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NATO'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC IDENTITY ON EASTERN AND SOUTHERN FLANKS

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For more than two decades after the end of the Cold War, the core of European security has been unchallenged. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO looked for a new rationale inside a new strategic global framework. For the Atlantic Alliance, the end of the Cold War implied less deterrence and territorial defense and an increase in strategic volatility beyond its borders. Between 1990 and 2010, the dissolution of former Yugoslavia first, followed by the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan, shifted Euro-Atlantic attention towards overseas territories. Conventional wisdom was that the Alliance needed a new task not to go 'out of business'. The 1991, 1999 e 2010 Strategic Concepts gradually transformed NATO from an organization focused on deterrence and territorial defense into an alliance concentrated on crisis management and the wider dimension of security. NATO's article 5, which states that an attack on one ally is an attack on all, still remained the Alliance cornerstone, but the most compelling requirements gradually changed: out-of-area operations, international terrorism, cyber-defense, human and energy security.

The outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 turned out

to be a dramatic game-changer for NATO. Since then, the Alliance had to face controversial – but familiar – diplomatic and military dynamics, which echoed those of the Cold War. Just when Allied forces were ready to begin the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia appeared to resume the role of the major enemy. Thus, history seemed to be back in Europe. Accordingly, at the highly-important Wales summit in September 2014, NATO chose to revise the nature of its priorities by shifting back from out-of-area tasks to a deterrence posture, based on territorial defense. The final declaration affirmed that «Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace». The Allies acknowledged that their security was «also» challenged by instability and transnational threats, such as international terrorism, coming from the Southern flank. However, the declaration was quite crystal-clear about NATO's new strategic focus: more deterrence and territorial defense at the expense of out-of-area operations.

This new priority was warmly welcomed by what the former US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld,

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called ‘the New Europe’, and particularly by Poland and Baltic countries. Indeed, due to understandable historical reasons, Eastern European countries naturally look at the US military power and NATO as the main guarantee for their security against Russian hegemonic ambitions. Unfortunately, that of the Eastern borders is not the only scenario alarming Europe, since the Mediterranean region and the Greater Middle East too are undergoing different degrees of instability and turmoil. It is no coincidence that many Allied countries, first of all Italy, would like NATO to remain more committed towards South in order to effectively conduct out-of-area operations when needed to ensure their own security.

In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, also the United States – NATO’s majority shareholder – reconsidered the role of the Alliance in its grand strategy. During President Obama’s first term, NATO did not represent the core of the US foreign policy. At that time, many experts stressed that this was a clear symptom that the Alliance finally turned into the already-predicted relic of the Cold War. On the contrary, Obama’s second term showed a different approach towards Europe, by focusing on Russia. The 2015 US National Security Strategy remarked that the development of Ukraine crisis strongly questioned European stability and peace, which could not be taken for granted anymore. Accordingly, one of the main priorities for Washington was to strengthen NATO’s Eastern flank in order to counter Russian ambitions through deterrence operations (such as Atlantic Resolve) and plans (European Reassurance Initiative and European Infrastructure Consolidation). At the top of its priorities, the White House intended also to «degrade and ultimately destroy» the so-called Islamic State in the Greater Middle East, but without involving directly NATO and its out-of-area capabilities. In doing so, the risk seems to be the marginalization of those voices coming from Southern countries, ignoring the path followed by NATO since the end of the Cold War.

NATO’s new focus on territorial defense and the Eastern flank rather than on out-of-area operations and the Southern front stimulated an interesting debate on the need of coexistence between different strategic needs. The diverging opinions recently expressed by two former SACEURs may represent a good example. In an article written for the journal ‘Foreign Affairs’, General Philip Breedlove emphasized that the major threat to the Euro-Atlantic region consists in Russian aggressiveness: in his opinion, international terrorism is a security issue, but should not represent a strategic priority for NATO. On the contrary, Admiral James Stavridis looked at impelling priorities on the Southern flank, and, on the pages of the journal ‘Foreign Policy’, he underlined that NATO should be involved at the forefront in operations aimed at combating international terrorism in the Greater Middle East. If necessary, he continued, NATO should consider the deployment of ‘boots on the ground’, including on Syrian territory, to fight the so-called Islamic State. In his opinion, the Alliance failed when it did not invoke article 5 in the wake of the Paris attacks in November 2015.

The debate shows that today NATO is at crossroads as the most successful alliance in history. Even after Russia reawakened the Cold War nightmares, the territorial defense should be considered as one part of a more complex security environment that extends well beyond Eastern Europe. Out-of-area missions are not out of date, at least until when turmoil and international terrorism continue to upset the Mediterranean region and the Greater Middle East. Allies, hence, should be extremely careful not to lead their different perspectives to a sharp contrast. Antagonisms would create disunity in a multipolar age, in which Western countries should instead stick together not to lose power and credibility. If the Alliance wants to claim to be doing enough for its members, it does not need to go global but, at least, has to reconcile the Eastern and Southern fronts, finding a renewed and comprehensive strategic identity.