



The Atlantic Alliance, NATO, and the Post-Arab Springs Mediterranean. The Quest for a New Strategic Relevance

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Introduction

In the wake of the Arab Springs, the changing Mediterranean security landscape posed to the Atlantic Alliance challenges that – on the backdrop of the transformation it was living – highlighted several problematic aspects. In the Cold War years, as guarantor of the Western security against the Soviet threat, the Alliance focused its attention mainly on the European “central theatre”. Since the 1960s, it meant defending the North German Plain and the Fulda Gap. The Mediterranean dimension – albeit present – played a marginal and subordinated role. The events following 1989 only partially affected this state of things. If in the mid-1990s, in the light of the evolving strategic context, NATO tried to start forms of dialogue and collaboration with some countries of the “southern shore”, the efforts that it made soon clashed with several difficulties. The enlargement toward the former Warsaw Pact members left Europe the main point of reference. The 9/11 events and the beginning of the involvement in Afghanistan (2003) led to the revision of the Alliance priorities and the re-orientation of its geographic sphere of action, gaining a new and sometimes troublesome centrality. Finally, the Ukraine crisis (2014) fuelled a rediscovery of NATO’s “old” continental dimension and a revival of the “deterrence and defence” approach that, in the immediate post-Cold War period, had been mostly abandoned.

The adaptation process that these events triggered reverberated in the domestic realm. Following the gradual US disengagement (started in the early 2000s, with George W. Bush’s outspoken unilateralism and culminated in the Trump administration’s attacks and criticisms), the tensions among the European allies soured. Simultaneously, the Central and Eastern European countries’ political and military relevance grew together with their defence budgets. As a consequence, NATO started facing new difficulties in dealing with Mediterranean security. The proliferation of regional problems and their increasingly non-military nature emphasised these difficulties. At the same time, they highlighted the contradictions of a structure searching for the antidote to its current problems in its military dimension’s relaunch. In the background, there was a debate about the usefulness of NATO in the new international system and the possibility to replace it with “something different”, maybe developing a more effective European security and defence identity. Unsurprisingly, the debate assumed its most heated tones on the European side. French President Emmanuel Macron’s critical remarks about NATO “brain death” are

just the most striking example. Another example is Macron's previous remarks about the need to start thinking about a "real European army" ("*une vraie armée européenne*") to provide the continent with a practical strategic autonomy from the United States.

1. NATO and the Mediterranean: a relationship with ups and downs

The geographical dimension is a pivotal element of the Atlantic Alliance. Since its establishing, it is supposed to set the limits of both its membership and its members' commitment. In other words, it defines the spatial coordinates in which apply the collective security guarantee enshrined in article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (Washington, April 4, 1949). In this perspective, the role of the Middle East and North Africa has often been troublesome. The inclusion of the "southern front" in the 1949 Treaty followed long and tiresome negotiations. On the one hand, it offered Italy the Western anchorage that several political forces were (ambiguously) looking. On the other, it did not dent the Anglo-Saxon nature of an alliance that – despite Canada's fundamental role – rested on the converge on the US and British interests. In the early 1950s, the admission of Turkey and Greece led to a partial rebalancing. In the following decade, the Harmel Report (*Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance*, 1967) identified the Mediterranean as one of NATO's "exposed areas". However, the region remained the Alliance's "soft underbelly" at least until the end of the 1970s/early 1980s. In this period, the adoption of the so-called "Carter doctrine" contributed to enhancing its importance for the Western security, establishing a structural link with the Gulf region and somehow anticipating the future debate on the "out of area" issue (Kaplan, Clawson, Luraghi 1985; Stuart, Tow 1990)¹.

It was a relatively short-lived parenthesis, spanning over the first Reagan administration (1981-86) and the "second Cold War" period (Miles 2020). The enhancing of the US military role in the Gulf after 1979 marked the beginning of this process, which consolidated in the following years, among others, with the deployment of a new generation of intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs): the so-called "Euromissiles". The entry of the post-Franco Spain into the Alliance (1982) and the riparian countries' increased activism fuelled this new attention. In 1985, the adoption of the Italian new *Libro Bianco della Difesa* relaunched Rome's Mediterranean ambitions. In the same period, the tensions between the United States and Libya emphasised the region's role within the Western security system. However, in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev's election as Secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union shifted the international attention on the Euro-Atlantic theatre again, opening the "summit season" of 1985-91. On the backdrop of the Euro-Atlantic détente, the previous years' tensions declined in the Mediterranean too. The process culminated in 1989-91. The "reform season" in the Middle East and North Africa – due

¹ In this sense, the geopolitical realignment that, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, redefined the role of the Mediterranean in the framework of the Western security strategy revolved around the question of whether a "Mediterranean flank" of NATO existed as opposed to the southern one; in other words, whether the Mediterranean area was coherent enough to justify the elaboration of a common strategy in its regards (Kaplan, Clawson, Luraghi 1985: ix).

partly to the impact of the Cold War's end, partly to the physical and political decline of the first generation of national leaders (Sikal, Schnabel 2003; more critical remarks on this process are in Ehteshami 1999) – contributed to strengthening the trend.

