

A SPACE FOR NATO IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

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In his remarks of 8 January 2020 President Trump stated, inter alia, he was 'going to ask NATO to become much more involved in the Middle East process.'

This remark was made following the assassination of Al Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, the commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis of Kata'ib Hezbollah, and their entourage with them on 3 January 2020.

The scheme of 'engaging NATO in the Middle East process' has almost been coterminous with the declaration on 28 January 2020 of the infamous 'Deal of the Century', another but related process prone to becoming, under present circumstances, the debacle of the century.

It is against this backdrop that the issue of involving NATO in the Middle East should be examined in greater detail.

First and foremost one should never ignore the fact NATO has been involved in the Middle East since Turkey acceded to the Alliance in 1952. The Turkish borders with the Middle Eastern countries also represent the NATO borders.

Since the end of the Cold War NATO had been involved, albeit in an indirect manner, in the Middle East by way of reinforcing Turkey's defence, particularly in the field of air and missile defence.

When ISIS started its terror campaign in Iraq and Syria and held large swaths of territory in those countries NATO decided to join the coalition against ISIS thus directly got involved in the Middle East. The assets deployed to Incirlik Airbase and elsewhere in Turkey carried out operations against ISIS signifying the direct involvement of the Alliance as a member of the Coalition.

Stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan against Al Qaida and radical wings of Taliban should also be seen as an integral part of engaging the Middle East at large.

Going even further back the launching of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) in 1994 and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) in 2004 are other manifestations of interest NATO had demonstrably displayed in its ties with the Middle East.

More recently the Alliance initiated the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative in 2014 at the Wales Summit in the wake of illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

By then the Alliance was able to deepen its ties with a string of countries in the Middle East on a demand-driven basis. The driving principle in the implementation of DCB efforts in the region is the needs and priorities of those countries to improve their security and defence structures.

The relevant question on the DCB initiative could be whether efforts exerted under it are sufficient or comprehensive enough. There is no direct answer to this question, but

one cannot deny the fact that the Alliance has increased its engagement on an unprecedented level with the region in the face of the turmoil prevalent there.

Could there be more space for NATO to play a more effective role in the region is a legitimate question that should be posed. One can remain assured the Alliance will find innovative ways of addressing the degree of its engagement in the region through consultations among Allies without endangering its credibility and its holistic approach to the challenges coming from the East and the South. Whilst designing its approach for the region, it would be in the interest of the Alliance to have focused consultations and contacts with those NATO members bordering the countries in the Middle East.

That would, on the one hand, give the Alliance better insights on evolving developments and, on the other hand, would be an additional conduit for NATO to have wider situational awareness on the needs and priorities of those bordering Allies.

This serious issue should also be addressed in the Strategic Review work of NATO decided upon at the London Summit.

That said the U.S. should cast further clarity on the notion of 'further involving NATO in the Middle East process.' If it implies direct intervention or combat operations in the region to resolve the conflicts plaguing the Middle East, this would be a non-starter for NATO to get involved. No Ally would be in a position to squander the prestige and credibility of the Alliance in a maelstrom sweeping the region at the moment.

The assassination of Soleimani and the declaration of the so-called 'Deal of the Century' have already sent visible tremors throughout the region and contributed to furthering the already volatile grounds. They also have exacerbated the perceptions in the region and thus given rise to tremendous dust yet to be settled. Therefore, it is very premature to identify a mode of attitude or action designed to increase the level of engagement of NATO in the Middle East. The best course of action now is to uphold the current policies and instruments and implement them in a more coherent and effective manner.

However, the current state of affairs should not prevent the Alliance from closely monitoring the developments in the region with a renewed sense of urgency and steer its future course accordingly. A hasty step is therefore ill-advised.

Absent a decision by the U.N. and the support of the EU, the Alliance cannot attempt to overcome the challenges from the Middle East by relying solely on its means. Any greater involvement of NATO in the Middle East processes should proceed on legitimate grounds. Multilateralism should guide the efforts in this direction.

The support by the EU in such efforts is essential. The EU should brush aside its nascent inhibitive reflex jerking on the anxiety of irregular migration. It should set for itself a coherent strategy to deal with Middle Eastern challenges. And it should develop such a strategy in tandem with the Alliance, as necessary.

Any strategy to tackle those challenges should be reinforced by further deepening the web of ties with the regional organisations in the region such as the Arab League, the GCC, and the AU. This would give further strength to Alliance efforts for stability and security to hold in the region. Regional ownership will become much more essential before any involvement in the Middle East.

Necessary grounds should be prepared to the maximum extent possible with the relevant regional countries for a sustainable regional solution to be embedded in a multilateral context. While deploying such efforts the increasing Russian and Chinese

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clout should not be underestimated. Precautions should be in place to stymie their attempts to manipulate processes to evolve.

The more stakeholders willing to positively contribute to such a process the better the chances to maintain and strengthen the process to be initiated. Such a common enterprise certainly needs the support of leaderships' as well as grassroots support throughout its implementation.

There are strong hints that the U.S will pursue, among others, this matter in the Alliance with some vigour. Therefore, it would be prudent for NATO and its member states to include the issue of challenges of the Middle East as a standing item in their deliberations to chart a proper and sustainable course for the future. That requires timely decisions and concerted efforts before other actors attempt to derail the impending process. The Alliance has the experience, instruments, and the means to create a space for itself in this common endeavour, which is to take shape in the foreseeable future.