



## After Ukraine – NATO should stay vigilant on the Middle East

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**Leading up to the NATO Summit in September, the crisis in Ukraine has vindicated some NATO members' fears of Russia. This could cause NATO to revert to a narrow focus on Article 5 defense. Yet, other issues still pose threats and NATO should remain vigilant towards security challenges from the Middle East.**

*Jakob Aarøe Jørgensen, jaaj@sam.sdu.dk*

Threats emanating from the Middle East still pose serious security challenges to NATO, though some see the crisis in Ukraine as the most serious security challenge yet to the alliance in the post-Cold War era. NATO must remain vigilant towards these threats, not allowing the crisis in Ukraine to eclipse all other contingencies.

The permanent threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is most acute in the most volatile regions of the world – i.e. especially in the Middle East. A second threat to NATO comes from terrorism; as Barack Obama stated in his West Point Graduation speech on 28 May 2014: *'For the foreseeable future, the most direct threat to America at home and abroad remains terrorism'*. The terrorist threat is also emanating particularly from the Middle East region.

Finally, a very important threat is the impact of instability and conflicts outside the NATO area. The so-called Arab Spring has caused great disruption and uncertainty. Syria is entrenched in civil war, causing intense pressure of refugees and instability for neighboring countries such as Israel and Turkey, a NATO member. Likewise, in the aftermath

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- NATO should remain vigilant towards security challenges emerging from the Middle East and should send a strong signal to Middle Eastern partners that the Alliance is committed.
- In the run up to the Wales Summit on September 4-5, 'global' NATO members should make their commitment to Article 5 unmistakably clear, while 'Article 5' members should reconfirm their commitments to NATO's Middle Eastern contingencies.
- To effectively engage the Middle East a division of labor within NATO may be needed: European members should increase commitments to partnerships and contingencies around its borders, in return for US Article 5 commitment and prioritizing elsewhere.



of NATO's intervention in Libya, the country is now riveted by intense violence and political instability. Yemen and Iraq, both highly unstable, remain some of the most important countries in fighting terrorism.

These threats are unlikely to disappear anytime soon and the Middle East remains one of the areas from which most of NATO's primary security challenges emerge. That is why NATO must pay unrelenting attention to the Middle East, remain vigilant, and engage the region in a sustained manner.

## **NATO RETRENCHMENT AFTER UKRAINE?**

Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, and Russian influence within Ukraine has vindicated concerns of some members. It has led to a reverting of NATO attention towards the Article 5 task in recent months, and may cause NATO to deprioritize other security challenges.

Allied agreement on the core tasks in the Strategic Concept notwithstanding, NATO expansion to include new members, has divided NATO into two camps: Article 5 countries and countries with global concerns. Not surprisingly, given the geographical proximity and historical experiences, some NATO members have remained concerned with Russia. For these members, Article 5 security guarantees remain the core task, and the price for memberships has been tacit political compromise with 'global allies' on out-of-area contingencies. As demonstrated in the Libya intervention, however, both old and new members refused to contribute military assets towards this out-of-area contingency.

Beginning in mid-February 2014, preoccupation with Article 5 was vindicated as the crisis in Ukraine evolved. It became obvious that Russian military forces were directly engaged on the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine – the home of Russia's Black Sea fleet. On March 18, the Crimean Parliament and the Russian Government signed a treaty, marking the accession of Crimea into the Russian Federation. This indicates that Russia should once again be understood as a revisionist state.

In Poland, an early March opinion poll had 59 % of respondents viewing Russian foreign policy as a threat to Polish security. This perception is not uncommon in several other European member countries. Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, coined the situation in Ukraine as the '*gravest threat to European security and stability since the end of the Cold War*'. The Secretary General is right to

caution about Russia's moves, but it is unlikely that Russia will encroach on NATO territory. Member states are right to be concerned – anything else would be unnatural – but President Putin is not reckless or irrational as to endeavor into NATO territory. He is well aware of Article 5 and the severe consequences, both politically and militarily, of such a move.

To view the situation in Ukraine and Crimea as one and the same may lead to the wrong interpretation of Russian interests in Ukraine. Crimea was primarily based on Russian security interests – securing the integrity of its Black Sea fleet – while the rest of Ukraine seems to be more coincidental in terms of opportunities for Russia to ignite anti-Western sentiments in the Eastern parts. Thus, annexation of greater Ukraine as we saw it in Crimea is unlikely because Russian security interests there are not as urgent. The goal for Russia is not a Russian Ukraine, but more likely a weak Ukraine, fearful of approaching the West.