The transformation of the Mediterranean scenario took NATO largely unprepared. With the improvement of the dialogue with Moscow, the dissolution of the Soviet Union (December 26, 1991), and the growth of the instability along the Alliance's borders (the background of the Strategic Concept that NATO adopted during the Rome Summit, on November 7-9, 1991), the reaction was projecting on the theatre the "antagonistic" model that previously shaped the East-West relations. The old cleavage was re-oriented on a North-South axis, and the "red peril" was reframed in a "green" one (Hadar 1993), although its tracts remained largely undefined. The instability in countries like Egypt and Algeria and the outbreak of the Yugoslav civil war supported this securitarian vision of the regional environment, mirrored in NATO's decision to develop a standing naval presence in the Mediterranean in 1992 (STANAVFORMED - *Standing Naval Force Mediterranean*, currently *Standing NATO Maritime Group 2* - SNMG2), instead of the existing 'on-call force (NAVOCFORMED - *NATO Naval On-Call Force Mediterranean*). Worth noting, between 1995 and 1996, also France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain developed their joint and combined military component, both land (EUROFOR - *European Rapid Operational Force*) and sea-air (EUROMARFOR - *European Maritime Force*), although on a not standing basis and limited to the discharge of the so-called 'Petersberg missions'² upon request of the European Union (EU), NATO, and the other international organisations.

It took until mid-decade for a new approach to emerge, with greater attention placed on NATO's role as an agent of international socialisation (Gheciu 2005). Announced in December 1994, the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue started in February 1995 with the invitations sent to Egypt, Israel, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. The following years, it was extended to Jordan (November 1995) and Algeria (February 2000), rising to seven the partners involved. The Dialogue was part of NATO's "participatory strategy" that supported several other initiatives in the same period. Among others, one can mention the Partnership for Peace program (PfP) in favour of the Central and Eastern European countries and the former Soviet republics, the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the following establishment of the Permanent Joint Council (PJC, 1997)³ and the signing of the Charter on a Distinctive

² Agreed in 1992 within the framework of the Western European Union (WEU) to strengthen the organisation's role as the EU defence component and the European pillar of NATO, the "Petersberg missions" include a broad set of military activities, such as (but not formally limited to) humanitarian or evacuation missions, conflict prevention and peacekeeping missions, and crisis management, including peace-making operations. Subsequently framed within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), their scope gradually extended to include joint disarmament activities, military advice and assistance missions, and post-conflict stabilisation operations.

³ After the crisis in NATO-Russia relations triggered by the allied intervention in Kosovo (1999), the adoption of the Rome Declaration (NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality) on May 28, 2002, replaced the PJC with the current NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Maintaining the objectives and principles of the 1997 Founding Act, the NRC was intended as a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, decision-making and joint action, inter alia by replacing the previous bilateral "NATO+1" format with a new multilateral structure in which Russia and the individual allies could relate on an equal footing.

Partnership with Ukraine (1997). In this framework, the Mediterranean Dialogue aimed to promote confidence-building in a moment when mistrust was still high between NATO and the countries of the “southern shore”; moreover, it aimed to act as a platform for technical cooperation, delivering *ad hoc* assistance programs tailored to the needs of the different partners. The underlying assumption was the interdependence of European and Mediterranean security in a world of increasingly multi-dimensional and multi-vectorial risks and threats; the background was the post-Cold War transformation of NATO from a “simple” political and military alliance into a more ambitious security organisation with a potentially global vocation.

Despite its ambitions, the program had problems from the very beginning: among others: the emergence of more stringent priorities, the mistrust existing among the partner countries, and their intricate relations with the Atlantic Alliance. The beginning of NATO’s involvement in the former Yugoslavia with Operation Deliberate Force in August 1995 and IFOR’s deployment the following December are parts of the problem. Another part was the contemporary presence of other regional or sub-regional initiatives, such as the OSCE’s Mediterranean Initiative, EU’s Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the so-called “Barcelona Process”), the “5+5” initiative, or the project for an Arab Maghreb Union. Although conceived in terms of mutual reinforcement, these initiatives’ proliferation eroded their effectiveness, especially in the most sensitive areas like crisis management. Twenty-five years after the beginning of the Dialogue, this is the field where the progress has been minor. For a long time, the persistence of NATO’s image as a purely military alliance was a hamper. Another hamper was its perceived European and Western nature. The relevance that the Alliance devoted to the integration of the former Warsaw Pact counties supported this perception. In 1999, when Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became full-fledged NATO members, it was in Europe that the “friendly hand policy” envisaged in the London Declaration (1990) and embodied in the PfP program attained its first results.

