

Report Part Title: THE IMPACT OF NATO

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IV. THE IMPACT OF NATO

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Introduction

The conflicts that engulfed the Western Balkans in the early 1990s put the region in the spotlight of international attention and led to the direct involvement of the transatlantic community in particular. After many unsuccessful attempts at engagement by different external actors, NATO took over responsibility for ending the military conflict and undertaking the peacekeeping and peace-building activities that followed. The Alliance has conducted numerous demilitarisation programmes in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYROM) and Kosovo and deployed military missions to all the aforementioned countries, with the exception of Albania. Offering fully-fledged NATO membership to all countries in the region, using the conditionality mechanism during their accession processes to foster democratic transition, and providing different forms of assistance to this endeavour significantly contributed to the process of long-term consolidation in the Western Balkans. In other words, building on achievements made by peacekeeping missions by incorporating higher standards of democratic governance in the framework of the conditionality mechanism significantly contributed to the overall resilience of countries in the region.

NATO's Open Door Policy resulted in Slovenia joining the Alliance in 2004, followed by Albania and Croatia in 2009 and Montenegro in 2017. The enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic security community to the region undoubtedly brought stability and resilience, but on the other hand also highlighted substantial loopholes in Western policies. Their inconsistency and inadaptability to a changing geostrategic environment, as well as the lack of political determination demonstrated by Western countries in their approach to remaining 'problematic' candidates in the region, have opened possibilities for the (re)emergence of other geostrategic players (namely Russia, Turkey, the Gulf States and China) and democratic backsliding on the part of local political elites. Furthermore, the modest strategic policymaking capacity of the region's aspiring EU membership candidates makes further enlargement highly unlikely in the coming decade, which will in the long term surely open additional space for other interested parties to exert influence.

Drivers of fragility

Unlike the heady days of the early 2000s when there were high levels of enthusiasm for the enlargement of the transatlantic community, there is now a visible inward-looking trend at both national and international level, with states and Euro-Atlantic institutions concentrating mostly on internal problems and challenges in the European vicinity. This is of course affecting NATO's Open Door Policy in particular. The issue of enlargement is barely even mentioned in election campaigns in different member states, and whenever it is alluded to it is rarely evoked in a positive light. Political leaders are focused more on growing challenges at the national level while they struggle to find compromises at the intergovernmental level on appropriate ways of tackling threats emanating especially from the eastern and southern European neighbourhood.

Unfortunately, the negative consequences are visible in the region with regard to the constraints on and limits of foreseeable NATO enlargement which creates a certain power vacuum between NATO and other emerging players. This is complicating the regional geostrategic landscape as well as bringing a fair amount of competition to the Alliance itself.

First, Serbia is attempting to pursue a so-called 'non-aligned security policy', having no intention of joining NATO in the forthcoming period and hence remaining open to the influences of other emerging actors. It has signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement and Defence Co-Operation Agreement with Russia and is continuously receiving extensive support in terms of military hardware and know-how from Moscow. It is also benefiting from Chinese and Gulf States' investments in strategic transport infrastructure.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's complicated political structure has impeded NATO accession not only because of an inability to agree on reforms in order to meet criteria for membership, but also due to firm opposition to the idea of joining NATO by the ruling political elites in one of its two entities. Lack of capacity to compromise on strategic issues like NATO membership will continue to represent a burden for the country and an opportunity for other rival players to consolidate their position. The role played by Russia in the Peace Implementation Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina is highly illustrative in this regard. Moreover, while the growing influence of Turkey in the country is increasingly visible and has clear political ramifications, there is widespread concern about the role of the Gulf States and their contribution to the spread of Salafism at the borders of the EU and NATO.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia met all the criteria for NATO membership almost a decade ago, but then had its membership bid blocked due to a bilateral dispute with one of the Alliance's member states. The country has been on a downward democratic spiral ever since and has become increasingly open to the influences of other external actors in the region over the course of the last few years,

with negative repercussions for NATO's leverage. In the case of Kosovo, the long-lasting *status quo* in the wider regional political context raises a number of concerns and offers limited viable options for the period to come.

In addition to opening up space for other external actors' influence and thus changing the geostrategic configuration of the region, the waning NATO accession perspective (coupled with the prolonged accession process to the EU) is also creating opportunities for populist elites that are once again on the rise in the Western Balkans.

At the local level, the difficulties accompanying the interminable transition process, coupled with deteriorating living standards and poor economic growth, have contributed to the rise of populist political elites. Furthermore, a lot of current challenges such as terrorism and the phenomenon of foreign fighters, uncontrolled migration and organised crime that are threatening the wider region are actually leading to a backlash against the democratic reform agenda, with calls for 'stability and predictability' and growing tolerance towards less democratic and transparent methods of governance, thus further consolidating populist ideology and authoritarian politics. Additionally, unresolved national issues in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are reinvigorating the nationalist rhetoric of the 1990s. Clearly this is not helping the process of long-term consolidation that started with the EU accession process and which now appears to be indefinitely stalled.

