NATO’s 360-degree approach to security: alliance cohesion and adaptation after the Crimean crisis

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To cite this article: Christelle Calmels (2020): NATO’s 360-degree approach to security: alliance cohesion and adaptation after the Crimean crisis, European Security

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2020.1795834

Published online: 22 Jul 2020.
NATO’s 360-degree approach to security: alliance cohesion and adaptation after the Crimean crisis

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ABSTRACT
In the mid-2010s NATO allies were facing the resurgence of a Russian threat at their borders, as well as terrorist actions in Europe and the MENA region. This evolving security environment provoked heated talks both within and outside NATO on its adaptation, often depicted as being the sign of irreconcilable disagreements. Conversely, this article argues that the "NATO 360-degree" concept adopted during the Warsaw Summit shows cohesion between the allies thanks to the Alliance’s decision-making process. As a security community, member states were incentivised to find common grounds despite their diverging interests, which resulted in this new concept encompassing the "arc of insecurity". Its subsequent implementation also confirms the cohesion hypothesis, despite its obvious refocusing towards the East and collective defence. This article will first present the diverging threat perceptions within the Alliance. It will then focus on the implementation of the “NATO 360-degree” concept, promoted during the Warsaw summit, to finish with an initial assessment of the changes at work.

Introduction

In May 2015, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared that “the tectonic plates of Euro-Atlantic security have shifted both in the East and the South” (NATO 2015a). A month later, NATO defence ministers issued a statement in which they affirmed NATO’s ability to “provide a 360-degree approach to deter threats and, if necessary, defend allies against any adversary” (NATO 2015b). This first official mention of the “NATO 360-degree” concept aimed at showing the organisation’s will to adapt by bolstering its eastern front defence while not neglecting southern challenges. The 2016 Warsaw summit then confirmed the new course taken by the Alliance as Heads of State and Government declared: “Our efforts to enhance the Alliance’s role in projecting stability will be guided by enduring principles, including a 360-degree approach” (NATO 2016a). At that time, the Alliance was not only witnessing a resurgent Russian aggressive behaviour at its borders but was also facing terrorist actions in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The evolving security environment engendered heated talks within NATO regarding its adaptation to this wide range of conventional and hybrid threats. Some observers often depict
these disputes as being the sign of growing and irreconcilable dissensions between allies, or even as predicting its obsolescence.

The academic debate about NATO’s role and survival is not new and dates back to the very origins of the Alliance. From the start, scholars have seized this object to explain the past, present, and future of the Atlantic Alliance. Wallace Thies rightly notes in Why NATO endures that it has created a market revolving around the notion of “crisis” in which authors either forecast the demise of NATO or describe what they consider as being a major existential crises in exaggerated terms (2009, p. 14, see also Jakobsen and Ringsmose 2018). Indeed, we can find abundant academic literature on the “doom and gloom” of the Alliance (Knorr 1959, Kleiman 1964, Steel 1964, Kristol 1979, Walt 1998, Nye 2000, Pond 2004, Terriff 2004, Sperling and Webber 2009). Drawing from this body of works, we could legitimately inquire about the impact of the new security environment on the Atlantic Alliance. Specifically, we must wonder how NATO strives to conciliate the divergent threat perceptions of its member states and to show cohesion since the mid-2010s.

To answer this question, this article relies on the socio-psychologically rooted alliance cohesion literature (Liska 1962, Holsti et al. 1973, Stein 1976, Thompson and Rapkin 1981, Kupchan 1988, McCalla 1996, Weitsman 2003, 2004, Malici 2005, Kim 2008, Park and Moon 2014). According to Patricia Weitsman, cohesion is “the ability of states to agree on goals and strategies toward attaining those goals” (2003, p. 85). Following this definition, cohesion manifests itself through cooperative behaviour such as consultations, mutual concessions, and responsiveness towards each other’s needs generating collective gains. If that behaviour is typical and even expected within an alliance, the proponents of cohesion theory point out that conflicting strategic interests and threat perceptions may be detrimental to group cohesion (Liska 1962, pp. 97–129, Holsti et al. 1973, p. 17, Thompson and Rapkin 1981, p. 615, Malici 2005, p. 93). This article responds to their argument by hypothesising that consensus-based bargaining within the Atlantic Alliance allows for the bridging of divergent threat perceptions among allies and fosters a shared understanding of their respective issues. According to this hypothesis, the birth of the 360-degree concept and its implementation shall then embody this spirit of compromise. We further hypothesise that it is rendered possible by the very nature of NATO. Scholars no longer dispute the fact that NATO is a pluralist security community (Pouliot and Lachmann 2004). It means that it is composed of independent governments sharing “core values derived from common institutions, and mutual responsiveness – a matter of mutual identity and loyalty, a sense of ‘we-ness,’” and determined to resolve their disputes peacefully (Adler and Barnett 1998, p. 7). NATO allies are then incentivised to talk and cooperate not only because of the consensus rule but also because they form an institutionalised “community of values” concerned by regional order (Risse-Kappen 1997, Park and Moon 2014).