Against this backdrop, the 9/11 attacks and the emergence of the “projected” NATO of the 2000s led to another revision of the Alliance’s Mediterranean posture, but they did not end the previous decade’s openings. The Balkan engagement continued with the KFOR mission in Kosovo; in the meantime, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Bosnia Herzegovina, the EU replaced the Alliance, starting *Concordia* and *Althea* missions in 2003 and 2004, respectively. However, the visibility that Afghanistan assumed with the beginning of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force, 2001-14) made it the real testbed for the Alliance in both operational and organisational terms. In this perspective, ISAF played a pivotal role in shape NATO’s evolution and highlight NATO’s limits (Hanagan 2019). The emergence of the “global NATO” also contributed to shifting the Alliance’s attention away from its neighbourhood (Edström, Matlary, Petersson 2011)⁴. In June

⁴ NATO’s “global partnerships” are aimed at all countries that are not already part of a regional cooperation programme (Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council/Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative). The list of NATO’s “global partners” (sometimes called “partners across the globe”) currently includes Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Pakistan.

2004, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) tried to engage the six Gulf monarchies within the than-preeminent attention to the Middle Eastern theatre⁵. On the same occasion, the admission of seven new members to the Alliance (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the three former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) reaffirmed the centrality of Eastern Europe for its future development and laid the foundations of the coming gradual worsening of the relations with Russia.

2. From 9/11 to the Arab Springs

It was a NATO looking beyond the Mediterranean borders that – between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 – faced the outbreak of the Arab Springs. Following the prevailing rhetoric, in its leaders' declarations, the Alliance looked favourably at a process somehow reminiscent of the Berlin Wall's fall. On this backdrop, even the intervention in Libya became the product of "a strong mandate from the Security Council and solid support from countries in the region [...] a unique combination which we have not seen elsewhere" (Rasmussen 2011). In the internal realm, the intervention reframed in a multilateral context the initiative that the United States, the United Kingdom, and France had taken based on UN Security Council Resolution 1973. At the same time, while probably not fully wanted, it allowed NATO to exploit the relational network built in the framework of both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the ICI, and its experience in leading "variable geometry" coalitions of members, partners, and third countries (the "NATO+" format). However, the impression remained of "a half-hearted air campaign that lasted for months with little change to the stalemate on the ground and with increasing political frustration at the lack of progress" (Michaels 2014). In this sense, Operation Unified Protector's troubled experience highlighted the ambiguity of the Atlantic Alliance and its members when confronted with the problems of the Arab Springs. On the one hand, this ambiguity stem from the different visions of members' regional interests; on the other, it reflected the permanent subordination of the Mediterranean to other theatres.

The declining role of the United States in Europe partly explains this phenomenon. This decline has different reasons. During the first Obama mandate (2009-13), Afghanistan's weight in the Alliance's future increased as a product of the disengagement from Iraq, which, since 2003, had been the symbol of Washington's commitment in the Middle East. For the new Democratic administration, stabilise the Afghan political situation became the main aim in this theatre (Fitzgerald, Ryan 2014). On the Euro-Atlantic front, the weakening of the control that the United States exerted on NATO's dynamics, on the one hand, emphasised the already existing centrifugal tensions, on the other strengthened the trend toward a re-

⁵ At present, only Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have joined the ICI. Saudi Arabia and Oman – although they have repeatedly expressed their interest in the initiative – have preferred to maintain a more aloof position. Probably, their choice will not change despite the Atlantic Alliance's announced desire to provide further dynamism to the program, which has reached the fifteen-year mark.

nationalisation of European foreign policies that had started during the 1990s. In this context, the logic of the “leading from behind”, although allowing the US to reduce its international commitment, contributed to denting its overall credibility, with foreseeable impacts on the Atlantic Alliance (Cohen, Scheinmann 2014). The Obama administration’s following decisions regarding the escalation of the Syrian crisis and the emergence and consolidation of the so-called “Islamic State” confirmed this inherent weakness. Regarding the so-called “Islamic State”, the same language that the US administration used has been seen as proof of its willingness to “[distance] itself from the imperative of a coherent response to the group in its local setting” (Siniver, Lucas 2016).

The conceptual elaboration of the Atlantic Alliance partly reflected these evolutions. The current Strategic Concept (adopted in Lisbon in 2010) predates the events. However, the praxis significantly evolved, especially after the Ukraine crisis and linking to its territorial implications, which favoured NATO’s return to its European “core business” and relaunched the US role, although in somehow different forms. The crisis of NATO-Russia relations led, among others, to freeze the existing cooperation programs and the NATO-Russia Council’s activity. This crisis gave new centrality to the East European theatre and the idea of a NATO “vigilant and prepared” somehow similar to the Cold War alliance. In its turn, this transformation of NATO’s role led to a redeployment of its forces and the valorisation of the US military presence in Germany and Central and Eastern Europe. Worth noting, since 2016, this presence has markedly expanded, with a new emphasis on operational readiness, new commands, new rotational assets deployed in Poland, and new Army Prepositioned Stocks (APS) stockpiled in several countries to support the quick expansion of the forces needed to contain a new possible Russian thrust. The decision to create the so-called “Spearhead Force” (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force - VJTF) within the framework of the Readiness Action Plan was probably one of the most relevant aspects of NATO’s new “eastward looking” posture emerging after the events of 2014.

