khadim (Bermudez, 2020).

38. Russia also plays an important role as a key arms supplier to the region. Between 2014 and 2018, Algeria received around two-thirds of its weapons from Russia (Ramani, 2019). In recent years, Russia has also significantly strengthened its military cooperation with Egypt, becoming its second-largest arms supplier behind France. It has notably supplied Egypt with war planes, helicopters and missile systems. Moscow's interest in Egypt is explained by the country's geopolitical importance and their shared interest in Libya. Russia's involvement in energy projects in the Mediterranean should also be noted. Its energy giants Gazprom and Transneft are cooperating with the Algerian Sonatrach on pipeline construction programmes (Ramani, 2019). In 2017, Rosneft signed a cooperation agreement with the Libyan National Oil Corporation. That same year, the Russian company Rosatom signed a USD 21 billion deal to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant by 2028 or 2029 (Reuters, 2017).

39. In short, Russia is increasingly seeking opportunities to expand its influence in the MENA region. Although it does not rule out possible agreements with any of the regional stakeholders, Moscow tends to favour preserving the old regimes and has been hostile to the Arab uprisings, in part for fear that they will spread to Russia's own significant Muslim population (Zvyagelskaya, 2014).

40. The involvement of the People's Republic of **China** in the MENA region has been primarily economic rather than military. Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Maghreb Highway, as part of its New Silk Road Initiative (or Belt and Road Initiative, BRI). China has set a target of increasing trade with the MENA region from USD 240 billion in 2013 to USD 600 billion within a decade, although thus far the trade volume growth has been slower than expected (Zoubir, 2020). Egypt's strategic position makes it a key player in the strategy that accompanies the BRI. In late 2014, the two nations converged politically with the signing of a long-term "integral strategic partnership". In addition, Egypt obtained the support of the Asian

⁴ The Wagner group was also used in eastern Ukraine, Syria and several African states, including Sudan, the Central African Republic and Mozambique.

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 (the only African country to achieve this and the second in the Middle East after Oman), was offered the opportunity to latch onto the momentum of BRICS countries and is growing closer to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Algeria is a second focus for China because of its energy resources, with significant investments being made in its infrastructure and mining sector (FMES, 2020).

41. Beijing follows up its development projects with political and security measures. It conducts training programmes for journalists from North Africa and the Middle East and promotes pro-Chinese narratives in the region's media (NDS-S Hub, 2020). In 2015 (with Russia) and 2017 (separately), China conducted naval exercises in the Mediterranean. Since 2017, the naval forces of the Chinese People's Liberation Army have a base in Djibouti, giving it power projection capabilities in the wider region.

42. The **Gulf** monarchies are also becoming important players in the Mediterranean. The most visible manifestation of this is the UAE's engagement in the Libyan conflict alongside Khalifa Haftar. According to the Libyan National Oil Corporation, the Emirati role was crucial in imposing the blockade on Libyan oil exports in July 2020, which prevented the Tripoli-based GNA from receiving revenues (Reuters, 2020). The UAE also appears to be supporting Sudanese militias in Libya (Ardemagni & Fasanotti, 2020). Emirati involvement in the Mediterranean is likely to further intensify following the signing of the normalisation agreement with Israel, notably since reinforced military cooperation with the US was announced at the same time.⁵

43. The Mediterranean operations of the UAE and its main regional ally, Egypt, are to a large extent driven by their regimes' ideological aversion to Muslim Brotherhood-type movements, which Emirati and Egyptian rulers – along with the Saudis – see as a threat. As a result, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Cairo frequently ally themselves with opponents of these movements, including Khalifa Haftar, and maintain difficult, even hostile, relations with supporters of these movements, notably Turkey and Qatar. In Libya, the UAE and Qatar, which both participated in the NATO-led operation in 2011, are now on opposing sides. The UAE also joined the EMGF as an observer. Saudi Arabia has stepped up its cooperation with Greece and expressed its support for Nicosia. Qatar, on the other hand, actively endorsed the Tripoli-based Libyan government, at least until the 2017 blockade crisis (Bianco, 2020).

