

## ADAPTATION OF NATO TO THE NEW REALITIES FROM ALLIED EASTERN AND SOUTHERN FLANKS

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*NATO has had to constantly adapt to the new challenges that emerge on the global stage. In order to succeed, the Alliance has adapted each time its involvement has been requested. In this regard, NATO has well overcome the problem of fighting terrorism, improving cyber security and the effort required to remain in solidarity with Ukraine to date. On the eastern flank, NATO is strengthening its defences by increasing the number of troops and weapon systems available and rethinking defence plans to deal with possible aggression from the Russian Federation. On the southern flank, the North Atlantic Alliance wants a consolidation of states in North Africa and the Middle East that have been divided by civil wars and better management of illegal migration. All the new challenges that have arisen and may arise require a thorough preparation of NATO members for an increasingly unstable future. The purpose of this article is to present how NATO is adapting to the challenges coming from the eastern and southern flanks. The hypothesis I am starting from is that NATO's adaptation to the new realities on the two flanks represents a challenge for the organization. The research method used in this article is the case study.*

*Keywords: NATO; Eastern flank; Southern flank; Russian Federation; Ukraine;*

### INTRODUCTION

The challenges for NATO, from its beginnings (April 1949) to the present, caused by geopolitical changes, have been multiple and complex. NATO had to reinvent itself after several unforeseen changes, such as: the end of the Cold War (when the main adversaries – the Warsaw Pact and the USSR – disappeared), the challenge brought by the rise of international terrorism and the emergence of new powers in Asia.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by the trend of continuous change. At the political, economic, social and military level, the world is changing, as a result of the emergence of the phenomenon of resistance to globalization. Every international actor wants to remain competitive and be able to provide a clear vision on how to manage emerging issues.

The world, based on economic cooperation and open societies, could not exist if every power imposed trade taxes and, through military power, imposed spheres of influence. In this century, in addition to the classic challenges, new challenges have emerged that the North Atlantic Alliance must face.

New challenges have arisen on NATO's eastern flank due to the modernization of the Russian military arsenal and the desire of the Russian Federation to regain its old spheres of influence. Another challenge for NATO is given by the maintenance of a tense situation in the area of the South Caucasus and the Black Sea, where there are frozen conflicts that can be reactivated at any time. The most recent case was the resumption of the conflict between Armenia, supported by the Russian Federation, and Azerbaijan, militarily supported by Turkey, since September 2023.

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine resumed on 24 February 2022. According to Moscow officials, this “special operation” was aimed at removing the neo-Nazi leadership from Kiev, demilitarizing Ukraine and supporting Russian brothers in the two self-proclaimed independent republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The prolongation of this conflict led to the need for some allied states, neighbouring Ukraine, to support this state more and more, in order not to be defeated.

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the USA began an all-out war against terrorism, involving other allied states and even NATO. The UN issued a resolution that represented the legal framework for states' fight against terrorism. Non-state actors such as the terrorist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah, along with Yemen's Houthi rebels, have become a source of security threat due to their ability to operate regionally. These organizations, financed by Iran, endanger the security of the State of Israel and the entire security environment in the region. Houthi rebels are a danger to shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the use of computers and satellites in communication has increased the speed of data and information transmission. This is beneficial both economically and militarily. If data transmission networks are overloaded, they freeze and stop working. The first NATO member state to be cyberattacked was Estonia in 2007. Since then, NATO and the EU have secured their cyberspaces. Thus, an Allied Centre of Excellence for Cyber Defence Cooperation (CCDCOE) was created in Tallinn.

Moreover, this century is one of continuous change; *"In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, social ties are transnational, mutual dependencies are global. Covid-19 amply demonstrated this, as did the far-reaching consequences of Russian aggression against Ukraine. In Central Europe, related debates on EU enlargement, economic development challenges, as well as political, social and cultural ones are intertwined"* (Pries, 2023, p. 1).

The purpose of this article is to present how NATO is adapting to the challenges coming from the eastern and southern flanks. The three main objectives of the research are: to present the existing situation in NATO's eastern flank by analysing the challenges from this flank, to analyse the existing situation in NATO's southern flank by highlighting the challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and to detail the role played by NATO in combating terrorism. The hypothesis I am starting from is that NATO's adaptation to the new realities on the two flanks represents a challenge for NATO. The research method used in this article is the case study. In order to find out how NATO is preparing to respond to the multiple challenges to which it is obliged to respond, we used the following sources of documentation: official NATO and UN websites and documents (www.nato.int, www.un.org, *Washington Summit Declaration, United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*), specialist articles and media sites.

