ISN
ETH Zurich

16 March 2015

NATO’s African Quartet: Forging a New Strategic Partnership

Samir Tata thinks that NATO will need to forge new strategic partnerships with Algeria, Angola, Libya and Nigeria in the coming years. That’s because this African quartet is set to play a greater role in safeguarding the Alliance’s energy security.

By Samir Tata for ISN

Africa will loom large in NATO’s security calculus over the next decade. Libya and Algeria in North Africa, and Nigeria and Angola in West Africa will become central to Europe’s energy security as it moves to sharply reduce its reliance on Russian oil and gas imports. NATO will also have to marshal its maritime security resources to sustain a major effort to combat piracy in the Gulf of Guinea in order to safeguard the flow of oil and gas to Europe. In addition, the Alliance will be confronted with very difficult decisions with respect to military intervention as internecine conflict along ethnic, tribal and religious lines roil failed states like Libya, and threaten fragile ones like Algeria and Nigeria. Simply put, NATO must recalibrate its priorities and forge a new partnership with Algeria, Libya, Nigeria and Angola to reflect the increasing strategic importance of this African quartet to the Alliance.

Restructuring NATO energy security

From Europe’s perspective, the combination of geographic proximity, friendly relations, and substantial oil and gas reserves makes the aforementioned quartet of energy producers the obvious diversification alternative to Russia. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), the combined proven oil reserves of these states total 106.9 billion barrels, well in excess of Russia’s 80 billion barrels. As regards natural gas, the picture is less rosy but nonetheless comfortable. The African quartet has combined proven gas reserves of 404.2 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) compared to Russia’s mammoth reserves of 1,688 Tcf. The key challenge for NATO will be to craft a long term partnership that ensures economic security for the four African countries and energy security for NATO’s European members.

Undoubtedly, the most serious consequence of NATO’s ongoing confrontation with Russia over Ukraine’s determination to join the Alliance (or at least gain the implicit protection of its security umbrella) has been the decision to wager NATO’s energy security against Russia’s economic security. NATO’s strategy is to exploit the fact that Russia’s economic security depends on its energy exports to Europe. In 2012, revenues from energy exports funded about half of the Russian government budget. And Europe accounted for about 79 per cent of Russian oil exports and 76 per cent of Russian gas exports. On the flip side, in 2012 Europe depended upon Russia to meet 55 per cent of its oil and gas import requirements. Mutual interdependence has been trumped by national security interests of Russia and political objectives of NATO.

In addition, European oil imports amounted to 10.5 million barrels per day, while total gas imports were 8.4 Tcf in 2012. Russia supplied 5.8 million barrels per day of oil and 4.6 Tcf of gas. By imposing sanctions on Russia's oil and gas industry, NATO has signaled that it is prepared to wage economic war, including an embargo on European imports of Russian oil and gas. Accordingly, Europe must now find a replacement for Russia as an alternative source of supply for its energy import requirements. The African quartet of energy producers fits the bill.

According to the latest statistics compiled by the EIA, Algeria, Libya, Nigeria and Angola produce about 7 million barrels per day of oil and exported about 6 million barrels per day. To cover the loss of Russian oil, the quartet would have to increase production by about 5.8 million barrels per day (assuming no redirection of non-European sales) - almost double its oil production. Obviously, it will require a major multi-year investment program funded by European and American oil companies (backed by EU and US guaranties) to achieve this objective. If the African quartet can increase oil production by 15 per cent per annum, they will be able to double production within five years. Setting such a goal for the quartet is reasonable, given the fact that with only three quarters of the reserves of the African quartet, Russia currently produces 10.5 million barrels per day. Of course, while African oil production is being ramped up, Canada and the United States will have to step in to cover any shortfalls. This would mean drawing down strategic reserves as well as stepping up production based on national security considerations rather than petroleum economics.