III. THE ROLE OF NATO ALLIES IN PROMOTING STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

44. During the Cold War, NATO primarily considered the Mediterranean from a military perspective, aiming to integrate the Allies of the so-called southern flank into NATO's larger defence and deterrence systems. Since the early 1990s, NATO has taken a broader approach to security and has developed an impressive network of partnerships with its neighbours. In 1994, in parallel with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) which was focused on Europe, NATO launched the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) with five (and later seven) MENA states.⁶ The Alliance also maintained its military presence in the region and launched several operations, including under a UN mandate in Libya in 2011.

45. The 2010 Strategic Concept specifically refers to the MD in these terms: "We are firmly committed to the development of friendly and cooperative relations with all countries of the

⁵ At the time of writing, the sale of USD 23 billion worth of F-35 jets to the UAE was temporarily suspended to give the new US administration time to review major US defence sales.

⁶ The initial members were Egypt, Israel, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. Jordan joined in 1995 and Algeria in 2000.

Mediterranean, and we intend to further develop the Mediterranean Dialogue in the coming years. [...] We will aim to deepen the cooperation with current members of the Mediterranean Dialogue and be open to the inclusion in the Mediterranean Dialogue of other countries of the region". In the mid-2010s, due to increased instability in its southern periphery, NATO reworked its policies toward the region in line with the notion of projecting stability. This concept was launched at the 2014 Wales Summit and intended to intensify cooperation in defence and security capacity-building with neighbouring NATO partners. At the 2018 Brussels Summit, Allied leaders approved a "Package on the South" reflecting NATO's key role in collective defence, crisis response and cooperative security. This package includes a series of initiatives designed to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence against threats from the South, contribute to international crisis management efforts in the region, and enhance cooperation with regional partners to improve their capacity to tackle security threats. At the Brussels Summit, Allied leaders also declared NATO's Strategic Direction South (the Southern Hub) fully operational. Based at Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) in Naples, the centre has a mandate to monitor regional threats and coordinate NATO partnerships in the region.

46. However, the package is not considered a substitute for a comprehensive NATO strategy for the South: the NATO 2030 Reflection Group called on NATO to "articulate a consistent, clear, and coherent approach to the South" (Reflection Group, 2020). With regard to the South, the Allies have yet to achieve the level of consistency and ambition that they displayed in response to challenges on NATO's eastern flank after 2014.

A. OPERATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND NATO'S MEANS OF DEFENCE AND DETERRENCE

47. In the military sphere, NATO still has overwhelming supremacy in the Mediterranean. In addition to the significant armies and navies of Mediterranean Allies, notably those of France, Italy, Spain and Turkey, two other Allies have a constant military presence in the Mediterranean: the US, whose Naples-based Sixth Fleet has been present since the start of the Cold War, and the UK with its bases in Gibraltar and Cyprus.

48. NATO's assets in the Mediterranean include:

- Two important headquarters: Allied Land Command (LANDCOM) in Izmir, Turkey, and Allied Joint Force Command in Naples. The principal mandate of the latter is to plan and conduct NATO military operations in the Mediterranean and beyond
- Two multinational naval groups – the *Standing NATO Maritime Group 2* (SNMG2) and the *Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2* (SNMCMG2) – in its southern periphery, mainly in the Mediterranean. NATO's two other permanent groups – SNMG1 and SNMCMG1 – also visit the Mediterranean regularly. Each of these groups is made up of several ships deployed on a rotational basis. They are part of the NATO Response Force and report to Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) in the UK
- Important elements of NATO's ballistic missile defence systems in Turkey and Spain
- The aforementioned Southern Hub, a new NATO body that aims to connect NATO Allies and partners with academics, experts and NGOs from Africa and the Middle East, to better understand and identify potential solutions to regional threats
- The AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) surveillance aircraft, which was used to support the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011 and, since 2016, to provide better situational awareness to the US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh. In the Mediterranean, AWACS aircraft use forward operating bases in Greece (Aktion), Italy (Trapani) and Turkey (Konya)
- NATO's unique Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) system, operating from the Sigonella base in Sicily where remotely-piloted RQ-4D aircraft are deployed. In February 2021, the AGS reached its initial operating capability (IOC). The state-of-the-

art AGS system is expected to provide Allies with high-quality intelligence and a complete picture of ground conditions at all times.

