

NATO's future Maritime policy as an indispensable part of Europe's strategic "Wall of Defense"? / Itay Ron, November 2015

An indispensable part of Europe's strategic "Wall of Defense"?

NATO's Maritime policy must also hold an offensive agenda

"In a rapidly changing environment, NATO must have a pivotal role to protect the world's most important routes of trade & Europe's back yard"

In the field of sports, many coaches' key strategy to win a match is that "the best defense is a good offense". That said, in the field of International Relations (IR), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has yet to materialize its encompassed potential in implementing a comprehensive strategic maritime policy. In this context, NATO should not only operate to prevent existing high threats but must also operate within a strategic frame that will enable the organization to identify root causes and encounter risks before they evolve and require preemptive tactical operations. The rapid process of globalization has led to a constantly changing reality that also results in a disintegration of modern state actors. One of its characteristics is the change towards asymmetric warfare, where non-state actors challenge known international actors in matters of security, diplomacy and even economics. Moreover, today's interconnection of political and economical events has increased intensity that further carries influential implications in matters of local, regional and international volatility. Thus, our "global village" has become a lot more vulnerable to these processes, as a remote local conflict holds a significant potential to initiate parallel regional processes such as mass migration and armed conflicts. Moreover, regional developments have the potential to affect the geo-political arena in which superpowers such as US, China, EU and Russia are likely to respond according to national and international interests of political alliances, foreign policy, security and sustainability which consist a part from the necessity to supply the nations' economical market demands.

In parallel, the world's maritime routes continue to serve as the most crucial and strategic tangible channels for today's global economy. Therefore, security and freedom of travel via maritime routes must be strongly implemented. This means keeping global trade sustainable and preventing, or at least reducing, existing high rates of criminal activities, such as illegal trafficking in firearms, narcotics, natural resources and humans, which eventually finance and sustain conflicts. A comprehensive policy could simultaneously improve Europe's last "Wall of Defense" and an additional offensive agenda. The latter will enable the alliance to mitigate foreseen strategic risks and maintain a status of geo-political deterrence which has recently been perceived as being devaluated by public opinion and political

adversaries. The current refugee crisis, with its influx of both asylum seekers and working migrants, has put to challenge known intra-European alliances. The influx, which was triggered by the Syrian and Libyan internal tribalism and ethnic wars as well as additional conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, reflects an ongoing phenomenon in which migrants from various countries attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea in order to reach the desired peaceful European continent. Moreover, as some of these conflicts encompass states hidden agendas and policies due to geo-political and economical interests, developments could lead to a failed intervention or alternatively result in an abstention that blocks a vital decision-making that need to be made. In parallel, although European economies are in desperate need of labor, the uncontrolled immigration and long-lasting lack of integration could lead to disastrous socio-economic results. Additionally, related consequences such as firearms and narcotics proliferation have increased with the reported illegal human trafficking. Therefore, NATO members together with the EU must act in accordance to try and tackle these phenomena's root causes.

Nevertheless, NATO has achieved a tremendous success in mitigating levels of risk in the notorious Gulf of Aden, in which piracy prevailed and had been a great threat until recently. At the same time, the risk of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has increased significantly and maritime vessels are often attacked while crewmembers are kidnapped for ransom. Moreover, the rise of well armed militant organizations, who breed in a political vacuum, enabled traffickers, pirates and militants to prosper and build up parallel trade systems. Thus, increasing piracy threatens not only maritime routes and human lives but also the needed security for maritime trade routes and economic sustainability. Due to that, a future security Special emphasis must be given to maritime choke points such as the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the upgraded Egyptian Suez canal as well as the Yemeni coast. The rising operational capabilities of the Islamic State affiliated organizations in these regions are likely to endanger ongoing trade in one of the Western world's most prominent maritime routes.

As NATO has already proven that it could successfully "stretch" its operational naval arms, it must further address today's highly volatile reality and accordingly develop a more offensive approach. This will not only further enable the Alliance to tackle increasing threats, such as piracy and human or firearms trafficking, but also to confront and uproot additional activity of militant groups, local militias and criminal elements who fund and fuel local conflicts. An example for that can be given in the case of Somalia's al-Shabaab, where a joint operation pushed the organization from its port towns which were used as a focal point for illegal export of Charcoal and live stock through the Indian Ocean. In this sense, once the actors' capabilities to support and contribute the risk of maritime security are minimized, the risk decreases accordingly. Therefore, should NATO future doctrine to be conducted in a more

strategic manner, the organization and its allies could eliminate a threat before it breaches Europe's last defensive line or alternatively risks crucial maritime routes that will influence the world's economic future.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strategic Identification and monitoring of potential threats' root causes will increase NATO's understanding of local challenges.
2. NATO should empower and delegate partners' naval forces to increase interoperability and sustainability in future operations and to deter the potential resurgence of criminal activity.
3. Additional naval missions in high-risk locations should be initiated in order to extend NATO's influence and assistance to securing the world's vital maritime trade routes.
4. Establishing a high maritime tribunal court, which would be capable of sentencing criminal elements, could further deter non-state actors and curve down illegal maritime activity.