
PERSPECTIVE FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS AND STRENGTHENING THE NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

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Abstract: A reflection process shall be launched to see if the NATO is ready to face the challenges of tomorrow. The main aim of this paper will be to outline what are the perspectives and challenges according to the Balkan countries and what is the role of NATO in the Eastern Flank. Collecting of views from the region will give some ideas and propositions how to make the Alliance stronger and more effective politically and militarily.

The western Balkans is one of the longest lasting and largest investments that NATO has made throughout time. The Western Balkans is the most articulate because of the complexity of the region. As the WB is so articulate and complex and the relationships since the 1990s between NATO and the region of the WB have evolved. The three main pillars of the NATO strategic concept are deterrence and defence crisis management and cooperative security. Now we have two new NATO tools that are helping the region - capacity building to the civil military team (NATO advisory team which support the set up of security force in Kosovo) and enhanced interaction which is a basket of tailored activities (it is not a partnership because there are some of the Allies that do not the declaration of independence of Kosovo) that have been revised by the North Atlantic Council- building integrity and civil emergency planning. The common point between all the countries of the WB which have joined the partnership of peace is the contribution that they give to the security and stability of the region and to this idea of projecting stability. When NATO's neighbours are stable the Alliance itself will be more stable. The open door policy a cornerstone of the Washington treaty- for many countries of the WB it is a cornerstone for becoming members and to assume the responsibilities and the obligations (and the willingness and ability to assume them) that come with this membership. Political dialogue and practical cooperation are crucial for the countries especially from the region of the Western Balkans to foster the regional understanding and to share common expertise. Speaking about the Geopolitics in the Balkans and in South Eastern Europe, my first point is about the current geopolitical dynamics. SE Europe and even The Balkans are not anymore in the centre of world politics in the role of the trouble maker in the region, like it was in the late 90s of the last and in the beginning of this century. But they continue to be a field for political manoeuvring of the geopolitical players dominated by the desire to confer spheres of interest and to mutually deter each other. We shall not forget that precisely democracy is the element that binds all members and the liberal economic principles are the cornerstone of this common identity. A more equitable burden sharing and ascending defense spending (2% or less currently) is an important benchmark for the future preparedness of the Alliance. The transatlantic relation was a point discussed largely in reflection process. A future goal for the Alliance shall be defining a mutually beneficial strategic and burden sharing equilibrium between North American and European members. An advance in the foreign and security policy objectives of Washington in Asia will be a good addition to this. What can be more is that NATO must continue to deepen and strengthen the already existing relationship. This mainly can be conducted through expanding its roster of partnerships, gaining actionable intelligence, strengthening early warning systems and improving crisis management to be nimbler politically and operationally.

B9 Alliances members need to leave their operational comfort zones and look to further their contributions in zones of instability in Africa and Middle East that could spill over to Europe.

Keywords: Western Balkans, NATO Eastern Flank, security challenges on the Balkans, NATO strategic concept, Black Sea

1. INTRODUCTION

A reflection process shall be launched to see if the NATO is ready to face the challenges of tomorrow. The main aim of this paper will be to outline what are the perspectives and challenges according to the Balkan countries and what is the role of NATO in the Eastern Flank. Collecting of views from the region will give some ideas and propositions how to make the Alliance stronger and more effective politically and militarily.

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To start with, NATO is not a geopolitical player, as far it is a security Alliance, it is a vehicle for policy implementation and of course it does reflect common policies and approaches. The mission is accomplished for NATO in the Balkans from the point of membership, after the Republic of North Macedonia joined. Now for NATO it is a matter of substance and performance in the region, rather than a matter of enlargement. To add more, we should state the fact that Russia has always been a factor in the Balkans, at least the last 2 and half centuries. But Russia has never been an alternative for the Balkans, in the course of the last two and a half decades and though apart from energy supplies Russia doesn't have the economical might and the economic resources and the ideological alternatives to divide the region. All the countries from the region have made their choice and have officially declared their euro-Atlantic orientation. The more assertive is Russia's behaviour the more tensions appear towards it, although most of the countries public opinion, in general, in the region towards Russia is friendly, apart from the conflict with Monte Negro. Paradoxically, Russia acquires some certain artificial secondary geopolitical alternatives from the confrontation. In fact, there are players that are offering geopolitical alternatives in the region and that are challenging the EU and NATO.