At the political level, the perceived Russian threat’s re-emergence contributed to increasing the Central and Eastern European allies’ weight and reducing the Southern members’ one. This trend was already evident in the second half of the 2000s and gave it more significant momentum. It rooted in the tensions that marred the relation between Washington of the allies of the “Old Europe” in the months immediately preceding the US military intervention in Iraq (March 20, 2003). Those tensions pushed the United States to look for a privileged – and mutually beneficial – relation with NATO’s new member countries. Linking with the economic difficulties that several members lived in the first part of the decade, this led, among others, to a reduction of the Alliance’s “long-arm” activities and to a new emphasis placed on the “deterrence and defence” approach that had shaped NATO’s activity until the early 1990s. The adoption of such a posture ended the period of the “great missions”. On December 31, 2014, ISAF officially ended. Although NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan continued based on the enduring partnership agreement signed in

2010, the strength and ambitions of Operation Resolute Support were decidedly lower (11,000 men at the end of 2020 vs 130,000 men of ISAF at its maximum strength⁶). The same applies to NATO's other global engagements, which – in early October 2020 – absorbed some 20,000 people, including the force involved in the air policing activity along the Alliance's eastern and north-eastern borders.

Observers soon pointed out how marginal the Mediterranean was in this context, comparing to the other operational theatres. Due to these criticisms, in 2016, the Heads of State and Government's summit held in Warsaw approved a package of measures to rebalance NATO's asset and attention on the southern front. However, Warsaw's decisions were more the beginning of the process than its end (Lesser 2016; on the decisions taken in Warsaw see *Warsaw Summit Communiqué* 2016). Not even the beginning of Operation Sea Guardian (OSG, November 2016) fully solved the tensions. OSG had a more comprehensive mandate and paid greater attention to the Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA) aspects, but, for other aspects, it was the continuation of Operation Active Endeavour, active from 2001 to 2016 as an anti-terrorism mission. Moreover, in operational terms, it was little more than the rationalisation and expansion of the activity that SNMG2 had already started in February in the Eastern Mediterranean basin to contrast illegal immigration. In a landscape of rising tensions at the regional level and within NATO, OSG became the catalyst of the allies' problems. The French decision to withdraw its units due to the rifts with Turkey on the *Courbet* affair (July 1, 2020) was one sign in this direction⁷.

In this perspective, if the Warsaw summit aimed to develop a set of instruments to recompose the cleavage among the different NATO's souls and manage more effectively the challenge of their integration, it was only partially successful. The adoption of the proposed measures was – above all – a way to defuse the tensions that emerged within the Alliance with the end of ISAF (December 31, 2014) and the decline of the out-of-area commitment, when NATO assumed a posture that some members considered too less "projected". Despite the favourable reception given to Warsaw decisions, these dynamics explain why a strategy capable of coherently composing different and – in some respects – opposing visions of security did not really emerge. The 2016 US presidential elections' result, the inauguration of the Trump administration (January 20, 2017), and the consequent weakening of the traditional US leading role strengthened the difficulties that stem from this state of things. Not even the effort to revive the so-called "360-degree approach" in the London summit of December 3-4, 2019 (*London Declaration* 2019: (4)) seems to have succeeded in providing a credible way out. Instead, the tensions that preceded the summit (and that – once again – had Turkey as a protagonist) highlighted how the Mediterranean balance remains a sensitive and contentious issue for NATO.

⁶ The US presence underwent similar downsizing. In 2020 only, their numbers fell from 13,000 at the end of February to 4,000 at the end of December, with the aim of reaching 2,500 with the completion of the redeployment phase, in late January 2021. In May 2011, when the US commitment in Afghanistan reached its peak after Barack Obama's "surge", ISAF's strength was about 132,400 troops, of which about 90,000 US.

⁷ According to the French authorities, on June 10, 2020, while inspecting the freighter *Cirkin* off the coast of Libya, the frigate *Courbet* was aggressively confronted by the Turkish units escorting the freighter and repeatedly targeted with the on-board weapon systems. The Turkish government denied the charge, while Paris asked NATO to investigate the incident.