## CHALLENGES FOR NATO ON THE EASTERN FLANK

NATO and the EU are trying to help certain states in Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. NATO has partnerships with these states in various fields of activity in order to increase the capacity of the armed forces. The EU, through financial and logistical support, wants to bring the eastern states closer together and prepare them for future EU accession. These efforts were made difficult by the presence of separatist entities within these states: *"Not surprisingly, the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space are located in the strategically important region of the Black Sea, on the territory of sovereign states such as Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh)<sup>1</sup>, Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria) and, more recently, Ukraine (the so-called <people's republics> of Donetsk and Lugansk)"* (New Strategy Center, 2016, p. 3). Crimea was occupied in 2014 amid great instability in Ukraine following the 2013 Euromaidan.

In order to better understand the Eastern region of Europe, especially the former states of the USSR that emerged after the collapse of the communist colossus, the issue of frozen conflicts on their territory must be highlighted. All these conflicts are related to the Russian Federation (Ib.). *"Moscow steps in to impose ceasefires or other temporary arrangements, halting hostilities for a time but leaving the root causes untouched. In some cases, this entails the continuation of the Russian military presence in the form of <peacekeeping troops>, in order to secure additional leverage for long-term geopolitical advantages. Moscow's interest in generating and maintaining such foci of latent tension is to control the whole (sovereign states or areas of strategic interest) by establishing control over a part (the conflict zone)"* (Ib., p. 4).

The maintenance of influential figures, who are directly controlled from Moscow, has led over time to the effective control of those regions by the Russian Federation. In this context, Russia's power in the area remained intact for a long time.

The failure to resolve these old conflicts has led to a dilemma for some EU and NATO member states regarding the progress of the eastern states towards their full integration into these two organizations. The unresolved conflict in Ukraine has halted the rise and smooth trajectory towards NATO and the EU.

<sup>1</sup> After the 2023 conflict, as of 1 January 2024, the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Karabakh of Mountain) definitively re-entered under the authority of Azerbaijan, therefore we can no longer speak of a "frozen conflict" in Azerbaijan.

It all culminated in the desire of the Russian Federation to change the leadership in Kiev and annex parts of Ukraine. More than two years have passed since the invasion on 24 February 2022. The war has been at a stalemate for a long time, both sides having problems with troop morale and insufficient stock of weapons and ammunition. After the armed forces of Ukraine entered the territory of the Russian Federation and occupied an area of more than 1,000 square kilometres in the Kursk region, the situation of the war remained uncertain. Kiev claims that this moment represents a position of strength from which peace negotiations with Moscow could begin.

Another challenge for the North Atlantic Alliance that is considered to be overcome concerns the migrant crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus. These actions on the eastern border of NATO and the EU are considered part of a hybrid war that wanted to destabilize the allied states on the eastern flank.

Researcher Crăișor-Constantin Ioniță believes that the world is moving towards a division into two competing blocs: *“Since the beginning of this war on the Eastern European border, considered by politicians and military leaders as the biggest major regional conventional conflict since the end of the Second World War, the international community has been divided and grouped into supporters of each belligerent, only a few countries remaining neutral. Therefore, we can say that, <de facto>, we already have a world divided into two opposing blocs – the Western democracies (NATO, EU, G7) that support Ukraine against the authoritarian regimes (BRICS, most of the G20) close to Russia”* (Ioniță, 2024, p. 10).

Professor Maria Mälksoo appreciates that, on the eastern flank, NATO is increasing its military forces again. During the Cold War, the Americans had about 300,000 troops in Western Europe, which decreased greatly after 1990, only after the aggression of the Russian Federation and the annexation of Crimea, in 2014, the American troops beginning to increase, reaching in 2022 about 100,000 (Mälksoo, 2024, p. 538). *“NATO’s new Strategic Concept, adopted at the alliance’s 2022 Madrid summit, marks its coming full circle, as the alliance’s eastern flank is currently undergoing a remilitarization effort more reminiscent of the Cold War era than the alliance’s post-Cold War leitmotiv of avoiding drawing a new dividing line in Europe”* (Ib.).

Regarding the Black Sea, analyst Ondrej Ditych (2024) believes that there are *“four possible security scenarios”* for the next decade:

1. *Lake interregnum*. The current evolution is maintained, in which case the Russian Federation and Ukraine continue fighting in the Black Sea, and *“all forms*

*of security, including maritime navigation and infrastructure”* (Ditych, 2024, pp. 2-3) are hampered. There is a very high risk of untoward incidents and significant damage to the commercial maritime sector.

2. *Russian lake*. The most dangerous scenario in Ditych’s view. In this scenario, the Russian Federation will control the Black Sea. The scenario assumes the involvement of the Russian Federation *“on multiple fronts – through a successful offensive in southern Ukraine, skilful manipulation of domestic politics in Moldova and Georgia, and potentially pressuring Türkiye to reopen the Straits”* (Ib., p. 3). This would mean that the Russian Federation would own most of the Black Sea coast and control a significant portion of maritime activity (Ib.).