Drivers of resilience

Basic normative values and principles of Western democracies transposed to the region via the activities of deployed NATO missions were successfully incorporated in the conditionality mechanism for candidate states in their pre-accession phase. NATO's paramount role in resilience building hence continued, being enriched with different mechanisms and tools which are relevant also today.

The Partnership for Peace (PfP) has represented the cornerstone of NATO's resilience efforts for almost two decades, contributing to the long-term consolidation of the region. It is a programme of bilateral cooperation between individual countries from the wider Euro-Atlantic area and the Alliance, which is tailor-made for each partner, allowing it to select priority areas for co-operation. While it has been extensively used to help prepare candidate states for membership, it is important to emphasise that even those countries who do not intend to accede to NATO have benefited significantly from participating in the programme.

Activities on offer under the PfP programme touch on virtually every field of NATO activity, including defence-related work, defence reform, defence policy and planning, civil-military relations, education and training, military-to-military cooperation and exercises, civil emergency planning and disaster response, and cooperation

on science and environmental issues.¹ In particular, participation in various NATO-led missions substantially contributes to the interoperability of the partner states' armed forces and consequently fosters the resilience of the respective states' security sector in an increasingly interconnected international arena. This is actually a good illustration of the wide spectrum of activities NATO is undertaking in its efforts to foster resilience in the region and beyond.

Taking a changing geostrategic environment which is increasingly challenging to NATO into account, it has to be acknowledged that the activities undertaken under the PfP have nevertheless proved effective and worthwhile. Given broad participation, including of countries with no aspiration to become NATO members, the PfP activities have contributed to bolstering the legitimacy of the Alliance even in a period of geostrategic competition in the region, enhancing NATO's profile as the most important long-term contributor to resilience in the Western Balkans and beyond.

However, while NATO conditionality represented an invaluable resilience tool for more than a decade, it gradually lost relevance and has been replaced by divisive forces related to the ongoing geostrategic power struggle in the region. The growing influence of other actors in the Western Balkans is forcing the Alliance to continue to go through the motions of pursuing the enlargement agenda and pretend that it is 'business as usual': this is its only viable response to the assertive actions of rival players in this geopolitical arena.

This is reflected in the geostrategic arguments put forward in support of Montenegrin NATO membership, the inclusion of various additional steps in the accession process as well as upgraded forms of cooperation with countries that are still waiting for an invitation to join NATO, in particular in the case of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While this is obviously not bad news for aspirant countries in the region, it is obviously an *ad hoc* geostrategic defensive measure rather than part of a thoroughly analysed and merit-based approach grounded on a realistic enlargement strategy for remaining difficult candidates in the Western Balkans.

This clearly leads to the conclusion that it is vital for the transatlantic community to reengage in the region. Such reengagement should, first and foremost, be based on a realistic assessment of the political will for further enlargement processes on both sides (within NATO and within the Western Balkan region) and accordingly of the relevance of its main tool – the conditionality mechanism. That is of existential relevance for the legitimacy of the 'normative power of the West' in the region, which is already facing severe challenges in the altered geostrategic environment.

1. See: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50349.htm.

The Alliance's commitment to the accession process of the countries in the region is of paramount importance not only due to the fact that it helps preserve NATO's role as a normative power in the Western Balkans, but it also – along with the EU accession process – keeps alive the drivers of reform processes which represent a cornerstone of resilience in that part of Europe.

The way ahead

The transatlantic community and the Western Balkans undoubtedly represent a single security space, which is currently facing serious challenges to its stability. Therefore, it seems clear that the measures undertaken to build resilience in the former will have an immediate impact on the latter and vice versa. Hence, the reaffirmation of the indivisibility of security in the process of formulating a new policy for the Western Balkans should help keep any ideas about 'regional containment' or a *status quo* strategy at bay.

Resilience cannot be built, especially in a region like the Western Balkans, without the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in society. Not only does the institutional set-up of the state need to be strengthened in order to be able to meet contemporary challenges, but non-state actors like civil society groups should be given an important role in this process.

NATO obviously needs leadership for this endeavour. A key role in the process should be played by the most influential member states and their institutions in situations when overarching compromise on specific issues is not palpable at the intergovernmental level. NATO does of course have many tools at its disposal, but this obviously requires strategic vision and the capacity to reach political compromise about the future of the Western Balkans.

Unpredictability seems to be the only predictable scenario in the period to come. Growing tensions at the international level and the resurgence of geopolitics and rival spheres of interest represent a looming challenge for the transatlantic community and NATO in particular. New assertive global players with increased defence budgets – unlike the majority of EU and NATO member states – are openly challenging the resilience and functionality of the entire 'Western concept of governance'.

The stability of neighbouring regions like the Western Balkans, which requires a comprehensive, robust and coherent strategy that combines the use of hard and soft power tools, is therefore of the utmost importance. In this context, the role of NATO as the strongest military alliance with a particular interest in this part of Europe cannot be overestimated. The fact that the transatlantic community and the Western Balkans actually represent the same security space raises the question of realistic future scenarios for difficult accession candidates and their lack of capacity

to meet demanding criteria for membership. It is essential to develop alternative feasible options based on a clear assessment of the security implications and geo-strategic consequences of the deficiencies and shortfalls currently affecting the enlargement process in the Western Balkans.