3. An increasingly complex Mediterranean environment

The deterioration of the inter-allied relations was another element that affected NATO's role in the Mediterranean. On the one hand, the region seemed to attract less and less attention; on the other, tensions among the Alliance's members increased in scope and magnitude. Turkey's increasingly independent role was one of the catalysts for these tensions. With its sizeable military establishment, the country was, traditionally, one of NATO's pillars. However, since the Syrian crisis' outbreak, the distance between Ankara and the other allies became more evident, touching its climax in October 2019, when Ankara launched Operation Peace Spring (OPS) in Northern Syria against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Several NATO members heavily criticised OPS, which followed the withdrawal of the US forces deployed in the region. Criticisms also involved the position of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, blamed for being "too soft" on Ankara. Canada and several European countries imposed an arms embargo on Turkey, while the United States imposed sanctions on Turkish ministries and senior government officials in response to the offensive in Syria. However, the crisis following OPS was just one of the many affecting Turkey-NATO relations in the last decade. In 2020, a new burst of the Greek-Turkish tensions over Cyprus led the countries on the verge of the military confrontation, while the exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean oil and gas resources fed the rivalries among the riparian countries.

In recent years, a growing number of states and private subjects have expressed their interest in exploiting the Eastern Mediterranean's energy resources. The European Union and its member states look carefully at these developments to differentiate their supply lines and bypass their traditional supply problems. The United States, China, and Russia are equally interested in the issue. The entry of the Eastern Mediterranean energy resources into the service can affect the global market unexpectedly and significantly change the regional political and economic balance. The troubles that the US unconventional sector is living are another element that enhances the Eastern Mediterranean's possible role and explains the growing attention that the infrastructural projects connecting the region with the Southern European markets and some North African countries attract. From a European perspective, the Levantine basins' development could weaken the Russian-Norwegian duopoly from which – currently – most of the EU countries depend for their consumption. However, this is not a win/win scenario. On the one hand, the Eastern Mediterranean energy resources' exploitation can promote greater regional cooperation, especially among the countries more directly affected by the projects. However, on the other, the diversion of the existing flows and the emergence of new players can impact several countries and jeopardise the "geopolitical rent" they traditionally enjoyed.

One of these "victims" could be Turkey. Ankara has long understood the Eastern Mediterranean's importance for its energy ambitions and the potentially negative impact that its development could have. This state of things helps to explain the recent return of tension with Greece and Cyprus, which are actively engaged in the

EastMed project, the pipeline system linking the regional basins to their potential markets⁸. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey has repeatedly tried to emerge as a possible Mediterranean energy hub and a privileged supply channel for Southern and South-Eastern Europe, exploiting its geographical location and its barycentric position vis à vis the routes coming from the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the former Soviet Central Asia. However, these ambitions only partly materialised. On the supply side, several projects failed to materialise (Schröder, Bettzüge, and Wessels, 2017); on the demand side, despite the efforts made to change this state of things, Russia remained the leading EU energy partner. The long-term deterioration of Turkey-Europe relations also adversely affected Ankara's aspirations, which now seem to turn East and South. The emerging proximity between Greece, Cyprus and Israel (who already signed several agreements to enhance their technical and economic cooperation) risks being a further limiting factor. Coupled with the increasingly ambiguous position that Russia is assuming in its dealings with Turkey, these elements could mark the end of Ankara's aspirations and limit its regional role.

In the background, there is Russia's and China's growing role in the Mediterranean basin. Since the mid-2010s, Beijing and Moscow are increasingly present in the region's political, economic and military dynamics. When presenting the #NATO2030 initiative, NATO's Secretary-General Stoltenberg explicitly mentioned China's weight in the international arena as a potentially troublesome element. In Stoltenberg's words, China's rise on the international scene "is fundamentally shifting the global balance of power, heating up the race for economic and technological supremacy, multiplying the threats to open societies and individual freedoms, and increasing the competition over our values and our way of life" (Stoltenberg 2020). For NATO's authorities, Beijing's investments in the Mediterranean are a growing source of concern⁹. The US Department of Defense already pointed out this aspect. According to a 2019 Report to Congress, "[s]ome OBOR [One Belt One Road] investments could create potential military advantages for China, should China require access to selected foreign ports to pre-

⁸ The EastMed gas pipeline should connect the Levantine basin's gas fields to Europe via Cyprus, Crete, and mainland Greece. Part of a network including the *Poseidon* pipeline between Greece and Italy and the Greece-Bulgaria Interconnector (IGB), it should initially transport ten billion cubic metres per year (bcm/y) of natural gas from the offshore reserves of the Levant to Greece and from there – via *Poseidon* and IGB – to Italy and other South-Eastern European countries. In the beginning, political support for this articulated infrastructure programme was intense, especially at the EU level. In 2015, EastMed became one of EU's Project of Common Interest (PCI), benefiting from grants of about two million euros through the Connecting Europe Facility programme. The project also entered the Ten-Year Development Plan of the European Network Transportation System Operators of Gas. However, these institutional supports seem to have declined, partly due to the current European Commission's decision to invest its credibility in the European Green Deal and the ambitious goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2025.