3. *European lake*. It would be the most optimistic scenario due to the cooperation of every Black Sea littoral state, with the exception of the Russian Federation, with the EU. *“Ukraine regains control of Crimea which ceases to be Russia’s strategic bastion. NATO and the EU manage to field denial and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to secure Black Sea navigation and critical infrastructure (including platforms and undersea cables)”* (Ib.).

4. *Lake glacialis*. It is a scenario in which a new Cold War would take place between the Russian Federation and NATO, which would divide the region politically and economically. Depending on the outcome of the current Russian-Ukrainian war, the Black Sea security zone could be included in a larger model of European security architecture (Ib.).

Among all these scenarios, the most convenient for Romania would be the *European lake* scenario, through which both security and commercial interests would be guaranteed.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict highlighted the need for NATO to increase weapons production and the adaptation of the defence industry to new requirements (Olay, 2024). General Christopher G. Cavoli, Commander Allied Forces Europe (SACEUR), argues that: *“It is extremely important that we get this right (...) because I believe that the industrial production of defence items is a critical part of our integrated deterrence”* (Ib.). As a result, it is necessary to create new production capabilities in all allied states.

To strengthen the eastern flank, a state-of-the-art radar from Italy was brought to Romania. *“Radar will mainly be used in military applications to provide comprehensive situational awareness and improve the operational capabilities of various platforms, including military ships and submarines”* (EurActiv, 2024).

In addition to reinforcements with troops and weaponry from the allied eastern flank, better collaboration with NATO partners in the region is needed on the southern flank.

### CHALLENGES FOR NATO ON THE SOUTHERN FLANK

The Russian Federation threatens not only the eastern flank but also the southern flank by creating military bases in Syria and Libya. Through these bases, the Kremlin gets involved in the internal conflicts in these states, supplying weapons to one of the parties. Through this military involvement, the Russian Federation hopes to control these states and gain a bridge to the states of Central Africa and the rest of the Middle East.

In order to have an advantageous position on the southern flank, Moscow began to diversify its positions in the Mediterranean. The best positions are those in Syria, especially the one in the port of Tartous, which is an important distribution centre of armaments for the rest of the military bases. *“In addition to gaining control over natural resources (oil and gas) and the Mediterranean port of Tartous, Russia gained a prominent position to bargain with the US in other countries such as Ukraine and Libya”* (Beaujouan, 2024, p. 8).

Another port located in Libya, Tobruk, is used by Moscow to arm the group led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who controls eastern Libya. The same port is a bridge to the states of Central Africa, where Russian paramilitary groups, such as Wagner, operate.

To deal with these changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to remove any threat, NATO proposes a deepening of relations with most states in the region. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2022) argues that NATO will have a very difficult task in stabilizing this region. *“Meanwhile, the instability emanating from NATO’s southern flank, and the threats from terrorism, organized crime, and irregular mass migration, remain. Political, ethnic, and religious tensions, lack of good governance, a worsening climate crisis, food shortages, proliferation of weapons, and emerging disruptive technologies, will continue to add fuel to conflicts in this region. It is highly doubtful whether current alliance efforts in the South, including NATO’s mission in Iraq (NTM-I), will be sufficient to leave any lasting positive impact on the stability of the region”* (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2022, p. 169).

The anniversary NATO summit in Washington in 2024 reaffirmed the unity among the allies and the desire to continue on the same path to maintain the current world order, based on rules and norms. On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding

of the North Atlantic Alliance, the member states proposed the strengthening of NATO and the need for continuity was emphasized. NATO grew to include 32 members, the last two of which – Finland and Sweden – made the move to the alliance after the Russian-instigated war began. At this summit, which took place between 9-11 July this year, NATO presented in the final statement how the relations between the organization and the states in the southern neighbourhood should evolve: *“NATO’s southern neighbourhood provides opportunities for cooperation on issues of mutual interest. Through our partnerships we aim to foster greater security and stability in the Middle East and Africa, contributing to peace and prosperity in the region. In Vilnius, we launched a comprehensive reflection on threats, challenges, and opportunities in the South”* (NATO, 10 July 2024).

Also at this summit, the North Atlantic Alliance adopted an action plan for NATO’s southern flank. The plan will be updated according to the needs of the Alliance: *“Today we have adopted an action plan for a stronger, more strategic and result-oriented approach toward our southern neighbourhood, which will be regularly updated. We have invited the Secretary General to designate a Special Representative for the southern neighbourhood who will serve as NATO’s focal point for the region and will coordinate NATO’s efforts”* (ib.).

