

## Symbolism, substance, and the southern dimension

### NATO in an age of terrorism<sup>1</sup>

David Brown

**Ever since the Cold War came to an end, NATO has been searching for a new purpose to justify its existence within an ever more crowded and complex regional and international security environment. In effect, NATO seemed to be suffering from some sort of self-imposed identity crisis. With the alliance worried about being pigeonholed as an overtly military security actor, focused primarily on its Eastern front, the practitioner and academic discourse became littered with Cassandra-esque predictions and ultimately unfounded fears that, unless NATO formally and prominently associated itself with emerging security challenges and liberated itself from its traditional geostrategic moorings, it would come to be seen as redundant in the twenty-first century. Consequently, it sought a frontline role in the developing “war on terror”, even going so far as to assert that conducting such a war would simply be impossible without NATO leading it.**

Yet, by so clearly seeking to tie NATO’s continued contemporary relevance to this conceptual and geographical shift in its underlying purpose — reiterated in Strategic Concepts and at successive summits, including at Warsaw in 2016 — NATO risked undermining its credibility. Simply put, as the record has subsequently demonstrated — and will be discussed in more depth below — NATO was and is ill suited for a leading role in countering terrorism. Rather than establishing benchmarks it can never attain, it would be more realistic to accept the subsidiary role outlined in the wake of 9/11, while maintaining its central focus on deterring and combating the re-emerging threat to its eastern borders from a revisionist Russia.

Additionally, while successive summit communiqués are right to warn of the growing and complex array of security concerns (Islamic terrorism, civil war, human trafficking, organized crime, forced migration, etc.) emanating from NATO’s southern frontier and the need therefore to maintain a watchful balance between East and South, NATO’s recent record of both action — in Libya — and inaction — in Syria — has had such serious consequences on the ground that further military activity seems unlikely in the current political environment. In spite of the claims that NATO’s campaign in Libya was a glittering success, both for the speed of action and the positive humanitarian consequences, the longer-term implications for counter-terrorism in particular suggest a less positive story and the need for further caution in the future.

#### **NATO and Terrorism**

NATO’s recent history with counter-terrorism only serves to underline the counter-productive nature of its own actions. By overplaying its hand, both in the presentation of actions undertaken and the wider arguments used to justify its continued relevance as a security actor, it undermines the credibility it seeks to preserve. Take, for instance, the

initial response to 9/11, still the defining moment of the counter-terrorist era we continue to operate in. Having established an institutional foothold in this area in the 1999 Strategic Concept, which noted, after some initial opposition, that “Alliance security interests can be affected by other risks of a wider nature, including acts of terrorism”,<sup>2</sup> NATO took the unprecedented step in the wake of the 9/11 attacks of offering an Article V guarantee to its preeminent power. It is worth recalling the response of the Bush administration, which, while welcoming the significant political symbolism of such an act, had no intention of allowing NATO a central role. As Paul Wolfowitz, then Deputy Secretary of Defense, noted, “if we need collective action, we will ask for it; we do not anticipate that at the moment.”<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, NATO’s anticipated moment did not come. The Bush administration led the counter-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan while NATO took on a greater stabilization role leading the International Stabilization and Assistance Force (ISAF). Obama’s skepticism about the utility of conventional military force as a means to counteract terrorist activity and his desire to share the burden more equitably both within NATO and beyond have led to a greater unwillingness on the part of NATO’s preeminent power to act. The alliance provided useful practical and logistical support, seeking to bolster intelligence sharing and deploying NATO assets, both air and maritime, in order to free up national assets for the front line — a trend continued at Warsaw, with an agreement in principle (at the time of writing, still to be formally agreed by all member states) to “provide direct NATO AWACS support to increase the coalition’s situational awareness” in combating ISIL in Syria and Iraq<sup>4</sup> — and it serves as the continuing institutional embodiment of Western solidarity. However, its contribution was unlikely ever to reach a level that would validate the 2002 statement by then NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson that “the war on terrorism would not be possible without NATO.”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the welcome commitment to provide additional air support to ongoing Global Coalition efforts in Iraq and Syria comes with a welcome dose of realism that places another of the counter-productive claims (still made by leading NATO specialists) into context. The summit communique concludes that “This contribution to the Global Coalition does not make NATO a member of this coalition.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than seek to implicitly associate NATO with counter-terrorist activities, either by acknowledging its role as a “facilitator” of collective action outside its formal auspices or simply by listing how many individual NATO member states had chosen to operate as part of a more flexible coalition, the communique bluntly accepts that the use of NATO assets, even in a campaign led by individual NATO members, does not in and of itself constitute NATO activity.