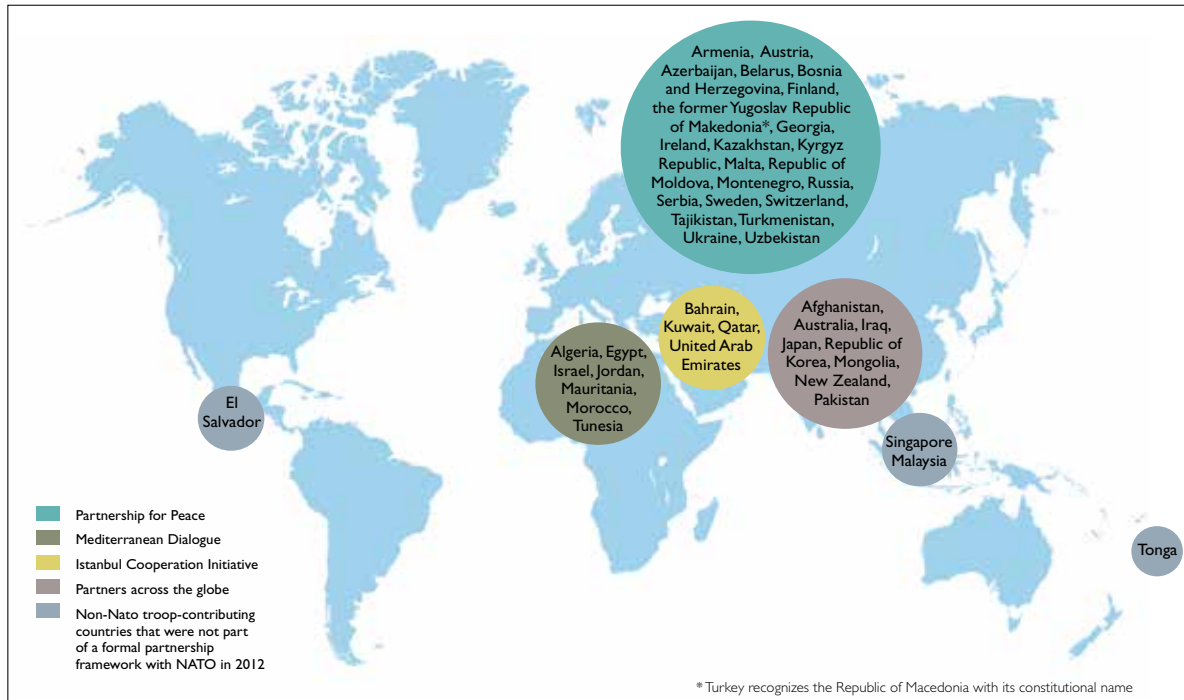
The difference between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine notwithstanding, NATO must realize that Ukraine, compared to other Eastern European states, has a unique historical meaning to Russia. As Eastern Ukraine has a large ethnic Russian population, many perceive it as part of Russian civilization. Thus, Russia has been keen to push back hard every time the West approaches Ukraine – much harder than is the case when NATO approached other Eastern European states after the Cold War. Taking these issues under consideration, it is unlikely that Putin will venture into Ukraine as long as Ukraine and the West remain separated. So whereas the current crisis should be a cause of concern, it does not warrant that NATO neglect security challenges in the Middle East.

## **ISSUES FOR THE WALES SUMMIT**

In terms of security challenges, NATO simply cannot afford to 'forget' the Middle East despite the crisis in Ukraine. In a region geographically close to NATO – bordering one NATO member – and in which NATO, throughout the years, has been perceived with great skepticism, it is of vital importance that the Alliance remain vigilant and nurtures whatever security cooperation it already has.

Headed for the Wales Summit, NATO members must debate the meaning of Ukraine for Alliance policy. This debate should have the key aim of assuring NATO commitment to member states internally but importantly also assuring global partners that NATO remains relevant. The debate should address the following points:

Partners and non-NATO troop contributors to NATO-led operations



**First**, globally oriented members must drive home the point once and for all that the ‘Article 5’-members can count on them. NATO works by deterrence and in this regard, in the history of the Alliance, it has never failed. In wake of the Ukrainian crisis, the signaled commitment to Article 5 is very important for some members.