The ambition of this article is therefore to go beyond a mere inventory of intra-Alliance divides and to study the actual outcomes of the latest transatlantic bargaining. To do so, it draws on five months of participant observation within the Alliance. As underlined by Maertens (2016), international organisations are either neglected or studied from the outside by international relations scholars. Consequently, only a few academic works have tried to “open the black box” and study the internal functioning of international organisations. Among them, Robert Cox’s book The Anatomy of Influence. Decision
making in international organisation (1973) is noteworthy in its launching attempt of a
research programme on the issue (see also Barnett and Finnemore 2004, Müller 2012).
However, NATO has not benefited from the same scholarly attention as the United
Nations due to the secrecy surrounding military alliances and the high entry barriers.
We have been able to circumvent this issue thanks to our participation in the activities
of the French military delegation.2 This full immersion enabled us to better grasp the
internal dynamics of the organisation, thus producing an “insider’s knowledge” (Maertens
2016, p. 3), which would be challenging to obtain otherwise. One of the added values of
this article thus resides in its highlighting of an overlooked practice by IR scholars, that of
informal groupings within NATO and their influence on its decision-making. Participant
observation also allows for a more tempered analysis of intra-alliance debates than that
generally produced by “outsiders”. Indeed, national public discourses may not always
reflect actual practices within NATO, especially in times of crisis when politicians must
first and foremost answer concerns regarding their public opinion.

Being part of the French delegation staff has also facilitated our access to key stake-
holders. Nineteen semi-structured interviews with civilian and military officials from
member states, as well as the international staff, were thus used for this article and
have been conducted under Chatham house rules3 (Appendix). They helped us reconsti-
tute the chronology of public action in addition to the analysis of discourses and percep-
tions of the interviewees (Pinson and Sala Pala 2007). Interviews were also a good proxy
when practices were not observable, especially when they belonged to the past: “The
rationale is that, even when practices cannot be ‘seen,’ they may be ‘talked about’
through interviews” (Pouliot 2012, p. 49).

Finally, we accessed several NATO and national archives during our fieldwork. Diplo-
matic notes, letters, meeting reports, food for thought papers, and draft documents
related to the Warsaw Summit, NATO command structure reform, and enhanced
Forward Presence were thoroughly consulted. Concerning these archives, national legis-
lation does not permit the restitution of classified documents before a specific time
limit that can extend up to fifty years. However, archives consultation is an effective
mean to find relevant open source documents and to elaborate more precise interview
questionnaires. Their indirect use has thus been invaluable in the writing of this article
and allowed for data triangulation to produce a more rigorous analysis of our empirical

This article will first present the diverging threat perceptions within the Alliance by
describing the South-East divide and the bridging attempt in the resulting communiqué
of the Warsaw summit. It will then focus on the implementation of the “NATO 360-
degree” concept through an analysis of the command structure adaptation and the refo-
cusing of NATO military activities. Finally, it will draw an initial assessment of changes at
work considered as orienting the Alliance towards an unbalanced, though realistic,
direction.

The 360-degree approach as a means of reconciling the South-East divide

“Some battles can only be fought in good company” (Interview with 2019-UZO). At the
dawn of the Warsaw summit preparations, a clear separation between the South and
the East occurred in the form of high-level regional meetings. The purpose of these
informal groupings was to gather “like-minded” allies around common security interests to influence the outcome of the future summit communiqué negotiations (Interview with 2019-UZR). The Bucharest nine group on the one hand, and the Southern quartet, on the other hand, emerged with divergent political and military agendas that had to be reconciled in the Chiefs of State and Government declaration.

The eastern flank allies: NATO as the primary security provider against Russia

The “Bucharest nine” format was created in 2014 at the presidential level by a Polish-Romanian initiative (Sejm 2017). It brought together Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and Hungary to discuss regional security issues and harmonise their positions with regards to the resurgence of the Russian menace at their borders (Interview with 2019-UZG). This regional grouping then progressively institutionalised itself and expanded to ministers, ambassadors and deputy permanent representatives to NATO as exemplified by the first official meeting of foreign affairs ministers, held in Bucharest in November 2016 (Interview with 2019-UZJ, Interview with 2019-UZR). Presented as a consultative format, Bucharest nine gathered several times in capitals and within NATO before the Warsaw summit in a context of Polish activism vis à vis the Alliance’s doctrinal evolutions (Interview with 2019-UZH, Interview with 2019-UZJ, Interview with 2019-UZO). Viewing the organisation as the “anchor” of their security, Bucharest nine countries achieved a united front before the summit on the increased military protection of their territory and the reinforcement of the NATO Command Structure. It led to a political declaration signed in November 2015 on a “strong, reliable and balanced presence” of NATO in the region (Poland in 2018).

This practice of frequent groupings enabled central and eastern European countries to orient the debate in the desired way by not only drawing the public opinion eye to their regional issues thanks to high-level meetings but also by catching the United States’ attention in the context of renewed tensions with Russia: “The Russian leverage allows [them] to have a stronger voice here than in the European Union or in the United Nations thanks to the Anglo-American axis” (Interview with 2019-UZE). Indeed, towards the end of Obama’s mandate and before his last NATO summit attendance, the United States’ reset policy was being severely tarnished by vocal critics from its political opponents. At the same time, the recent annexation of Crimea questioned its results (Khalifazadeh 2014, Zygar 2016). The stricter American foreign policy towards Russia made the country more willingly listen to its eastern allies’ demands both outside and within NATO through informal bilateral discussions (Interview with 2019-UZE). The joint Obama-Cameron declaration (2014) published in The Times entitled “We will not be cowed by barbaric killers” displayed for its part an Anglo-American momentum for the strengthening of the Alliance, in line with Bucharest nine political agenda. Moreover, the popular vote in favour of Brexit just before the tenure of the Warsaw summit, while being a source of concern for European Union countries, announced a progressive refocusing of British resources on NATO to “maintain its rank in international affairs” (Interview with 2019-UZE) praised by eastern European countries.4

The simultaneous deterioration of the European security environment and the Anglo-American relations with Russia therefore gave Bucharest nine countries claims more visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of whom they consider as critical allies, epitomised by
Obama’s announcement of deploying 1,000 additional troops to Poland during the Warsaw summit (Borger 2016). Bucharest nine thus de facto established itself as the most suitable and influential eastern format supplanting Visegrad four, which gradually lost importance within NATO due to internal disagreements (see Popescu 2017, p. 74, Kolmašová 2019). We do not assume that these struggles have disappeared with the creation of Bucharest nine. However, Polish-Romanian activism has successfully produced a harmonised discourse and posture for eastern and central European countries on the international stage without crossing each other’s red lines.