First of all, China has always had a long term approach towards the region and its strategy goes around transforming its economic might into political influence and offering a non-western road to the countries of the region in the long run through the Balkan road initiative, which is a new strategic direction in the Chinese foreign policy towards Europe, after Africa and Latin America, now the Balkans are the stop in the road to Europe which China has headed. Another player offering an alternative to the region is the Radical Islam. It is offering not to countries but to the individuals and not a non-western and not in the long run but in the short run and the nutritious environment for the Islam are the wars and the conflicts, which in fact create divisions and hatred. Will the Balkan Islam be a barrier or a breach for radicalization of Europe? And a recent study of our institute has reached the conclusion that the moderate Balkan Islam is a barrier for the radicalisation, but it is a barrier but it can be easily lifted, through influence of forces that are external to the region.

Shifting the accent in the EU from integration to security which is natural for NATO but not so natural for the EU changes the entire political optics. The region is degraded from apart the EU the larger European objects into a subject of geopolitical ambitions. And as a result the region might be facing two equally not desirable options- being transformed into a buffer zone that means a great periphery zone of instability or into a playground for domination. So, the possibilities to evade these two scenarios are also in two directions –first, belonging meaning European and Euro Atlantic integration and Regionalization meaning cooperation. The Balkans is transformed into an area of relative tranquillity with a very low probability of any external military threat to South East European and to Balkan states. The main problems in the region are primarily internal problems. The security and defence doctrine of mostly all states in South Eastern Europe mention non-military threads to their security separatism, Nationalism, religious intolerance, illegal migration, organized crime, illegal traffic of arms and narcotic traffic, illegal narcotics from Afghanistan (heroin) and cocaine from Latin America. The illegal traffic of arms that are used in terrorist attacks is something which shall not apply to a country belonging to the EU.

The challenges for security are not military, and the other again non-military challenges are the energy dependence and the current situation with the pandemic, which have produced a very considerable economic slump, imposing a cut in governmental spending and a cut in defence spending. It is very important that in the Western Balkans we

have several actor's influence and that is the basics of the political evolution and that are we can extract the basic idea in the reflection process and to pass on to our representatives in the reflection process and from our point of view, for sure we are going to intervene in the debate for the wider Black Sea. We need that observance that the main security problems are inside the region and that great powers and regional powers and countries that have ambitions in the regions are creating or accelerating some problems in the region and that we have unsolved conflicts, conflict that emerge from time to time when the tension between the countries involved are overwhelmed and those powers are acting and this is why we need cohesiveness, unity and strengthening the Trans Atlantic bond and the EU-NATO relationship in order to be sure that this type of effort will give us strengths, and being even stronger in order to be sure that this type of effort would give at least strengths, enlargement is a part of the policy that will give us incentives, and the presence, the footprint of those organizations on the Western Balkans not talking only about military and security issues, but on economy, investment and democracy development.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE REFLECTION GROUP FOR ENHANCING THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF NATO

- The regions can be a source for various risks, apart from the security risk within the Trans Atlantic Alliance itself, all successes of NATO and the EU in the region have been seen when the bond working, meaning when US and Europe going in a coordinated approach for the region.
- The situation now is not like that. For instance, the meeting between Kosovo and Serbia in previous week was quite clearly driven by the White House and not with consultation with the EU. It was about Mr Trump middle-eastern policy and not about the regions tensions. There were two different agreements signed.
- Coordination and cooperation on the both sides of the Atlantic will be the only way this situation will be resolved.
- The level of trust in the EU is not very high
- Working not even in parallel and get a bit of reaction.
- The NATO member states in the area need to have a higher degree of public opinion support. On the average, the public opinion support for the governments and for NATO in most of SE EU countries is lower than for instance in Poland and pre-Baltic states.
- The latest public opinion survey showed it is lowering and the majority of the respondents in Greece and Turkey expressed an unfavourable view of NATO, 50 plus percent, and the most negative view of NATO is in Serbia. The latest indication was the failed referendum in Macedonia. And the fact the regime in Monte Negro is not there to call the referendum.
- There is a general disappointment and insufficient help to resolve internal problems. In order to make NATO more effective in the area something should be done.