49. NATO has carried out several operations in the Mediterranean over the years. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US, NATO launched an Article 5 operation, *Active Endeavour*. To date, it was the only NATO operation based on Article 5, with a mandate to deter, defend, disrupt and protect against terrorist activities. In 2016, following the emergence of new challenges in the region, *Active Endeavour* was replaced by *Sea Guardian*, whose mandate is no longer based on Article 5 and which can tackle a broader range of tasks.⁷ In accordance with the decisions of the North Atlantic Council, this operation is currently deployed in the Mediterranean. It is focused on three of the seven tasks linked to maritime security operations (MSO): in addition to counter-terrorism, it contributes to maritime security capacity-building and supports maritime situational awareness.⁸ *Sea Guardian* has actively cooperated with *Operation Sophia*, led by the EU and other partners in the region, providing them with valuable intelligence.

50. *Operation Sophia* was suspended as of March 2020. The EU's new naval operation, *Irini*, is tasked with enforcing the UN arms embargo on Libya. NATO and the EU were unable to reach a cooperation agreement similar to that which existed between the *Sea Guardian* and *Sophia* operations. While the EU would appreciate the continued support of NATO's unique resources in the Mediterranean, Allies were unable to agree on the benefits of *Operation Irini*, reflecting their divergent approaches to the conflict in Libya. All Allies strongly support the UN-led efforts in Libya, but Turkey specifically argues that, in practice, *Operation Irini* penalises the Libyan Government of National Accord, thus benefiting the forces of Khalifa Haftar, which, according to Turkey, receive most of their weapons by land and air. These conflicting opinions culminated in the above-mentioned incident involving the French frigate *Courbet* and Turkish Navy ships in June 2020, which prompted Paris to temporarily suspend its participation in *Operation Sea Guardian*.

51. This preliminary draft report has also mentioned SNMG2's contribution to improving situational awareness in the Aegean Sea, where NATO ships have provided intelligence to Greek and Turkish coastguards as well as Frontex since 2016. Turkey's position is that the usefulness of these NATO patrols has come to an end, while Greece supports continued NATO engagement in the Aegean.

52. Having said this, it is important to stress that in most cases Allies have displayed mutual solidarity and support in the Mediterranean. The Greek and Turkish navies continue to collaborate and participate in joint naval exercises, the most recent being the anti-submarine warfare exercise, *Dynamic Manta*. According to MARCOM, it mobilised submarines from the Greek, Italian, Turkish and American naval forces, as well as French, Greek, Italian, German and American surface ships and maritime patrol planes. The surface ships involved include some from SNMG2: the frigates

⁷ Wherever the North Atlantic Council decides to deploy it, *Operation Sea Guardian* can cover all of the seven approved maritime security operation tasks: maritime situational awareness; upholding freedom of navigation; maritime interdiction; fighting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; protecting critical infrastructure; maritime counter-terrorism; and contributing to maritime security capacity-building. (Source : https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_136233.htm)

⁸ Supporting maritime situational awareness: the focus is on information-sharing between Allies and with civilian agencies to enhance the NATO Recognised Maritime Picture (RMP). Supporting maritime counter-terrorism: this involves the planning and conduct of a range of operations to deter, disrupt, defend and protect against maritime-based terrorist activities. Essentially, these actions aim to deny terrorists access to designated areas and contain threats through the use of force. Contributing to maritime security capacity-building: NATO aims to contribute to the international community's efforts in developing maritime security with both military and non-military authorities. (Source : https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_136233.htm)

ESPS Cristóbal Colón (Spain), *ITS Virginio Fasan* (Italy) and *TCG Kemal Reis* (Turkey), as well as the French *Charles de Gaulle* Carrier Strike Group (Lagneau, 2021). A further example of solidarity was the decision made by Germany and the Netherlands, following consultations under Article 4, to send Patriot air defence systems to Turkey in 2013 to help protect the border zone with Syria (Stoicescu, 2021). These deployments have since been continuously maintained thanks to contributions from other Allies.