The southern flank allies: a mosaic of interests

Before the summit, the international context was not only marked by Russian aggressive actions in its neighbourhood, but also by transnational jihadism rendered more tangible by the Islamic state’s proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014.

In the case of Turkey, the country had to deal with a grave diplomatic incident with Russia, a deterioration of its relationship with the US, as well as internal destabilisations caused by the Syrian refugee crisis and several terrorist attacks targeting its territory (Balci and Tolay 2016, Benhaim 2017, pp. 95, Okyay 2017, pp. 837–838, 841–844). Described as being the only NATO country “neighbouring three major crises [...] in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine” by its Chief of Defence (NATO 2015c), Turkey undoubtedly occupied a unique position among southern flank allies at that time. Turkey was also isolated diplomatically vis-à-vis its long-standing reluctance towards NATO–EU cooperation while its southern counterparts – all EU members – were pushing for a deepening of the relationship. In that regard, despite regular talks between Turkey and its Mediterranean allies within NATO, the country did not become part of the “Southern quartet” (Interview with 2019-UZO).

This latter gathered France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal for the first time in May 2016 at the Defence ministers’ level in Toulon. Less publicised than Bucharest nine, it nonetheless was formed to fulfil the same purpose of exchanging views and creating consensus between the southern European allies to promote their interests during the communique negotiations. In a declaration published on the Italian Ministry of defence website (Ministero della difesa 2016), the Southern Quartet described its objective as follows: “Allied countries should balance their efforts to develop concrete lines of action aimed at tackling also the challenges originating from NATO southern flank: a 360-degree Alliance that takes into consideration the requirements of all its member countries.” The narrative developed by southern European countries relied on a balanced approach of NATO and better coordination with the European Union in the Mediterranean region where the two organisations were conducting several maritime activities. As a matter of fact, the southern allies concurrently pushed this topic within both NATO and the EU by formulating a proposal to the Secretary General and the High Representative who then met to discuss it before the Warsaw summit.5

Regarding Russia, the shared view by all Southern quartet members was a double-track approach of strength and dialogue with a country they did not consider as the main threat against the Alliance. In doing so, they distinguished themselves from Bucharest nine by promoting the maintenance of open channels of communication through the NATO–Russia Council (Interview with 2019-UZE, Interview with 2019-UZO). Other allies like
Germany or even the United States which were not in favour of cutting off all lines of communication despite their renewed hard stance on Russia supported this posture (Interview with 2019-UQJ, Interview with 2019-UZM). However, notwithstanding shared demands for a more balanced NATO approach, the visions of the organisation’s involvement in the South differed significantly among southern flank allies.

In the case of France, the country chose to invoke Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union instead of Article 5 after the terrorist attacks against the Bataclan in November 2015 (Pomorska and Vanhoonacker 2016). Even though it did not imply any immediate action, this call for solidarity was directed towards EU members to encourage deeper involvement in French and EU operations in Africa (Haroche 2017). In this, France considered that NATO was not the most appropriate forum to tackle terrorist issues happening both in Europe and in the South. France’s stance, as described in several interviews, was that of minimal involvement of NATO in its pré carré and containment of the expansion of its activities outside the military field (Interview with 2019-UZO, Interview with 2019-UZE, Interview with 2019-UDE, Interview with 2019-EZM, Interview with 2019-UQJ2). Hence, we can consider the French call for a 360-degree approach as a discursive way to alleviate the Alliance’s focus on Russia while not involving an increased NATO presence in the South (Interview with 2019-UZE, Interview with 2019-UZP).

For its part, Italy actively discussed terrorist issues with the United States and the United Kingdom before the Warsaw summit to foster new NATO initiatives in the South (Interview with 2019-UZO). Welcoming several NATO facilities in its territory and concerned by the destabilisation of Syria and Libya, Italy, together with Portugal and Turkey, was thus highly in favour of going beyond cooperative security efforts in the region (Interview with 2019-UZE, Interview with 2019-UZP). As for Spain, the country adopted a middle position between France and Italy by soliciting an increase in the funds allocated to the Partnership for Peace programme. As summarised by an interviewee from a Southern quartet country: “France wants a minimum implication of NATO in the region, Spain advocates for the maximum of the minimum, and Italy wishes for a maximum implication of NATO in the South” (Interview with 2019-UZE). Southern Quartet countries thus diverged on the degree of NATO’s involvement in the South. However, they all agreed on the necessity to act in the region, be it only symbolically, and on adopting a measured language on Russia before the Warsaw summit communiqué negotiations.