⁹ Among others, the state-owned COSCO Shipping Port has minority stakes in the ports of Bilbao, Genoa, Istanbul, and Valencia, while China Merchant Ports has similar stakes in Istanbul, Marseille, and Marsaxlokk (Malta). Moreover, COSCO is present in Port Said, at the northern tip of the Suez Canal, and China Merchant Group (through Terminal Link) in Tangier-Med, at the tip of the Strait of Gibraltar. Chinese companies have also expressed their interest in the ports of Bizerte, Ploče, Taranto, and Trieste. As far as the infrastructures are concerned, Shanghai International Port Group signed an agreement with Israel to develop and manage the port of Haifa; China State Construction Corporation and China Harbor Engineering Company are involved in the construction of the Cherchell port (Algeria), and China Harbor Engineering Company won the Israeli tender to build the new port at Ashdod.

position the necessary logistics support to sustain naval deployments in waters as distant as the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, and [the] Atlantic Ocean to protect its growing interests" (*Annual Report to Congress 2019*: 11). General Joseph Votel, the former head of the US Central Command (US CENTCOM), and Admiral James G. Foggo, the former commander of the US Naval Forces Europe - Naval Forces Africa and the Allied Joint Force Command Naples, are just two of the figures who have raised similar concerns.

The quick recovery of the Chinese economy after the COVID-19 pandemic contributes to supporting Beijing's ambitions. In economic terms, the estimated GDP growth of 3.2% in the second quarter of 2020 and 4.9% in the third goes a long way in "raising the bar" of the challenge that NATO is facing. Following the path that Greece (August 2018) and Portugal (January 2019) inaugurated, in March 2019, the Italian government signed a non-binding memorandum of understanding within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while twelve EU countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) already participate in the Chinese-sponsored "17+1 Forum". Some of the largest Chinese companies are also active in several European and Mediterranean countries' infrastructure sector. However, also in this context, concerns about excessive exposure towards the Asian giant are growing. The European Commission repositioned China from "strategic partner" – as it has been for more than fifteen years – to "negotiating partner", while several governments have adopted measures to contain the Chinese technology's role, e.g. in the respective telecommunication networks. These decisions seem to underline how the EU is increasingly considering it necessary to find a balance in its relations with a country that – with growing clarity – is seen as a competitor in pursuing technological leadership and a rival in promoting its social and political model.

The risk is the gradual erosion of the Western role within and outside the Mediterranean. Such erosion is due to both the weakening of the Euro-Atlantic internal cohesion and the strengthening of its systemic rivals. China has significantly expanded its direct and indirect presence in many areas that remained unguarded after the end of the US-USSR competition. In the Mediterranean, Beijing deployed its full panoply, promoting the establishment of sectorial cooperation forums, investing in the infrastructure, energy, transport, and telecommunications sectors, and conducting military exercises to support the development of its maritime presence. Worth noting, several European countries have shown a marked sensibility to Beijing's soft power's seductions, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even the Chinese authoritarian model seems to attract increasing favour, welding with the authoritarian impulses already existing in different countries. Unsurprisingly, the surveys highlight the growing awareness of the conflict between Europe's short-term economic gains and long-term dependencies in its relations with Beijing (Oertel 2020). Together with supporting a political-institutional vision essentially contrasting with EU's and NATO's values, neglecting this conflict could be, on the one side, a further catalyst of regional tensions, on the other, an instrument to promote the consolidation of Beijing's role in the Southern European neighbourhood.

4. An Alliance in the quest for its strategy?

If NATO's interests have significantly increased in recent years, the Alliance seems to have broken down in the same period. This controversial process reflected deep-seated dynamics: the complexity of the emerging multipolar international system, the vulnerability of increasingly articulated social systems, the downsizing of the role traditionally played by the United States, and the increasingly broad and uneven nature of the current 30-member-strong Atlantic Alliance. The most evident bone of contention is the definition of the principal threat(s) that NATO should contrast. In this field, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of still currently undergoing low-intensity conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk played a central role. They polarised those who saw the sign of a resurgent Russian threat in these events and those who want to place greater attention on the southern front. The increasingly non-military nature of the southern front's threats adds a further divisive element to this already complex picture. Beyond its immediate effects, this situation feeds a structural cleavage between two competing visions of NATO: a vision that opposes those who favour a more "political" Alliance committed to projecting stability at a global level, and those who favour a more "military" Alliance, focused on defending the "physical" security of the European continent.