Statements by successive Secretaries General have noted that NATO does not have and is not planning for a role in the on-going military campaign in Syria. This point was made all too clearly in statements by then Secretary General Rasmussen. With regard to the avowedly humanitarian operation in Libya, he noted that “we consider this *of strategic interest for NATO territory*...it’s about territorial defence, it’s about the defence of the interests of our countries” (emphasis added). In contrast, when referring to Syria, although the underlying themes were the same, the responsibility for acting became more abstract: “I see it as an obligation for the international community to stop it, to defeat it and to take the necessary steps to that end.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, a Libyan operation inspired by the humanitarian imperatives of the “Responsibility to Protect” principles was of “strategic interest” to NATO’s territorial integrity — an interesting suggestion in 2011, given that some critics claim

that the scale of Gaddafi's crimes was deliberately overstated for political purposes in order to lay the groundwork for regime change.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the on-going humanitarian and political catastrophe in Syria, which has left over 400,000 dead (according to UN sources in April 2016), led to massive population displacement within the region and into Europe and has seen the establishment across Iraqi and Syrian territory of a territorial base for widespread terrorist activity is, in effect, someone else's problem. While NATO does not need to be involved, given the increasing coalition activity, such realism of action needs to continue to permeate the wider practitioner and academic discourse, to ensure words and deeds match up more effectively.

### **Going South? NATO, Libya and Syria**

It is worth giving more consideration to NATO's more recent military activity in its southern dimension, in order to, paradoxically, reinforce the point that NATO is better served by focusing its attention on where it can add most value, as a more conventional military actor confronting the increasing military activity of Russia on the alliance's eastern and northern frontiers. While the Libyan operation has been heralded as a textbook case of how to conduct both a legal and legitimate military operation, scratching below the surface indicates longer-term concerns for NATO, in terms of both the conduct and consequences of the intervention.

For one, some critics have gone so far as to claim that this was not, in effect, a NATO operation at all. Anne Applebaum argues that "the use of NATO's name in Libya is a fiction," suggesting it was, at best, an Anglo-French project.<sup>9</sup> While this assertion goes too far and is demeaning to the other European states that participated in the campaign — as well as to the US, which had hoped to "lead from behind" only to rediscover the weaknesses of its European allies when it came to providing key military personnel and assets — it does point out, once again, the greater operational incoherence that comes with conducting operations in an institution of 28 member states. In fact, as with Afghanistan, which was bedeviled with national caveats and operational conditions, in Libya, both in the pre-operation diplomatic phase — where France, Turkey, Germany and Italy were all involved in political struggles over the applicability of NATO as a vehicle to respond to the developing crisis in the first place — and during the campaign, where only fourteen NATO members were actively involved and only six European states took part in strike operations, institutional coherence was hardly at a premium. Even when NATO takes command and control, it struggles to operate as a full alliance, it seems.

The consequences are also worth briefly considering, especially in light of NATO's continued declaratory insistence on the importance of combating terrorism. While not a counter-terrorist operation in design, the decision to not put significant boots on the ground after the initial campaign, to operate strictly to the letter of the UN mandate and to effectively leave the nascent Libyan authorities to seek to restore order has contributed to the chaotic and increasingly tragic situation in Libya today. With competing sources of authority and governance, a country split between the forces of Islamism and secular authority, with militias proliferating alongside a developing profile for ISIL around Sirte and an increasing share of terrorist activity, in the region and beyond, NATO must accept some responsibility for adding to the complexity of the counter-terrorist campaign, rather than seeking to downplay the developing threat. It is not good enough for the Obama administration to

seek to relativize its own responsibility by either placing the blame on trusted allies, such as the UK and France, who became “distracted” in the president’s words, or by emphasizing the decision of the National Transitional Council in Libya to seek to restore sovereign order alone. The perception created is that, for reasons of national interest and alliance cohesion, given that a number of member states did not want NATO involved in the first instance, the alliance did not try hard enough to impress upon the new Libyan authorities the need to establish a more formal role for external powers, in whatever form, in post-intervention Libya. While Obama’s former Middle East advisor Philip Gordon is right to “not pretend that there was a good solution in Libya and Obama just failed to find it,” the solution adopted has hardly assisted with the containment of the terrorist threat or the restoration of order in Libya.<sup>10</sup> Increased training activity — as outlined in Warsaw — will go some way to assisting, although the recent record of external training translating into effective results, in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, should also lead us to be more cautious here.