### A communiqué encompassing the “arc of insecurity”

According to Holsti et al. (1973), a common attitude toward external threats is mandatory to achieve cohesion. If Bucharest nine and the Southern Quartet developed different agendas according to their respective threat perceptions, they facilitated negotiations on the communiqué by harmonising positions on measures to adopt in both regional groupings before formal talks. The latter were then mostly aimed at conciliating demands from the two informal formats rather than between individual positions. Cohesion thus already happened before the Warsaw summit through informal consultations within the two groups of allies. It then consolidated during the summit communiqué negotiations through a series of compromises between already clarified postures. To no one’s surprise, the Warsaw summit communiqué eventually recognised in July 2016 an “arc of insecurity and instability” ranging from military to hybrid threats and coming from both
the eastern and the southern periphery of the Alliance (paragraph 5). The two primary security challenges underlined by the communiqué were concerning Russia and terrorism following the main concerns expressed by Bucharest nine and the Southern Quartet. Regarding Russia, the Allies strongly condemned its “aggressive actions” which triggered a “renewed emphasis” on their deterrence and collective defence efforts (paragraphs 6, 32). One of the main announcements of the summit was thus the launching of a military activity eastward.

We have decided to establish an enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to unambiguously demonstrate, as part of our overall posture, the Allies’ solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression (paragraph 40).

This activity was presented as being part of the newly implemented Readiness Action Plan, mostly focused on defence and deterrence against Russia (paragraphs 35-42). The Allies also took advantage of the summit to declare a functional assessment of NATO Command Structure in order to evaluate its adaptability to the “increased overall requirements” (paragraph 46). This announcement indicated a desire to bulk up the military structure while it had been reduced during the previous reform. The summit was therefore used by the Allies as an opportunity to convey strength to Russia with a measured language and expressed their will to keep the channels of communication open as requested by the Southern Quartet:

We remain open to a periodic, focused and meaningful dialogue with a Russia willing to engage on the basis of reciprocity in the NRC, with a view to avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, and to increase transparency and predictability (paragraph 12).

The mention of the NATO-Russia Council, as well as the 1997 Founding Act (paragraphs 9, 12, 15), was pushed by France, Belgium, Spain, and Germany which gathered informally several times before the summit to soften the language on Russia and insist on the double-track approach around which compromise finally crystallised (Interview with 2019-UZB). As for the South, the allies declared in the communiqué their willingness to “[help their] partners provide for their own security, defend against terrorism, and build resilience against attack” (paragraph 8). While recognising national operations of some allies in the Sahel region (paragraph 31), the declarations mainly expressed a focus on partnerships to engage in the South with a light footprint: “We are continuing to draw on our cooperative security network to enhance political dialogue, to foster constructive relationships in the region, and to increase our support for partners through practical cooperation” (paragraph 26). NATO’s projection of stability thus materialised in the eyes of the allies through capacity building and training missions in the region (paragraph 83). The communiqué also announced reflections on a NATO-EU coordination in the Mediterranean Sea (paragraph 93) reiterated in the NATO-EU joint declaration (NATO 2016b). Despite being closer to French and Spanish views on NATO’s involvement in the South, the text however remains vague enough to satisfy everyone by giving states room for manoeuvre in the subsequent implementation of these measures.

As emphasised by Lesser (2016) and Zima (2016), the communiqué was undeniably focused on the building up of NATO collective defence capabilities to face eastern
challenges. Yet, it equally addressed threats coming from the South, thus creating a balanced discourse on security issues encompassing all demands expressed by the allies before the summit. Consequently, contrary to the conclusions of Ringsmose and Rynning (2017, p. 129), we consider that the moderate language and search for equilibrium in the communiqué do not reflect a will to “punish” Russia, but rather represent a prudent warning that is the product of NATO’s decision-making process. Indeed, allies achieved attitudinal consensus (Thompson and Rapkin 1981, p. 620) at the Warsaw summit by satisfying both blocs in the communiqué. Furthermore, the text mentioned “common”, “democratic”, or “shared” values no less than eighteen times, thus confirming Risse-Kappen’s understanding of the Atlantic Alliance as a community of values (1997, p. 32). The versatility of the communiqué also enabled each state representative to insist upon their own public opinion on the aspects corresponding to its main concerns. By way of example, French President François Hollande (2016) stressed the importance of NATO-EU cooperation at sea during his press conference, while Polish President Duda (2016) welcomed the much-awaited launching of enhanced Forward Presence.

Implementing the 360-degree approach: a strong focus on deterrence and defence

The Warsaw summit communiqué gave a concrete reality to the “NATO 360-degree” concept by launching several projects to adapt the Alliance to its new strategic environment. Acting as a “Strategic concept by default”, it provided direction for NATO activities which materialised in three main outputs: the reform of the NATO Command Structure, the reorientation of its military activities, and a rationalisation of its Partnership for Peace programme.

A reinforcement of the military structure

During the 2010–2012 reform, the international context was marked by the economic crisis affecting NATO’s finances, as well as its strong involvement in out-of-area operations (Interview with 2018-ADX, Brauss 2018). At that time, a “reformist group” of allies emerged and advocated for a rationalisation of the organisation and, more specifically, a reduction of its command structure they considered maladjusted to its current activities. France, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Denmark then drove the reform impetus (Interview with 2018-ADX), which was supported widely within the Alliance, apart from some countries welcoming NATO facilities and worrying about the possible reduction of its geographical footprint.