Against this backdrop, the most significant doubts concern the sustainability of an "all-round" strategy and the Atlantic Alliance's ability to cope with the commitments that this kind of strategy entails. The "360-degrees NATO" was an element in NATO's debate even before the East/South relation came to the forefront. In June 2015, for example, the final communiqué of the Alliance Defence Ministers' summit noted how "[t]o address all these challenges to the East and to the South, NATO continues to provide a 360 degree approach to deter threats and, if necessary, defend Allies against any adversary" (*Statement...* 2015: (2)). The Warsaw Summit Final Communiqué reiterated how "[o]ur efforts to enhance the Alliance's role in projecting stability will be guided by enduring principles, including a 360 degree approach, commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, complementarity with international actors, in particular with the UN, EU, and the OSCE and focusing on NATO's added value, local ownership and buy-in, partner involvement, inclusiveness, tailored cooperation, long-term commitment, prioritisation and sustainability, and overall coherence" (*Warsaw Summit Communiqué* 2016: (81)). Two years later, the Final Declaration of the Brussels Summit of Heads of State and Government of Member Countries (11-12 July 2018) reaffirmed that: "The Alliance will continue to pursue a 360-degree approach to security and to fulfil effectively all three core tasks as set out in the Strategic Concept: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security" (*Brussels Summit Declaration* 2018: (1)).

However, passing from aspirations to realisations was difficult. The centrality of the collective security clause in NATO's life traditionally places stringent constraints to the allocation of a budget that – by definition – is limited compared to the Alliance's needs. The gap between ends and means is even more critical today after the events that followed the Ukrainian crisis have relaunched the problem of Europe's territorial

security and affected the critical topic of NATO's deterrence capabilities (Frear, Kulesa, Raynova 2018). The burden-sharing issue is a problematic aspect of US-Europe relations since the 1950s. In 2014, during the South Wales summit of the Heads of State and Government, NATO's members agreed to the so-called "Celtic Manor targets" (2014), committing to allocating two per cent of their GDP to the defence budget by 2024 and twenty per cent of this sum to investment, purchasing new equipment and weapons systems. However, in converging towards these targets, the different countries have moved at different speeds. Despite the results achieved at an aggregate level (in 2020, eleven countries had reached the two per cent target, compared to three in 2014, and sixteen reached the twenty per cent target with the launch of massive procurement programmes), even before the outbreak of COVID-19 at least some of them might not be able to reach them¹⁰. The pandemic's economic fallout reinforced this trend, favouring a shift of resources from defence to other sectors, perceived as a more immediate need (Barrie *et al.* 2020).

The second aspect (which closely links to the first) concerns the Alliance's assets and capabilities. Since the end of the 1990s, NATO actively tried to fill the existing gaps and adapt its assets and capabilities to the ever-changing strategic scenario. The experience gained in the former Yugoslavia, and the widening gap between the United States and the European allies played a pivotal role in adopting the Defense Capabilities Initiative (Washington, 1999) and the Prague Capabilities Commitment (2002). However, in this field, too, the results did not always meet the expectations. In the second half of the 2010s, several criticisms hit the idea of setting aggregate targets to measure the Alliance's progress in closing its capability gaps. Moreover, while the force structure's reshaping proceeded quite rapidly in terms of deployability, expeditionary capabilities, and joint and combined capabilities, technological upgrade proved more troublesome. The constant emerging of new fields of intervention (such as cyberspace) exacerbated the problem. Several elements contributed to this result; among others, the time that the development of the different programs requires, the rapid transformation of the international environment, which increased the risk of obsolescence of the programs in progress, and the cumbersome mechanisms for selecting the program themselves. Some member states' resistance and the competition among different "national champions" made these problems worse, and not even the efforts to elaborate multinational programs tackled them.

The consequence of these dynamics has been a deepening of the Alliance's divisions and a new stratification of military and political power among its members. In recent years, the fear of Russian pressure has led to more lavish defence spending

¹⁰ According to the most recent NATO's figures, in 2020, the United States, Greece, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, France, Norway and Slovakia reached the two per cent target, while Turkey, Hungary and Croatia approached it with a ratio between 1.8 and 1.9 per cent. According to the same source, Luxembourg, Hungary, Turkey, Slovakia, The United States, Poland, Norway, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Latvia, Estonia, Italy, Spain, Romania, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Montenegro, reached the twenty per cent target, while Bulgaria approached it, with a 19.2 ratio [*Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2020)*, Brussels, March 16, 2021].

in Central and Eastern European countries and pushed their military budgets above the Alliance's average. As a consequence, their relative political and military weight increased compared to the Western and South-western allies. A similar trend affected the Scandinavian countries – both within NATO (Norway) and outside (Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Finland) – and Turkey, which capitalised on its newfound importance by seeking greater autonomy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East¹¹. In their turn, these changes led to an overall weakening of the “historic core” of NATO's founding countries (the “old Europe” that the then US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld evoked in 2003) in favour of the new members. The growing divergence between the two groups' national policies fostered this process and widened the distance separating the European and the US positions. While their origins date back to the early 2000s, Donald Trump's despise of NATO and his preference for bilateral diplomacy, seen as a privileged tool to interact with its possible interlocutors, emphasised these trends. The deterioration of the US-Europe relations went in the same direction, making the transatlantic collaboration trickier.