The consequences — in terms of alliance inactivity in Syria — are also clear. Denied the props that legitimized intervention in Libya, in terms of both regional support and a UN mandate, complicated further by the greater complexity of military action in Syria and the increasing unwillingness of the US to act — as exemplified by the cancelling of air strikes after chemical weapons use had crossed Obama’s “red line” — NATO has remained on the sidelines of the campaign against ISIL. This reticence has left a global coalition to slowly increase its military profile and begin the task, with some success, of cutting the IS caliphate down to size, by restoring territory and key cities to Syrian and Iraqi control. While the belated success in military terms is to be welcomed — suggesting NATO is not essential as the primary defense of its southern dimension — it is likely to be a long and difficult struggle to restore order in the region, particularly as the campaign against ISIL is only one facet of a multi-dimensional conflict within Syria. Additionally, as ISIL loses more territory, it is likely to revert to more traditional terrorist activity both within the region, notably in Iraq, and in NATO states. The recent attacks in Paris, Brussels, Istanbul and, at the time of writing, another tragedy in Nice herald further deleterious consequences in the international campaign to combat and defeat Islamist terrorism in whatever form it emerges. As such, while the southern dimension of NATO activity remains unsafe, it remains unclear what more — if anything — realistically NATO as an institution can do about it at source.

## **Conclusion**

Realism is the key to how NATO presents itself in the contemporary security environment. Rather than repeating the mistakes its supporters made in the wake of 9/11, seeking to associate NATO with the resolution of a crisis to which it was not established to respond, out of fear that a wider international audience would begin to question its utility, NATO needs to ensure that its words match its deeds. While it has made useful contributions, both to combating terrorism and monitoring security concerns in the south, such as Operation Active Endeavor, initiated after 9/11 and “transitioned” into a wider security function at Warsaw, and has stepped up its commitment to training national capacity-building in Iraq and Libya particularly, it should not seek to over-sell such initiatives. They do not add up to a frontline role in combating terrorism, either in the Middle East or elsewhere, and they are a more limited contribution to its southern dimension. Other actors — whether the EU, with its relatively more developed internal security and policing capabilities or a succession of coalitions, either willing (initially in Afghanistan and Iraq) or “core” (to combat ISIL) — are

either better suited or politically more acceptable to provide the lead in tackling what remains a serious regional and international terrorism threat.

Rather than view this situation as a problem, and continue to demonstrate the counter-productive institutional insecurity that has dogged NATO in recent years, NATO should focus on its preeminent task at hand, to provide territorial security and reassurance to its member states, particularly those confronted by a more aggressive Russian state. Given Russia's greater appetite for revising the European security order by force and its actions in the Middle East and the Black Sea, NATO may find that such a focus may ultimately provide a bridge between southern and eastern threat assessments. In that sense, the alliance should have the confidence to fend off queries regarding its twenty-first century relevance — even from the friendly fire within the NATO community itself — by reasserting its traditional roles, rather than seeking to over-promote its contribution to combating new challenges for which it is structurally and politically less well suited.

**Dr. David Brown is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Defence and International Affairs of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He is about to complete two new books with colleagues in the department, on the foreign policy of George W. Bush and on the prospects for multipolarity in the twenty-first century.**

---

<sup>1</sup> This article represents only the views of the author and does not in any way represent the views of the Ministry of Defence, the British Army or the wider British government.

<sup>2</sup> See particularly paragraph 24 of the 1999 document. *The Alliance's Strategic Concept (Press Release NAC-S (99) 65)*, Brussels, NATO 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfowitz cited in David Brown, "The War on Terrorism would not be possible without NATO: A critique" in Martin A Smith (ed.), *Where is NATO Going?*, (London: Routledge, 2006) 27.

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 96 of *Warsaw Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw on 8-9 July 2016 (Press Release 100)*, Brussels, NATO 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Lord Robertson cited in Brown op cit, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Paragraph 96 of *Warsaw Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw on 8-9 July 2016 (Press Release 100)*, Brussels, NATO 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Rasmussen cited in Tal Dingoff Alkopher, "From Kosovo to Syria: the transformation of NATO Secretary-Generals' discourse on military humanitarian intervention", *European Security* Vol 25 No 1 (2016) 61.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Alan J Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a well-meaning intervention ended in failure", *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Anne Appelbaum, "Will the Libya Intervention bring the end of NATO?", *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2011.

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of US actions, see Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine" and "Obama's former Middle East advisor: We should have bombed Assad", *The Atlantic*, 20 April 2016.