The call for a functional assessment of the NATO Command Structure (NCS) during the Warsaw summit happened in an entirely different international context. In light of recent changes in the European security landscape, the military command was not considered “fit for purpose” anymore by most allies in 2016 (Interview with 2019-UDJ, Interview with 2019-UDX, Interview with 2019-UZE, Interview with 2019-UZY, Interview with 2019-UZR, Interview with 2019-UDS, Interview with 2019-UQW). It was no longer a question of rationalisation, but instead of allocating more financial, material, and human resources to the command structure to strengthen the defence of the most exposed allies to potential Russian attacks. Eastern allies were at the forefront of the “NCS-Adaptation”, in contrast
with the previous reform (Interview with 2019-UZR, Interview with 2019-UZG, Interview with 2019-UZY). Conversely, France was the more cautious nation and isolated itself during the debates, even from the reformist group, because of its rigid stance on numbers during the whole process: “France was on its own and [...] the Secretary general even had to meet the French President, which does not often happen, especially with this kind of issue” (Interview with 2019-UDS). Still, a compromise emerged and resulted in an increase of about 1,200 military personnel affected to the command structure instead of the 2,000 initially proposed by the Strategic Commands (Brauss, n.d., p. 8). Instead of degenerating into deadlocks, negotiations thus once again proved the ability of the allies to cooperate and find common grounds (Thompson and Rapkin 1981, p. 620). The “maximalists” lowered their ambitions while “minimalist” France finally accepted the idea of an increase despite its initial reluctance. The country displayed integrative behaviour (Stein 1976, p. 151) and solidarity with its eastern allies mainly concerned by NATO command structure reform while Russia did not directly threaten its territory. The staffing rise was accompanied by the consensual creation of a Joint Force Command for the Atlantic in Norfolk to secure Atlantic sea lines of communication, a Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm to facilitate the movement of troops across Europe and a Cyber Operation Centre to bolster NATO cyberdefense activities (SHAPE NATO 2019, NATO 2019d, 2019e).

Another challenge of the NCS-Adaptation was the necessity to display its rapid adjustment to the new security environment:

The NCS will be enabled to command and control operations across the whole mission spectrum, including large-scale maneuver operations for collective defence under hybrid conditions and cyber threats and facing simultaneous risks and threats in multiple regions. [...] Work on the adaptation of the NCS is progressing expeditiously. (Brauss, n.d., p. 8)

The sense of emergency reflected in this speech and the leitmotiv of NATO’s ability to adapt could partly be explained at that time and thereafter by the declarations of Donald Trump, both during his campaign and presidency, describing NATO on his social media as either obsolete or too much of a financial burden for the United States (Dombrowski and Reich 2017). Considering the public scepticism and renewed criticisms of the American President towards his allies, it had become necessary to show how NATO could be useful to the American foreign policy. This impetus was mostly led by the structure which developed a strategic communication destined to satisfy the US president by proving the plasticity of the organisation.

The transformation and refocusing of NATO military activities

Another critical development following the Warsaw summit was certainly the refocusing of NATO military activities from out of area operations prevailing in the 2000s to training missions and collective defence preparedness activities. Indeed, the first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by NATO’s deep involvement in the Middle East and North Africa mainly through the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (2001–2014), Operations Active Endeavour (2001–2016) and Unified Protector (2011), as well as several counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa (2008–2016). Since 2015, these combat operations have been progressively replaced by low-intensity training missions in the area, such as Resolute support (2015–present) and
the NATO mission in Iraq (2018–Present). The organisation also launched in November 2016 a flexible operation in the Mediterranean Sea (Sea Guardian) to ensure maritime security in the face of terrorist and smuggling activities in this zone.

On the other hand, Chiefs of State and Government welcomed during the Warsaw summit, the first implementation of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) adopted two years earlier. The Secretary General presented it in his 2016 report as an improvement of NATO’s “360-degree awareness” (NATO 2017a). Yet, when subjected to closer scrutiny, the series of assurance and adaptation measures taken in the framework of the RAP seemed mostly focused on the eastern part of the Alliance. After 2014 the allies progressively started to deploy ground troops on eastern allies’ territories for multilateral and bilateral training (NATO 2016c). Regarding NATO exercises, they were conducted mostly in the region since 2016: for thirty-nine exercises taking place in eastern countries, the organisation had only conducted ten exercises in the southern part of the Alliance (NATO 2019a, 2018b, 2017b, 2016d). The Warsaw summit also welcomed the operationalisation of eight NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) located in Lithuania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, and Poland as part of the “comprehensive package” of the RAP (Ringsmose and Rynning 2017, p. 132, Karásek 2018, p. 52). While respecting the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, these small headquarters aimed at creating a persistent presence in the region to reinforce NATO’s defence and deterrence posture and enable the rapid deployment of allies’ troops in the area in case of attack.

Lastly, the most emblematic decision of this summit was unquestionably the launch of enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic states and Poland. Taking the form of four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups led by the United States, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom, it was presented by the allies as a way to complement the set of measures already adopted under the RAP by creating a “tripwire” in case of Russian aggression (Zapfe 2017). Contribution to eFP was thought of as voluntary and rotational to reassure the allies who feared an escalation of tensions with Russia (Interview with 2019-UZG). It inaugurated a hybrid “activity” category between the mission and the operation, leaving great latitude to the host, framework, and contributing nations in their strategic communication. For example, while Germany tends to publicly consider eFP as a “training exercise” with no tactical added value, other nations like the United Kingdom or Poland adopt a more militaristic stance on the matter and insist on the deterrence and defence aspect of the activity in their strategic communication (Interview with 2019-UZB; Interview with 2019-UQJ2). eFP undeniably shows attitudinal and behavioural consensus since allies agreed on a common target, that is Russia, and on commons means to deter it from aggression. Its nature does not violate the NATO-Russia founding act but still shows solidarity from the framework and contributing nations to their eastern allies. On the other hand, the varying level of sensitivity of national public opinions may explain the different strategic communication of countries involved in this activity without questioning their commitment.

