



## **Russia, the Islamic State, and Emerging Non-Traditional Security Challenges for NATO**

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### **Abstract**

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With Russia invading Ukraine and the emergence of the so-called Islamic State group in 2014, NATO's European members suddenly find themselves facing simultaneous threats on two fronts – Russia in its eastern flank and a potential terrorist state in its southern flank in the Mediterranean. In the face of decreased European and U.S. spending, as well as increasing non-traditional security challenges of terrorism, WMD proliferation, and militarization of the Eastern Mediterranean over energy resources, this provides a unique opportunity for NATO to apply the 2010 strategic concept and adopt a southern strategy of cooperative security and crisis management with regional partners and stakeholders for power projection.

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## Analysis

The year 2014 was an *annus horribilis* for transatlantic security, with Russia invading Ukraine and the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. NATO's European members suddenly find themselves facing simultaneous threats on two fronts – Russia in its eastern flank and a potential terrorist state in its southern flank in the Mediterranean.

However, while NATO is confronting an increasingly unstable security environment in its immediate neighborhood, it is concurrently decreasing its defense budget. Moreover, this resource constraint is going to affect NATO's capabilities and doctrine at a time when its focus will be split between multiple significant threats.

In NATO's 2011 Libya campaign, Europeans militaries fielded top-rate troops, ships, and aircraft but had inadequate stockpile of munitions that lasted only weeks or even days. In midst of an airstrike, campaign many nations ran out of munitions, and France began dropping concrete bombs – essentially using advanced aircraft to throw rocks at the enemy. NATO also heavily relies on the United States for critical military capabilities such as surveillance, in-flight refueling, and transportation. And despite pledges to increase defense spending at the September Wales summit, it is unlikely members will follow through, other than those most directly threatened by Russian belligerence such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Germany and Great Britain have already announced further cuts.

In the face of decreased European and U.S. spending, U.S. officials are now focused on bolstering European military "readiness" to remedy previous shortcomings in the Libya campaign and to sustain NATO's military bandwidth. In December, NATO established an initial "assurance force" for rapid deployment, intended to be an interim solution until the Spearhead Force of 4,000-6,000 troops becomes operational in 2016. This force would incorporate lessons learned from the Libya campaign such as developing and improving command and control facilities, weapons and ammunition depots, and airstrips and other facilities to accommodate fielding a force quickly.

NATO hopes this Spearhead Force will reassure member states bordering Russia and re-emphasize the mandate of collective defense. However, the Islamic State group remains a threat in NATO's southern flank; this is where the other two missions elaborated in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, crisis management and cooperative security, come into play.

In the Mediterranean, NATO can apply the "smart defense" of cooperative security with existing Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) partners, as well as Arab Gulf states in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), for crisis management and power projection. With the increasing non-traditional security challenges of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction proliferation, and militarization of the Eastern Mediterranean over energy resources, this presents a unique opportunity for NATO to adopt a southern strategy with regional partners and stakeholders.

On counter-terrorism, NATO is considering leveraging the experience of Asian global partners such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand from its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan and applying it toward combating the Islamic State group. In fact, in May 2014, the NATO Defense College convened a conference in Vancouver, Canada, on NATO's Asia pivot called "Euro-Atlantic Meets Asia-Pacific," with a special focus on preserving the valuable interoperability and partnerships gained from the ISAF coalition. Shortly thereafter, the rise of the Islamic State group in July and August presented an opportunity to maintain cooperative security between NATO members and its Asia-Pacific partners.



Indeed, NATO's security cooperation with Asian partners on counter-terrorism will continue to be relevant in its Asia policy portfolio post-Afghanistan. In an age of globalization, terrorism is a virulent contagion that has spread to both the Middle East and Asia. According to Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, the Islamic State group has already recruited thousands of fighters from Muslim populations in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, China's Xinjiang province, and elsewhere. NATO can thus leverage its counter-terrorism interoperability with ISAF partners to foment a comprehensive regional strategy to combat the spread of the Islamic State.

Linked with counter-terrorism, preventing nuclear terrorism and arresting WMD proliferation is also important for NATO's MD and ICI partners in the Mediterranean, as well as for its Asian partners. Given that Pakistan is a fertile breeding and recruitment ground for Islamic extremists, there is growing concern that the Islamic State group may acquire Pakistani nuclear weapons. Should this occur, NATO would have a nuclear-armed terrorist state in its southern neighborhood, a frightening prospect.

NATO and its partners also share stakes in maintaining energy and maritime security in face of the increasing militarization of the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition to NATO-Russian naval rivalry spilling over from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, Turkey, Cyprus, Greece, and Israel are also increasing their military presence in their scramble over hydrocarbon resources in the Levantine basin. Additionally, China has entered the Mediterranean and conducted joint naval war games with Russia to signal its stakes in regional stability, while Russia has established a permanent Mediterranean naval task force to signal its return to the region.

Looking ahead, with declining transatlantic defense spending, rising non-traditional security challenges, and a revanchist Russia, NATO will increasingly rely on cooperative security with partners for power projection, and Europe and North America will have to pivot together with their Asian partners to address various security challenges across the globe.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed are those of the author.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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