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NATO: Time to Refocus and Streamline

Is it time for NATO's European partners to assume a greater array of roles and responsibilities? Samir Tata thinks so. Today, he outlines the changes the Alliance needs to make, especially if it wants to cope with a resurgent Russia and the dangerous instability of North Africa.

By Samir Tata for ISN

With almost a quarter century passed since the end of Cold War, it is now high time for the United States to insist that the European members of NATO assume their fair share of defense responsibilities within the context of a streamlined and refocused alliance. Almost all member-states face a decade of austerity, meaning that security obligations will have to be realigned to match diminished resources. This, in turn, reflects that NATO must address two very different security challenges over the next decade: Russia and North Africa.

Moscow's 'Key Strengths'

NATO must acknowledge the re-emergence of Russia as a regional power that is seeking to restore its sphere of influence over Ukraine, Belarus, the Balkans and Central Asia. In order to achieve this, Moscow is focused upon maximizing its four key strengths: oil and gas, nuclear energy, nuclear weapons and conventional military weapons. Russia has the world's largest [reserves](#) of natural gas (1,680 Tcf) and the ninth largest reserves of oil (60 billion barrels), and is not afraid to use them in order to maximize leverage over its neighborhood. Indeed, Moscow's suspension of [gas shipments](#) via its pipeline network to Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 and Belarus in 2007, coupled with the [invasion of Georgia](#) in 2008, are leading indicators of Russia's determination to reassert its power and regional influence.

Currently, oil and gas exports to Europe constitute the foundation of Russia's economic security, and help finance the country's economic development and military modernization. In 2011, Europe accounted for about 70 percent of Russia's oil and gas exports, with NATO members such as Germany and Turkey heavily dependent upon Moscow for energy security. It is highly likely, therefore, that Russia will seek to exploit the growing [energy dependence of NATO's European members](#) to exert greater political influence.

Exports of conventional military weapons to China, India and Iran are the second element of Russia's economic security. In 2012, for example, [arms sales to India](#) were estimated to account for 60% (approximately \$8 billion) of Russia's total military exports. Moscow also hopes that exports of [nuclear energy power plants](#) for electricity generation - particularly to Iran and India - will become an additional element of its economic security. Indeed, these are likely to gain in importance given that

arms sales to Syria, the fourth major client of Russia, are unlikely to be sustainable as the regime of Bashar al-Assad implodes.

Russia's parity with the U.S. with respect to nuclear weapons is the key to its status as a major military power. Moscow views the proposed U.S. missile defense shield in Europe, which is ostensibly aimed at Iran, as a potential threat to the nuclear balance. It claims that the proposed missile defense shield is a NATO ploy to degrade the effectiveness of Russia's second strike capability. In order to safeguard its nuclear deterrence strategy, Russia has warned that as part of its nuclear weapons targeting plans it would specifically target NATO member countries hosting the missile defense shield.

Further South

The potential for problems along NATO's eastern flank are complemented by the political travails that continue to grip parts of the Middle East and North Africa. As recent events in Egypt and Algeria amply demonstrate, the region remains in the throes of reform, revolution and social turmoil. The fact that a strong Islamist undercurrent (that carries the risk of Islamic fundamentalism coming to the fore) persists suggests that instability will remain the handmaiden of change across the region for the foreseeable future. This is of particular concern for those member-states that rely upon Libyan and Algerian oil and gas supplies and are often the first port of call for migrants seeking to escape this politically volatile region.

In this respect, NATO's 2011 intervention in the Libyan conflict on the side of anti-Gaddafi insurgents reflected the Alliance's determination to ensure a degree of stability along its southern borders. It is also reflected a commitment on the part of some European member-states to prevent the emergence of a security vacuum in a strategically important country located in its backyard. Yet there were nevertheless [serious disagreements](#) within NATO over the extent of its intervention in Libya. Germany offered little in the way of support, Turkey insisted on a veto with respect to air attacks on Libyan ground forces, and the United States preferred France and the United Kingdom to lead operations.

Necessary Steps

In order to ensure that NATO remains an effective and relevant transatlantic military and political alliance in the twenty first century, the following five key steps need to be taken. First, NATO must agree on its security challenges: Russia and North Africa, with energy security as the common link. Narrowing NATO's strategic focus will help the alliance to determine the optimum size and structure of the military force required.

Second, the United States should support the rise of Germany as the dominant economic and political power of the European Union, while insisting that Berlin assumes commensurate military responsibilities in NATO. As the [Eurozone crisis worsens](#) as a consequence of government deficits, Berlin is demanding and gaining greater control over EU monetary and fiscal policy in return for its attempts to preserve the Euro as the common currency. With deep cuts in government spending across the EU, Germany will have to step in and significantly increase its defense budget should it assume its role as the dominant European member of NATO.

Third, the United States should encourage the United Kingdom and France to reconsider the viability of maintaining [independent nuclear weapons programs](#) while sharply reducing conventional military forces. The United States, with its vast arsenal of nuclear weapons, provides a robust nuclear weapons shield to all its NATO allies. Accordingly, it would be more cost effective for London and Paris to maintain militaries designed to address the 'conventional' challenges facing NATO. Put simply, the nuclear weapons of Great Britain and France are not only superfluous, they are a drain on severely strained defense budgets and reduce rather than enhance the effectiveness of NATO's conventional

military forces.

Fourth, Washington should acknowledge Turkey's critical role as the geo-strategic lynchpin of NATO's eastern flank and as an alternative energy hub for Europe. Turkey is expected to play an increasingly important role as the [transit corridor](#) for pipelines carrying oil and gas from the Caspian Sea and potentially the Persian Gulf. In the future, oil and gas from Iran, Iraq and Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan could be transported by pipelines transiting Turkey. This may help these countries to diversify their energy exports away from China (and Russia) and towards Europe. It is also possible that such developments might run concurrently with [European attempts to reduce dependence](#) on Russian oil and gas (which will be even greater given Germany's decision to phase out nuclear power plants).

Turkey may also eventually serve as a broker for U.S.-Iranian rapprochement and arguably remains the NATO member-state with the most to gain from the successful resolution of conflict in Syria. With these factors in mind, the United States should also recognize that Turkey will have to cooperate with Iraq, Iran and Syria in addressing the common challenge of [Kurdish separatism](#). In addition, Turkey might be able to use its abundant water resources as a bargaining tool in efforts to resolve the Israel-Palestine dispute and other security challenges facing the Levant region. Although ultimately cancelled, [Turkey's 2004 agreement](#) to export water to Israel indicates the potential for Ankara to play 'hydropolitics'.

Finally, the United States should reiterate its commitment to providing a nuclear umbrella to all NATO members and, at the same time, announce that it will be significantly reducing and restructuring its conventional military forces in Europe. The burden of maintaining the appropriate conventional military force structure must be borne primarily by NATO's European members, including Turkey. If Europe fails to rise to the challenge in an era of austerity, it will ensure that a hollowed out NATO will be strategically irrelevant.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[NATO in the 'New' MENA Region](#)

[Emerging Security Challenges: A Glue for NATO and Partners?](#)

[Building Future Transatlantic Interoperability Around a Robust NATO Response Force](#)

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