53. Nonetheless, the Alliance's collective defence and crisis management capabilities can and must become more robust. NATO needs to gain the capacity to act quickly and effectively. The primary objective is to guarantee NATO full and unhindered access to lines of communication across the Mediterranean. Allies must actively participate in regional exercises and continue to dedicate forces to standing maritime groups and other NATO assets in the region. More frequent naval exercises in the Mediterranean would not only improve the interoperability of NATO forces, but would also help develop the capabilities of the national units participating in these exercises. A more active participation of North and Central European Allies in NATO's Mediterranean missions would send a very positive signal of solidarity to southern Allies. Likewise, the engagement of South European Allies on the eastern and northern flanks sends a firm signal that the Alliance is determined to protect itself against threats from all sides. Former NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow and Lauren Speranza of the Atlantic Council are calling for an "enhanced Southern Presence" (eSP) from NATO, similar to the Forward Presences in the east and southeast (Vershbow & Speranza, 2019). The Southern Hub's unique approach, which involves engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including academia and civil society, offers NATO a singular opportunity to better understand the region and thus create optimal policy responses. While taking these observations into account, it is worth bearing in mind that NATO must be an agile and efficient organisation, as was concluded at the Lisbon Summit and reiterated since. In this regard, two relevant avenues are the building of partnerships and cooperation to ensure that prime consideration is given to the added value of NATO's potential new tasks. The Mediterranean area abounds with possibilities.

B. THE MEDITERRANEAN DIALOGUE AND OTHER COOPERATION MECHANISMS

54. Since its launch in 1994, the MD has evolved and expanded considerably. Close collaboration with Southern Mediterranean partners has helped NATO project a degree of stability and security in the region. At the Riga Summit in October 2006, the set objectives centred around increasing civilian and military training as well as building trust to enhance the interoperability of military capabilities (Bouhou, 2008). Mutual understanding has significantly improved thanks to this practical cooperation. As in other NATO partnership initiatives, the MD covers political and practical aspects. On a political level, NATO officials dialogue regularly and at different levels with representatives of MD countries. Due to the regional diversity, these meetings usually take place in a "NATO+1" or "30+1" format rather than a "NATO+7" or "30+7" format. The meetings focus on counter-terrorism and other security issues of mutual interest. Experts note that political collaboration has intensified since the mid-2010s, but this dimension remains underdeveloped compared to that of practical cooperation (Lesser, Brandsma, Basagni, & Lété, 2018).

55. As far as practical cooperation is concerned, NATO offers initiatives in a wide range of potential areas. Each year, it develops a programme of concrete actions with individual MD countries. This programme includes seminars, workshops and other practical activities in areas such as the modernisation of armed forces, civil emergency planning, border security, public diplomacy and scientific and environmental cooperation. NATO also invites MD partners to observe – and in some cases partake in – NATO/PfP military exercises. Their representatives attend courses at NATO academic institutions. In addition, NATO regularly sends its mobile education teams to the region to organise training-of-trainers sessions on various security issues.

56. Two MD partners – Jordan and Tunisia – stand out in their relationship with NATO due to their participation in the Alliance’s Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) initiative, designed to promote intense and targeted defence and security cooperation between NATO Allies and potentially vulnerable strategic partners. Introduced in 2014, the DCB package for Jordan focuses on the capacity of its security forces in areas including crisis management, border security, terrorism, logistics, cyberdefence and countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In 2017, Jordan hosted NATO’s first Regional Exercise (REGEX) in an MD country. In 2018, NATO accepted Tunisia’s request for a DCB package. NATO’s DCB initiatives in Tunisia focus on education and training for the country’s armed forces. The Alliance’s support for Jordan and Tunisia is especially important given the fragile stability of these countries in troubled regions.⁹

57. Tunisia is also identified by the EU and NATO as one of their assistance programme “pilot countries”. Following the 2016 Joint Declaration, the two organisations aim to coordinate their assistance programmes in Tunisia, including through NATO’s DCB initiatives and EU capacity-building for security and development. NATO and the EU have made significant efforts to identify potential areas of shared interest, enhance information exchange, and coordinate their strategic communication in a wide range of areas including civil protection, cyber security and the protection of arms and ammunition stockpiles. However, there is scope to improve coordination between the two organisations across the region.¹⁰ A first vector could be that of maritime security and surveillance, an area in which the EU has become a leading and long-term player, combining naval, air and also satellite resources from SatCen (European Union Satellite Centre) in Torrejon, Spain. Given the potential complementarity between NATO’s defence and security expertise and EU assistance for development and the rule of law, these organisations’ cooperation projects could also serve to promote the empowerment of women in their southern neighbourhood, notably by helping to implement the “Women, Peace and Security” programme. Finally, the fight against disinformation is another potential field of cooperation, underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic. Disinformation and false information campaigns have been launched by state and non-state actors and published on social media in both Allied and partner countries.