The main problem that was evidenced throughout the discussion

- The discrepancy that NATO is a security guarantee of the region
 - The political presence of NATO in the region and it has to do with internal development in NATO
 - Different countries and region have different securities risks and it is a matter of cohesion and internal unity especially in our region having Turkey and Greece, and more united political presence of NATO here in the region.
- Defence sovereignty shall be built in the region with the right energy and to keep the Black Sea and the Balkans high on the NATO agenda. Operating in the Black Sea presents a number of challenges, especially for the countries that are geographically not close to the region. The Montreux convention is one of those challenges to the non Black Sea countries as it limits their time they can legally be in the Black Sea Basin and place more restrictions to those countries. There shall be an establishment of a NATO Black Sea strategy and development of more meaningful ways to improve regional security.

To elaborate on the theme does not NATO needs an amended strategic concept? In the currently changing geopolitical situation and the growing political tension in many areas of the world, yes it does.

Firstly, building defence capabilities and modernization of the armed forces of NATO member countries was found of crucial importance in the constantly changing global environment. In the reflection process it was a point of word made that the B9 NATO members shall continue their investment policy in the defense capabilities and to achieve defined hardware guidelines to contribute to operations. What is a really important task is the creation process of a credible Alliance policy of deterrence. A priority shall be the ensuring of requirements that will adequately contribute to "Four-30's initiative". From a Reception Staging and Onward Movement (RSOM) perspective improvement is needed vis- à-vis military mobility in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe to successfully facilitate large movements of equipment and personnel across swaths of terrain during peace and conflict time, where civilian infrastructure should be modernized and standardized to satisfy military requirements throughout the Alliance. Effectively respond to Russian treats is part of the improvement of the concept that will be beneficial to implement for all. The challenges don't come only from the East and this is something important when the geopolitics is

reflected upon. It shall be admitted that the NATO – Russia pillar is more or less unrealistic at this point. And we have to mention that China is aspiring for global leadership which makes the threat more global.

Secondly, the disruptive technologies are also an issue in many NATO countries. We shall try to capture the potential of emerging technology as it would create an even further and potentially irreversible gap in interoperability in that area. B9 political leaders need to embrace the economic benefits that can be derived from sustained investment in defense technology and its ability to stimulate growth and profitability. An idea that will help this will be that the B9 Members and NATO should hold strategic consultations to determine the best way forward to help them raise their inputs on emerging technology.

Another very important issue that was contemplated at the discussion was resiliency. Resiliency shall be in the forefront in NATO agenda. It can be also a part of building capacity in this evolving evolution in the world. Internal resiliency shall be generated and it shall be made greater by the B9 countries so in this way they will be able to contribute to Alliance wide resiliency. This contribution will ensure readiness in the face of a diverse set of crisis. High tech, 5G and artificial intelligence shows us that the concentration of production was used as a tool during the harsh times against our countries and we have to keep this in mind. Another idea how this area can be strengthened is to create a new NATO contact group which will be focused on resiliency.

The fourth major focus of the discussion was that on the global level it was agreed that there shall be find a way to overcome the growing political tensions and the divergent views of the different countries. The Transatlantic bond and its further strengthening needs more engagement and an equalized balance in the responsibilities and duties that North American and European members have can add to this. Also the publicly reinforced commitment of the United States to NATO and Article V was a point made that can raise this awareness across the ocean. The political tensions are growing now in the EU on burden sharing, on climate, on trade and on China and especially on multilateralism. The elections in America will definitely have an impact on the view that will have to be elaborated on security and defence. How can B9 group react and do more about those challenges and how to approach all this issues? Future Emergencies, threats, crisis, and disasters will force NATO into frequent action which shall be act together and stay strong together. In the future NATO needs to communicate its new identity that it is willing, ready, and able to bring security to its nearly one billion citizens and international assistance to partners.

3. CONCLUSION

We shall not forget that precisely democracy is the element that binds all members and the liberal economic principles are the cornerstone of this common identity. A more equitable burden sharing and ascending defense spending (2% or less currently) is an important benchmark for the future preparedness of the Alliance. The transatlantic relation was a point discussed largely in reflection process. A future goal for the Alliance shall be defining a mutually beneficial strategic and burden sharing equilibrium between North American and European members. An advance in the foreign and security policy objectives of Washington in Asia will be a good addition to this. What can be more is that NATO must continue to deepen and strengthen the already existing relationship. This mainly can be conducted through expanding its roster of partnerships, gaining actionable intelligence, strengthening early warning systems and improving crisis management to be nimbler politically and operationally.

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