Against this backdrop, the risk for the southern flank is of gradual marginalisation. It is a constant risk for an Alliance that traditionally focused its action on the central theatre. However, in the last ten years, it has grown more evident. At the same time, the threats have become less manageable in terms of deterrence and defence. In this perspective, the agenda outlined in the 2010 Strategic Concept – which configured the Alliance's evolution in an increasingly “political” and global sense (Ringsmose, Rynning 2011) – seems to have been shelved for the time being. One way to revive it could be the reflection launched in June 2020 with the #NATO2030 initiative. In this context, the report of the group of independent experts appointed by the Secretary-General highlights in several points the need for a more significant presence of the Alliance in the Mediterranean region, both by strengthening the preparedness and responsiveness of military structures and by “energis[ing] the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) through strengthened political engagement, capacity building, and resilience enhancement” (*NATO 2030* 2020 (12)). However, even in this case, the focus on the Mediterranean dimension seems to be mainly reactive: a means to counter the possible Russian and – to a lesser extent – Chinese efforts to exploit the region's fragilities for their benefit.

¹¹ According to SIPRI's figures, the estimated global military expenditure in 2019 was \$1917 billion, the highest since 1988. The total was 3.6 per cent higher in real terms than in 2018 and 7.2 per cent higher than in 2010. In Europe, total military spending was \$356 billion, 5.0 per cent higher than in 2018 and 8.8 per cent higher than in 2010. Military spending in Western Europe was \$251 billion, up by 3.9 per cent compared to 2018 but down by 0.6 per cent compared to 2010. In Eastern Europe, military expenditure totalled \$74.0 billion, 4.9 per cent higher than in 2018 and 35 per cent higher than in 2010. All seven Eastern European countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine) increased their military spending in 2019. In Central Europe, spending was \$31.5 billion, 14 per cent higher than in 2018 and 61 per cent higher than in 2010. Four countries in Central Europe increased their military spending by more than 150 per cent between 2010 and 2019: Lithuania (232 per cent), Latvia (176 per cent), Bulgaria (165 per cent) and Romania (154 per cent). Poland – accounting for 38 per cent of the total for Central Europe in 2019 – increased its military spending by 51 per cent over the decade 2010-19. In the same decade, Turkish military expenditure increased by 86 per cent, reaching \$20.4 billion. Between 2017 and 2018, Turkish military expenditure raised by 27 per cent, while the increase between 2018 and 2019 was 5.8 per cent (SIPRI - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019*, Stockholm, 2020).

Concluding remarks

Despite the greater attention placed since 2016, the definition of a credible Mediterranean strategy is still an open question on NATO's agenda. In recent years, both NATO and many observers emphasised the willingness to revive the Mediterranean Dialogue and spur collaboration on more solid and articulated bases. A similar willingness emerged about the Alliance's need to improve its understanding of the Mediterranean theatre and better engage its different regional partners were equally stressed. The inauguration, in 2017, of the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub (NSD-S) in Naples fits into this perspective. According to NATO's authorities, the NSD-S' opening should have been the first step toward a "more Mediterranean" Alliance. However, the hub's functions – summarised in the triad "Connect, Consult, Coordinate" – and the ways and means to pursue them are still mostly undefined. The vagueness of its geographical area of competence, the multiplicity of political and military functions entrusted to it, the small size of the staff compared to the breadth of the tasks, and the constant risk of overlapping with the activities of other Alliance's bodies and structures (such as the International staff of NATO HQ in Brussels and the various SHAPE units, the Supreme Allied Command in Mons) are some of the elements that make this task complex and risk harming the instrument's functionality.

Equally critical is the function that the regional countries – such as Italy – can play. Due to its geographical and geopolitical location, Italy stands at the crossroads of many of the above-outlined problems. As part of the "old Europe" and founding member of the Atlantic Alliance, it hinges the north-south and the east-west axis. The problematic relationship between its Mediterranean and continental dimensions is a well-known trait in contemporary Italian political history: a trait that, since the end of World War II, evolved into a "three circles policy" integrating the traditional two-pronged framework with the new Euro-Atlantic dimension. This "three circles policy" does not lack ambiguities and exposes the country to multiple vulnerabilities. However, it also offers a privileged perspective to act as a link between the needs of NATO's two fronts. Due to its sensitivity to the Eastern and Southern developments, Italy can play a balancing role within the Alliance. At the same time, it can be a bridge between NATO and the Mediterranean countries. From this point of view, a more assertive approach with allies and partners could favour the emergence of a strategy taking into account the interests of both the southern and the eastern players on a broad set of non-military issues, including the management of migration flows by sea and land, the exploitation of energy resources in a security perspective and the promotion of effective political dialogue in the European neighbourhood.

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