It is therefore possible to observe the refocusing of NATO military activities on collective defence since the mid-2010s, while the culture of “readiness and responsiveness” progressively became another leitmotiv of the Alliance next to its adaptability. The reorientation of NATO thus occurred not only on the material and operational levels, but also happened discursively in recent years. According to Heinrich Brauss (n.d.), former Assistant Secretary General for Defence Policy and Planning: “Pro-active strategic communications
complement the Alliance’s broad approach to deterrence and defence. Together, these efforts will foster the shift in strategic mindset in NATO and reinvigorate a culture of readiness.” The formulation of a coherent narrative at the organisational level also contributes to display cohesion and unity, as underlined above. This aspect should therefore not be overlooked by alliance cohesion scholars and would benefit from more considerable attention.

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“Projecting stability” in the South through enhanced partnerships

A later outcome of the Warsaw summit was the establishment in September 2017 of the NATO Strategic Direction South (NSD-S) hub in Naples. Thought of as a forum connecting the allies with their African and middle eastern partners, the ambition is to better understand challenges coming from the South thanks to a “holistic and collaborative approach” including not only military officers but also civilians and researchers from diverse organisations (The Southern Hub, n.d.). The main challenges considered by this hub are terrorism, radicalisation, migration, and environmental issues, thus expanding the panel of threats highlighted in the Warsaw summit communiqué (NATO 2019c). Its mission is divided into three core activities described as follows: “Connection, consultation and coordination”. More precisely, it means that the NSD-S hub aims at pooling cooperation efforts with NATO southern partners in one place to facilitate and centralise the interactions between all actors. The projection of stability is itself envisaged through advising activities and training of local authorities in African and Middle Eastern countries (Dibenedetto 2018). Ever since its operationalisation in July 2018, the NSD-S has conducted several activities such as a security patrol in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, a training on civil emergency cooperation of military officers from the Kuwait Armed Forces, or the hosting of a study day on Climate Change in the Middle East and North Africa, thus proving its versatility. Additionally, its location in Naples makes Italy the leading proponent of its activities as reflected in the statements of defence minister Elisabetta Trenta during her visit in October 2018.

The Alliance has finally kicked off its planning to tackle the new threats originating in the Mediterranean area. [...] This was not an accidental achievement: on the contrary, it is the outcome of Italy’s strong engagement in this regard, that received full support on 4 October, during the NATO Brussel’s Ministerial. (Ministero della difesa 2018)

The Italian activism for the creation and the promotion of the hub corroborates its will to anchor NATO in the South and develop its antiterrorism activities as described in the first part of this article. In this, Italy benefited from a momentum created by Trump’s declarations (2016) during his presidential campaign and thereafter which prompted the organisation to tackle the issue rapidly: “NATO [...] must be changed to additionally focus on terrorism.” It also enjoyed the support of its Southern quartet partners who collectively sent a letter on increased EU-NATO cooperation in the Mediterranean to the Secretary General in February 2017 after their third meeting in Porto (Ministero della difesa 2017). Indeed, enhanced partnership as embodied by the southern hub does not violate any red line of the other Southern Quartet members, even the most reluctant to an increased NATO activity in the area. With that, southern European allies finally managed to find common ground on the issue, even though it can be read as a minima compromise.
The 360-degree approach today: an initial assessment

Having examined the main outcomes of the Warsaw summit, it seems now necessary to draw initial conclusions on the concrete implementation of the 360-degree approach. Although it is visibly imbalanced and shows a return to a collective defence model, it nonetheless relies on a realistic evaluation made by the allies of the European security environment and the political and military tools available to NATO.

An unbalanced approach

According to several observers, NATO is “back to basics” since the mid-2010s because of its refocusing on collective defence tasks. In this, the Alliance’s approach clearly favours the reinforced protection of eastern allies’ territories against Russia to the detriment of southern European countries facing more diffuse threats, such as terrorism. Kamp (2014) thus warns against the risk of “falling into the trap of creating a one-dimensional ‘East-Alliance’”. If he is wrong in theory, it appears difficult to deny his conclusions in practice.

When it comes to the NSD-S hub, its actions are limited in terms of funding and human resources. Its budget represents a small fraction of the military budget of NATO, and it relies mostly on existing military staff within the Joint Force Command who devote only part of their working time to the hub (Interview with 2019-UZX). This reduced team of a hundred personnel seems derisory given the magnitude of the task to manage relations with a multitude of public and private actors. The hub is still recent and may be strengthened in the years to come. Nevertheless, it now seems necessary to be more ambitious and provide it with further resources. Fulfilling this requirement would show Italy and other concerned southern allies that they have not been “forgotten” in the adaptation of the Alliance. Moreover, by taking a closer look at NATO’s fight against terrorism, the organisation certainly furnishes AWACS surveillance aircrafts to the international coalition against Daesh, but without taking part directly in the conflict: “Being in the coalition does not mean that NATO will engage in combat, but it does send a strong signal of our commitment to fight global terrorism” (The Global Coalition, n.d.). In this, we could arguably conclude that measures for the South mostly seem symbolic and rely more on strategic communication than on concrete actions. This observation is reinforced by the various declarations made by either NATO officials or its member states these past few years, giving the impression that NATO now leads from behind when it comes to terrorism:

While nations retain the primary responsibility for their domestic security and their own resilience, NATO adds value and has a role to play, in complementarity with wider international efforts and in accordance with international law and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. [...] our capacity building and other partnership activities help partner countries fight terrorism themselves and deny terrorists safe haven, which in turn strengthens NATO’s own security. NATO can also complement international efforts by drawing on Allied expertise. Mapping of counter-terrorism capacity building activities in partner countries, in cooperation with the partner country concerned, would help NATO to better determine where it can best add value. (NATO 2018c)

This posture has initially engendered dissatisfaction among some of the chief proponents for a deeper NATO engagement in the region (Euractiv 2017). However, considering the
overall politico-military environment, this approach can also be seen as a realistic adap-
tation of the organisation.