Reassuring Article 5 countries and deterring Russia, the US is vitally important. In the aftermath of the ‘rebalancing towards Asia’ announced by Hillary Clinton in 2011, many European members became concerned about abandonment. At West Point, Obama reconfirmed the importance of Article 5: ‘We are now working with NATO allies to meet new missions – within Europe, where our Eastern allies must be reassured.’

NATO has opted to step up its air policing over the Baltic States and reinforced the air defenses over Poland. Despite the inadequateness of these largely symbolic gestures in countering real Russian aggression, the most important task at the Wales Summit is to assure ‘Article 5’-members that the full military might of NATO is behind them if Putin defies all rational behavior and encroaches on NATO territory.

**Second**, ‘Article 5’-members must acknowledge that despite the Ukrainian crisis, there are other extremely important security challenges demanding careful attention. They must reassure the

global members of their commitment to managing these challenges as well. If ‘Article 5’-members do not commit wholeheartedly to Middle Eastern contingencies, it may be difficult to secure continued American commitment, in face of US concerns for declining defense budgets and global attention. An alliance where everyone – regardless of their main concerns – can see clear benefits of membership is the healthiest.

**"Our NATO allies must pull their weight to counter-terrorism, respond to failed states, and train a network of partners"**

President Barack Obama in his West Point Graduation speech on 28 May 2014

As suggested in the Transatlantic Academy report ‘Liberal Order in a Post-Western World’, a division of labor may be desirable and it is an issue that members need to address at the Wales Summit. Obama made it clear, that beyond Europe’s borders: ‘our NATO allies must pull their weight to counter-terrorism, respond to failed states, and train a network of partners’. US interests in a division of labor must be understood in light of declining US defense budgets, unresolved issues at home, and the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. In return for US commitments to Article 5 and East Asian



contingencies, it is necessary that Europeans engage more actively in security challenges on its own borders.

This leads to the **third point**: Towards its Middle Eastern partners, NATO should reaffirm its commitment to managing Middle Eastern security challenges. Instead of reverting the large majority of NATO resources – diplomatic, political and military – to Ukraine, NATO should remember to sustain its engagement in the Middle East, in particular its partnerships. At West Point, Obama called for additional resources: ‘*which will allow us to train, build capacity, and facilitate partner countries on the front lines*’. In this endeavor, the European allies should also play a leading role in the division of labor.

Arguably, the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative have thus far been limited successes. Especially the political dimension – supporting NATO values, diplomatic rapprochement etc. – has encountered considerable obstacles with partners. The practical cooperation – military interoperability, consultation on terrorism and proliferation of WMD’s etc. – however, has shown tangible results. This was demonstrated in Libya where three Arab countries contributed to the military intervention. NATO should continue developing areas of practical cooperation offering NATO a larger stake in Middle Eastern security, and thus greater opportunity to effectively manage the Middle Eastern security challenges in collaboration with local partners.

## REMAINING RELEVANT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Middle Eastern security challenges are not likely to disappear anytime soon. Therefore the Alliance should have a genuine debate on the consequences of the crisis in Ukraine, remembering the larger scope of what it takes to be effective in addressing NATO security challenges which are in their essence global. For this, a division of labor may be advisable, in which Europeans increase their commitment to face these challenges while the US reassures the Europeans of Article 5 commitments and manages contingencies in East Asia.

The key for NATO in remaining an effective security structure for all members is to stay vigilant in the Middle East despite the strong urges that many members may feel to retrench towards a narrow Article 5 role for NATO after Ukraine. An important step is explicit commitment by NATO towards its Middle Eastern partners, which should be a key priority at the Wales Summit.

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## FURTHER READINGS:

Transatlantic Academy Collaborative Report 2014: *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World*.

[http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TA%202014report\\_May14\\_web.pdf](http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TA%202014report_May14_web.pdf)

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<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-west-point-academy-commencement-ceremony>

Jørgensen, J. A. (2014) *Cooperative Security: NATO's Partnership Policy in a Changing World*. DIIS Report 2014:01 Flockhart, Trine. (ed.). Danish Institute for International Studies, Ch. 7, p. 111-120. <http://en.diis.dk/home/news/2014/natos+partnerships+in+a+changing+world>

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