The collaboration with the states of the southern part of the Alliance will continue and be strengthened by creating new liaison centres that will improve relations between NATO and these states: *“We will reinforce our dialogue, outreach, visibility, and our existing instruments for cooperation, such as the Defence Capacity Building Initiative, the Hub for the South and the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait. Together with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan we have agreed to open a NATO Liaison Office in Amman. Building on the success of NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) and based on the request of the Iraqi authorities, we have broadened the scope of our support to the Iraqi Security Institutions and will continue our engagement through NMI”* (NATO, 10 July 2024). In addition, cooperation between NATO and partners on the southern flank is necessary to stop the development and spread of terrorism.

### TERRORISM IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The terrorist attacks in the United States that occurred on 11 September 2001, caused by Al-Qaeda, changed the US position on terrorism. International terrorism has been and continues to be a threat to international peace and security. This phenomenon is described by NATO as: *“The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property*

*in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives” (NATO, 19 August 2016).*

The attacks of 11 September 2001, like those that followed in Europe, changed the perspective on security in democratic states around the world. Terrorism is one of the most complex phenomena of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has become a reality with great global implications, difficult to prevent and manage. At the same time, another important moment that affected the whole world was the US decision by which the US government initiated a global military campaign against international terrorism, involving NATO in this war.

Non-state actors such as the terrorist organizations Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda have become a source of security threat due to their ability to operate regionally and globally and within the state.

The causes that lead to terrorism are: international conflicts, failed state, occupation of a territory, as well as lack of economic development of the state. These cases highlighted the link between terrorism, radicalism and violent extremism, which must be stopped.

The complex issue of terrorism has also been addressed by the UN. In the discussions of the Sixth (Legal) Commission – 71<sup>st</sup> session, the issue of terrorism was extended to the financing of these groups. *“Furthermore, some delegations expressed concern at the nexus between transnational organized crime and terrorism, while other delegations expressed the view that the issues should be understood and addressed separately. In this regard, many delegations stressed the need to address the question of the paying of ransom money, underlying that it constitutes one of the key sources of income for terrorist groups” (UN, 11 November 2021).*

Therefore, it is necessary to understand the factors that influence terrorism in order to be able to prevent people from joining various terrorist groups. The management of this type of threats within international organizations has led to the creation of counter-terrorism strategies (NATO, 5 December 2023). *“NATO’s work on counter-terrorism focuses on improving awareness of the threat, developing capabilities to prepare and respond, and enhancing engagement with partner countries and other international actors” (Ib.).*

The UN proposes a global strategy against terrorism, which is a method of regional and international stimulation to combat terrorism. The UN strategy commits countries to combat terrorism at local, regional and international levels.

In this struggle, countries must respect human rights. They must provide citizens with peace, tranquillity and freedom.

The UN strategy is composed of 4 pillars:

1. *“Measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.*
2. *Measures to prevent and combat terrorism.*
3. *Measures to build States’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the United Nations system in that regard.*
4. *Measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism” (UN, United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy).*

The issue of international terrorism is an integral part of the challenges to which NATO must adapt. NATO member states, at the initiative of the US, took the necessary measures to combat international terrorism, by modifying security strategies and increasing resilience.

## CONCLUSIONS

NATO meets the multiple challenges on its eastern and southern flanks by continuously strengthening and adapting and providing a balanced political-military response. The new changes on the eastern flank forced NATO to take new measures to balance the report of forces in the area. For NATO, the Russian Federation represents the main threat in the short and medium term. The Russian Federation is involved in the destabilization of candidate states for accession. The expansion of NATO in the eastern flank, through the future accession of Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, represents a challenge for the entire alliance, but also a *“red line”* for the Kremlin.

On the southern flank there are several crises and conflicts that may affect the MENA region and, by extension, NATO member states. The conflict between Hamas, Hezbollah and Israel, with the involvement of Iran, has led to extreme tension in the Middle East. As a result, despite NATO’s best efforts, the MENA region will be difficult to stabilize, given the conflict in Gaza and Lebanon, Iran’s threats to Israel, Turkey’s stance on Israel’s military actions, and frequent military coups in the region Sahel and West Africa.

The outbreak of the conflict in Gaza was based on a terrorist action, in which armed and well-trained individuals attacked civilians. The Russian Federation is actively involved in Syria and Libya by creating military facilities that allow

it to control the region. It also has logistics and military facilities in two major ports in Syria (Tartous) and Libya (Tobruk).

All the new challenges that have arisen and may diversify require a thorough preparation of NATO member states for an increasingly unstable future and a permanent adaptation of the North Atlantic Alliance to the requirements of the regional and global security environment.

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