A realistic approach

NATO’s lighter footprint in the South must first be considered with regards to current
blockages within the United Nations Security Council on the Syrian conflict. Since 2011,
Russia and China have vetoed thirteen resolutions depriving the member states of
finding satisfying and lawful solutions to the situation (Library United Nations, n.d.). If
NATO intervened in the Balkans during the 1990s under a debatable legal framework,
this behaviour seems highly improbable today considering the disastrous consequences
and the memory left by the Operation Unified Protector (OUP) in African and Middle
Eastern countries (see Henriksen and Larssen 2016, O’Sullivan 2017). Moreover, OUP
and post-Afghanistan operational fatigue already announced a gradual American withdra-
wal from this region, recently confirmed by Donald Trump’s decision to remove American
troops from Syria (Feaver and Inboden 2019). Therefore, without a robust legal basis or US
support, a future NATO operation in the South is far from being on its agenda. Under these
circumstances, NATO boots on the ground in this region would probably cause more harm
than good and bear great potential of “backfiring” against the allies (Marrone 2016, p. 2). It
partly explains why NATO southern activities are today mostly focused on training mis-
sions in favour of local authorities and maritime awareness, much flexible and economical
financially, humanly, and mediatically for the allies.

Another aspect to consider is the diffuse and multifaceted nature of southern threats.
Despite the expansion of NATO’s fields of action, the organisation was initially thought to
protect the European continent militarily against a conventional threat. It therefore lacks
instruments to counter terrorist actions or to manage the illegal immigration issue.
Without being irrelevant, its actions must consequently be enshrined in more in-depth
cooperation with the European Union, as the Southern quartet is promoting: “The collabor-
ation and interaction that has been bolstered between NATO and the EU is crucial for
the future” (Euractiv 2017). The impetus is led within the Union by South EU Summit
countries which gather regularly to foster initiatives for the South (South EU Summit,
n.d.). All Southern Quartet members are part of this EU subgrouping, thus proving attitu-
dinal and behavioural cohesion in both organisations. Deeper cooperation between NATO
and the EU in the region would then be beneficial in the following two ways: it would first
contribute to alleviating NATO’s burden as the organisation is massively reinvesting in ter-
ritorial defence, and it would reassure Mediterranean allies, such as Italy, which directly
face hybrid threats in the region.

A further noticeable observation is the involvement of Baltic countries in French or EU
operations in Africa since the launching of enhanced Forward Presence: “We send troops
to Mali because we are worried about the dangers of illegal immigration. It is an act of soli-
arity and part of the burden-sharing effort” (Interview with 2019-UZR). This trans-organi-
sational reading of burden-sharing thus creates a strategic trade-off and an informal
division of labour between NATO now mostly focused on the East and the EU increasingly
involved in the South. If the material contribution of eastern European countries may seem
derisory, the ideal impact is significant since it creates a sense of friendship and reciprocity
between allies that should not be overlooked (Berenskoetter 2014, pp. 51–71). It also has
the merit of making eastern countries recognise publicly the plurality of challenges facing the European continent: “The B9 should be supportive of a proper balance between the Alliance’s readiness to strengthen the ‘eastern flank’ and its readiness to cope with threats stemming from the South, including terrorism” (Svárovský 2018).

Furthermore, the involvement of previously reluctant allies in eFP allows for a much more tempered discourse on Russia despite current tensions. According to an interviewee from a Southern quartet country: “Our participation in this activity fosters talks with these allies and forces them to listen to us when we advocate for a dialogue with Russia” (Interview with 2019-UZO). Even the most vindictive allies are now talking about a “two-track policy” (Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Tallin 2017) thus showing the influence they have on each other and attitudinal convergence between the two groups of allies. It certainly would not have been possible without the decision-making by consensus inducing allies to make compromises and tame their own agendas. Hence, we are not in favour of a modification of NATO decision-making procedures, as it has been suggested and then quickly dismissed by some scholars because of its infeasibility (see Leo Michel 2003, Sperling and Webber 2009, Chun 2013). Instead of looking at divergent threat perceptions as impeding NATO’s progress, we could consider them as an opportunity to open dialogue and balance NATO’s evolution to avoid ending up in a situation like that of the Cold War. As recalled by an interviewee: “What matters is the end result: to speak with one voice on these issues” (Interview with 2019-UZJ). Discussions and disputes are part of everyday life in international organisations and are no different in NATO than elsewhere. Up until now, despite these divergences, the Alliance has succeeded in formulating a common policy showing its cohesion and liveliness.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the emergence and the implementation of the NATO 360-degree concept within the Alliance. Between the Newport and the Warsaw summits, eastern and central European countries gathered several times in an informal grouping called Bucharest nine to monitor the implementation of measures taken for the East in 2014, while openly advocating for increased protection of their territories. They perceived Russia as the main threat against the Alliance and NATO as the “anchor” of their security. On the other hand, southern European countries displayed a strong concern for threats coming from the South, such as illegal migrations and terrorism, and developed a more tempered discourse on Russia. They gathered in an informal grouping called the Southern Quartet, whose actions followed the same modus operandi as Bucharest nine while being less publicised than its eastern counterpart.