58. Overall, the MD has withstood the test of time and has increasingly contributed to the region’s stability. However, experts also note that the MD continues to suffer from a “lack of resources and focus” (Brandsma, 2019). Most partnership projects are funded and staffed by national contributions which are often inconsistent or inadequate. As a result, the scale and impact of many MD projects are modest. It is therefore important to ensure a better exchange of information between Allies regarding their bilateral cooperation in the region to avoid redundancy with NATO-led projects. Such information exchange could also help to better coordinate the Allies’ existing funds and thus contribute to the above-mentioned revitalisation of programmes. Allies should also encourage dialogue within the “30+7” framework and promote horizontal projects between MD partners, potentially involving partners from the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), the G5 Sahel and other members of the African Union (Berger, 2020; Lesser, Brandsma, Basagni, & Lété, 2018).

59. Concerning the content of MD projects and other partnerships, an increased emphasis on counter-terrorism should be welcomed. This is in line with the Reflection Group’s recommendation that “NATO should more explicitly integrate the fight against terrorism into its core tasks”, in close collaboration with civil society and by giving appropriate consideration to NATO’s core values.

⁹ For more details on the NATO DCB initiative, see the 2020 report by Lara Martinho (Portugal) for the NATO-PA DSC Committee.

¹⁰ Europe is developing a comprehensive approach to the region comprising: 1) significant aid for the security and development of southern Mediterranean countries; 2) strong maritime border control and law enforcement capabilities; and 3) a coherent migration and asylum strategy. Portugal’s current six-month presidency is notably working hard to achieve the third point (Euractiv 2021).

In this regard, collaborating with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its various organs could be particularly relevant.

IV. FINAL REMARKS

60. Developing a clear and coherent Euro-Atlantic strategy for the South will undoubtedly be one of the key themes of NATO's next Strategic Concept. The challenges emanating from the South are just as formidable as those from the East, yet the Allies have yet to demonstrate the same level of strategic focus on their southern periphery. In addition, the South continues to be an area of discord and even tension between Allies. While Central and Eastern European Allies are united in their assessment of the Russian threat and their demand for "more NATO" on the eastern flank, Mediterranean Allies disagree on the extent of NATO's involvement in Mediterranean affairs. Some strongly favour a bilateral approach in their relations with other regional actors. NATO officials have indeed made laudable efforts to engage constructively with their partners in the MENA region. Yet this engagement has produced modest results due to the lack of a coordinated approach among Allies, which also hampers collaboration with important players such as the EU. Furthermore, the absence of a clearly articulated policy for the South on the part of NATO is not conducive to building trust between the Alliance and its partners in the MENA region. The latter remain uncertain of NATO's real objectives in the region and suspect that it may have a "hidden agenda" (Berger, 2020).

61. This draft report has identified several elements that could potentially be reflected in NATO's strategy for the South and help stabilise the security situation in this region. However, before a coherent strategy such as this can emerge, the foremost prerequisite is intensified political consultations among Allied states to define and frame the Alliance's role in the South. At this stage, resolving the underlying thorny disputes involving NATO Allies in the Mediterranean remains a long-term goal, but Allies are certainly capable of finding an acceptable *modus vivendi* and preventing escalation through dialogue. NATO and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly provide a particularly useful framework for such dialogue and consultations. Allies should also improve information exchange and increase contacts with academia and civil society in the MENA region to enhance their understanding of this region and dispel myths.

62. Finally, we must not forget that while the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean are intrinsically linked by their geography, they are also very different in terms of their economic, political and demographic structures. After decades of stagnation, the MENA region is undergoing a fundamental transformation and overhaul of the social contract between its populations and state regimes. This process presents both opportunities and challenges that will inevitably impact the northern shores of the Mediterranean.¹¹ While NATO has neither the mandate nor the capacity to play an important role in supporting this transformation, it can and should bring added value in its areas of expertise, helping to create a secure environment for this transition.

¹¹ For more information on the MENA region's political and social dynamics, see the NATO PA Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security (CDS) 2021 draft report, dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Arab uprisings.

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