The situation with respect to natural gas is similar, although more challenging given the quartet's lower reserves base. In 2012, these countries produced 4.7 Tcf of gas, and exported 3 Tcf, virtually all to Europe. In order to replace European gas imports of 4.6 Tcf supplied by Russia, the African quartet will have to double gas production. This objective can be realized in five years by increasing production by 15 per cent per year. In conjunction with the oil program, an aggressive multi-year investment program will have to be earmarked for gas exploration, development, production and transportation. In particular, liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities will have to be built in the African countries, and corresponding LNG storage and re-gasification facilities will have to be constructed in Europe. In addition, Europe will have to reconfigure and build new gas transmission pipelines to accommodate the switch from Russian to African gas. Also, it is almost certain that the United States and Canada will have to cover any gas shortfalls, both during the ramp up period as well over the longer term.

Security of African oil and gas flows

The biggest challenge to switching from Russian to African energy supplies is neither time nor money, but security. Libya, Algeria and Nigeria all face formidable internal security challenges with only Angola enjoying stability over the past decade. Following the overthrow of the Muammar Qaddafi regime in 2011 (with the help of NATO), Libya is effectively in the midst of civil war as competing militias, some of them radical Islamists, vie for control of the country. Algeria has also been engaged in a long-term effort to root out a stubborn Islamic fundamentalist rebellion. Also, the current (four-time) president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, is seriously ill and political instability is a distinct possibility while rivals jockey to succeed him.

Nigeria has just postponed national elections for six weeks from 14 February to 28 March, while the army fights Boko Haram Islamic insurgents in the north. Nigeria's security woes are further compounded by widespread oil theft (primarily through illegal tapping of oil pipelines) by armed

Christian groups operating in the country’s south - the Niger Delta region where the oil fields are located. Ensuring the security of the oil and gas fields ultimately is the responsibility of the respective African governments. At best, NATO can help them equip and train special forces to safeguard the energy infrastructure.

However, the Alliance also has the responsibility to ensure freedom of navigation in international waters in the Gulf of Guinea. If oil and LNG is to flow from Nigeria and Angola to Europe, tankers will have to travel through or near this sea line of communication (SLOC). Piracy is a growing menace in the region, with tankers carrying Nigerian oil presenting particularly lucrative targets. As Europe increases its reliance on African energy imports, piracy becomes a key issue for NATO as it seeks to safeguard the continent’s energy security. Accordingly, NATO will have to organize a special maritime force (which will involve rebalancing scarce, existing naval assets) to ensure there is a robust long-term naval presence to deter and, if necessary, combat pirates operating in the Gulf of Guinea.

The impulse for humanitarian military intervention

Humanitarian military intervention has been a major focus of NATO since the end of the Cold War. NATO military interventions in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) were shaped by the sense that the Alliance had a responsibility to prevent the imminent genocide of Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims in its own backyard. Similarly, humanitarian considerations were invoked to support military intervention in 2011 that ultimately led to the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi.

Arguably, in all three cases there were at least three other important considerations driving NATO intervention. First, both the Balkans and North Africa, by virtue of geographic propinquity, were implicitly considered to fall within NATO’s sphere of influence. Second, there was a fear that endemic violence and political instability could trigger a flood of refugees that, in turn, would impose an unbearable burden on neighboring NATO countries. Third, given NATO’s overwhelming power, military intervention would involve minimal Alliance casualties. In the case of Libya, there was a fourth consideration – it is a key source of oil and gas for Europe.

As the countries of the African quartet become increasingly important to the Alliance’s energy security, the impulse for NATO (humanitarian) military intervention will grow. NATO must resist this temptation. Instead, the Alliance must become an “agent of change”, and craft a preventive economic and social program of growth and development for its African partners. This will entail a major multi-year effort on the part of the EU and United States to coordinate, collaborate and partner with multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, African Development Bank and International Monetary Fund to ensure that Algeria, Libya, Nigeria and Angola develop into prosperous, vibrant and stable democracies.

The partnership between NATO and the African quartet will be a completely new chapter, with no prologue to guide them. They must rise to the challenge and seize this unanticipated opportunity for mutual benefit.

For more information on issues and events that shape our world, please visit the ISN Blog or browse our resources.

Samir Tata is a foreign policy analyst. He previously served as an intelligence analyst with the National-Geospatial Intelligence Agency, a staff assistant to Senator Dianne Feinstein, and a researcher with Middle East Institute, Atlantic Council and National Defense University.

Publisher

International Relations and Security Network (ISN)