This partition of the Alliance between these two groups has often been described as a sign of an irreconcilable split between the allies. The Warsaw summit was then used as an opportunity to show its cohesion by considering in its communiqué all threats coming from both the eastern and southern flanks of the Alliance. If it encompassed the “arc of insecurity”, the declaration was nonetheless mostly focused on the East with regards to the announcement of concrete measures. Its implementation also undoubtedly favoured a reorientation of the Alliance towards the East and the building up of its collective defence capabilities. For their part, measures taken for the South rested upon a light footprint approach and better coordination with NATO partners. Be that as it may, we have
demonstrated in this article that cooperative behaviour and shared understanding between allies have emerged from the intra-Alliance bargaining process following the annexation of Crimea. The negotiations and the implementation of measures ultimately displayed cohesion between allies embodied by the 360-degree concept. Moreover, if eastern allies perceived NATO as the appropriate vehicle for their ambitions, it was not necessarily the case for southern allies who emphasised the need for NATO to work with the EU in the Mediterranean region. Their respective posture coupled with a realistic evaluation of the European security environment explain the refocusing of NATO on its core tasks. The implementation of the NATO 360-degree concept is therefore unbalanced in a way that allows the EU to get more involved in its southern neighbourhood while reassuring the most exposed allies against Russian aggressions. It is nevertheless necessary to interpret these positive results with caution. Indeed, we have tested our hypothesis on a pluralistic security community that does not face war in its territory. Further studies on other configurations of alliances and in wartime are thus necessary before generalising this observation.11

Among other considerations, NATO will have to deal with the negative perception that it is increasing tensions with Russia fuelled by the latter and by some liberty taken periodically in domestic communications.12 Despite ongoing cooperation between allies, this lack of coherence in national discourses represents a challenge for NATO’s overall image on the international stage. This endogenous issue is not new in the history of the Alliance and has never prevented cooperation between allies in the past. However, a better and more harmonised strategic communication is needed at the inter-state level to reinforce the narrative already developed by the Alliance in its various texts.

Notes

1. For an extensive review of positive and negative correlates of group cohesion, see Thompson and Rapkin (1981, p. 624).
2. This fieldwork has been facilitated by our affiliation to the French Defense Ministry research centre (IRSEM), thanks to our DGRIS doctoral funding.
3. We have conducted interviews with civil servants, diplomats, military officers, and international staff from France, Portugal, Germany, Belgium, the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Turkey, Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Italy. To anonymise the interviewees, this paper relies on the method developed by Schmitt (2015) consisting of creating a 3-letters’ and 1-number’s code for each interview. The first letter designates the institutional position of the interviewee (capital, Allied Command Operations, Allied Command Transformation, NATO headquarter in Brussels), the second one designates his/her status (military officer, diplomat, civilian, international staff), and the third one designates his/her nationality. The number is used to differentiate two or more individuals having the same characteristics. If suboptimal, this solution nevertheless allows to access high-ranking officials and to gain the trust of interviewees who would not accept to talk otherwise.
4. This reinvestment of NATO materialised through the obtention of the chairman of the military committee position, the UK’s involvement in Estonia as a framework nation and the tenure of the 2019 NATO summit in London.
5. Federica Mogherini declared in 2016:

We are […] looking at ways in which we can work together, and NATO can support the activities of the European Union, in particular Operation Sophia in the Central Mediterranean, to dismantle the traffickers’ business. But also, maritime security at large in other parts of the world. (Mogherini 2016)
6. The reference of the Warsaw summit communiqué as a “strategic concept by default” was regularly brought on the negotiation tables during our fieldwork within NATO, just like the desuetude of the 2010 Strategic Concept. These observations have been recorded in our ethnographic notebook.

7. The initial staffing number proposed by the Strategic Commands has been mentioned several times in meetings during our fieldwork within NATO and noted in our ethnographic notebook.

8. As underlined during several meetings we attended within NATO and noted in our notebook, Heinrich Brauss, then Assistant Secretary General for Defense Policy and Planning, and SACEUR (General Breedlove and then General Scaparrotti) were presented as the main proponents of the reform among the organisation’s civil and military staff.

9. It is particularly noticeable on the countries’ respective social media (Twitter, Facebook, and governmental websites).


12. The next US presidential election will be crucial in that matter, Donald Trump’s mandate being marked by inconsistent and aggressive communication.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the organisers of the EISS-NDC policy workshop “Intra-Alliance Challenges to NATO’s Cohesion and European Security” for allowing me to present an early version of this article to NATO specialists in November 2019. I also thank the participants for their useful remarks during the workshop. At last, I am grateful to Miroslava Kovacova for having proofread the latest version of my article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Appendix**

**Semi-structured interview questionnaire**

Which countries are the most influential within NATO, why?
Which country representatives are your preferred interlocutors at NATO?
Do you participate in informal meetings/groupings, which ones?
What are the red lines of your country?
Does your country have a proactive stance on specific topics?
How do you negotiate summit Communiqués?
What were the main stakes of the Warsaw summit?
Were you in favour of a reduction of the military structure during the 2010–2012 reform? What were your requests during this reform?
Were you in favour of an increase in the military structure during the NCS-adaptation reform? what were your requests during this reform?
Do you consider that the current French and EU operations in Africa contribute to the security of the Alliance?
How do you perceive [country name]’s involvement in eFP?