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"Border change and geopolitical shifts in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean: the challenge for NATO in the 21st century

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I remember the 50th and 60th anniversary of the founding of NATO. This means –except from growing older- that I can recall the optimistic spirit of East-West cooperation after the Cold War. The obvious question is: where did this go until this year's 70th anniversary? Russia and NATO find themselves on a path of antagonism despite the latter's strategy of "defense and dialogue".

Continuity and change

The good news is that "continuity and change" fully apply to the evolution of NATO. It has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to new challenges, sustain international peace and attract countries of the former socialist bloc; Montenegro and North Macedonia are eloquent paradigms, to mention only recent additions from the war-ridden Western Balkans.

Russian Antagonism

The less good news is that adaptation must run faster than once expected. The last 20 years have changed significantly international politics and strategic priorities. A fundamental change was the transition of Russia from a cooperative to an antagonistic behavior under Vladimir Putin. Beyond the

strategic level, this is evident in interventions in the “near abroad”, extending from Eastern Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.¹

Russia in 1999, Putin in 2009

This behavior was not the case 20 years ago, when Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO. It was also not the case on NATO’s 60th anniversary in 2009. Luckily, the global economic crisis coincided with the reorganization of Russia’s politics with Putin still playing the moderate card.² Under the calm surface however, he was gaining time to stabilize power and regain influence in the neighboring areas. That effort ran contrary to the pledges for democratization and freedom that shaped Russia’s relations with NATO and the EU after 1991.

Color revolutions, Arab spring

Russia started to play the hegemonic card in the second decade of the 21st century. At first, it compromised the democratization dialogue. It was encouraged by the obstacles to democratization during the American war on terror. Moscow opposed the US-encouraged “color revolutions” in Georgia (Rose Revolution in 2003), Ukraine (Orange Revolution in 2004) and Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolution in 2005). Further alarmed by the “Arab Spring” in 2010-12, the Kremlin sought to block EU and NATO-enlargement in Eastern Europe. The Ukrainian crisis of 2013 was triggered by the ratification process of an association agreement with the EU. Shortly thereafter, Russian military escalation and Crimea’s annexation made the year 2014 a turning point in Russia’s relations with the West.

Syrian war

The Syrian civil war gave Russia the pretext to strengthen its presence in the Middle East, too. Putin intervened militarily in Syria in 2015 to save it from partition and keep the dictatorial Assad regime intact as a guarantor of Russian bases and naval presence in the Mediterranean. Moscow joined hands not on-

¹ To make a historical comparison, in the early Cold War these were the regions around the so-called “Northern Tier” (Greece, Turkey, Iran).

² Hence, he responded to President Obama’s “reset” of US-Russian relations to spread democracy and stop nuclear proliferation (2009); he concluded the “modernization partnership” with the EU (2010) and Russia entered the World Trade Organization in 2011.

ly with the Syrian regime and its strategic partner Iran, but also with Turkey. This was mainly caused by Ankara's opposition to the national aspirations of the Kurds who had fought on the front lines against ISIS.

The Balkans

At the same time, Putin sought to interfere in the Western Balkans. Through Serbia and other countries, including Greece, he tried to prevent the settlement of open issues that would pave the way for further NATO enlargement. After Montenegro joined the Alliance in 2017, Russia opposed territorial exchanges between Serbs and Albanians e.g. in Kosovo as well as the compromise between Athens and Skopje that eventually opened NATO's door to North Macedonia.

In a nutshell, Russia views Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and the Mediterranean as a single strategic area of interests. These can be served only by challenging Western influence. This is a genuine return to classical geopolitical considerations. It does not mean that we move back to a Cold War. It rather means that the Cold War was intensely shaped by the geopolitics created by the two world wars and remain still relevant today.

Culture

Russia has engaged in various commercial and economic activities from Eastern Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean. Economic influence is underpinned by ideological and religious initiatives. The Russian reaction against the recognition of an autocephalous Ukrainian Church by the Patriarchate of Constantinople is telling.

Pipelines

Energy is the most powerful weapon. The network of pipelines that has been designed to transport Russian oil and gas to Europe and the Mediterranean seems to encircle the continent.

Nordstream 1 and 2 are the most provocative cases. Russian-Turkish pipelines are another source of concern. They have increased the energy role of the Eastern Mediterranean. Washington's "pipeline diplomacy" has been instrumental. LNG units in Greece complement the TAP, the IGB (Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria) and natural gas discoveries in Israel, Egypt and Cyprus. The

East-Med pipeline project gains ground as the quickest way to achieve energy security in Europe. Moreover, it offers long-lasting glue to tie together NATO allies and non-NATO partners in a regional geopolitical sub-block that will be connected with NATO. This combination of geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts promises to erode Russian influence.

China, Iran

Another regional actor is China. Like Russia, China lacks technological innovation, but, unlike Russia, it also lacks energy resources. Still, it has invested enormously on trade, real estate and infrastructure during the economic crisis. Although Russia seems to be a more direct concern for the West than China, the *Belt and Road Initiative* poses a considerable challenge to the West. More remote, but not to underestimate, is the challenge of Iran, which increased regional activism by using mainly the energy muscle.

Competition for NATO's resources

From this analysis, it is evident that, in my view, challenges are similar for the Eastern and the Southeastern regions of NATO. They originate in the same sources: terrorism, international economic competition, departure of Russia from cooperation with the West.

Having said that, I fully recognize that internal competition for NATO's resources is only natural and inevitable: "*Where you stand depends on where you sit*". The economic and political re-engagement of the US and NATO is equally crucial. In any case, cyberthreats, hybrid war and other modern challenges are relevant to most members. Definitely on the East and Southeast part of the Alliance.

The Mediterranean is not located so close to Russia as Central and Eastern Europe. Still, it is a vital geostrategic fault line between Europe and the Middle East and is in flux.

Greece

Greece lies in the middle of this fault line. Despite the economic crisis, it has remained a valuable security provider in the region. Apart from its own military capabilities, it invested on a strategic partnership with crucial non-NATO pro-Western players: The result was the trilateral cooperation between Greece-

Cyprus-Israel and Greece-Cyprus-Egypt and quadrilateral cooperation between Greece-Cyprus-Israel and the US. Energy is the best-known sector. Important are also the transfer of technology and military innovation, naval exercises, military and academic exchanges.

These schemes have been magnets for other Mediterranean countries. For instance, in January 2019 the *Natural Gas Forum* met in Egypt with representatives from Egypt, Cyprus, Israel, Italy, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, the EU and the World Bank. The *Convention of the Southern EU Countries* brought together Greece, Cyprus, France, Italy, Malta, Spain and Portugal. Greece is re-inventing its traditional “bridge function” between the West and regional players.

Greece and Turkey

Yet, thorny problems remain open with Turkey. The Cyprus issue is the one side of the coin, the other being the bilateral difference over the Aegean. Recent gas discoveries in block 10 of Cyprus have re-invigorated tension. Tension burdens Greece and NATO, as a whole, since it obliges Athens to dedicate significant national resources to defense against Turkey. Greece understands that the US and NATO want to maintain a dialogue with Turkey to address policy differences, find a solution in the Kurdish conundrum and, if possible, re-anchor Turkey in the West. As a matter of fact, a NATO and EU-oriented Turkey, respectful of borders and democracy, is in Greece’s interest as all Greek governments have insisted since the EU Helsinki Summit of 1999. But Greece also understands that contingency plans and complementary strategic assets are necessary to hedge against a further rupture with Turkey. It also needs to hear from Turkey logical viable suggestions on the Cyprus issue.

Greece and the USA

Greece expects closer cooperation with the US and will seek a more energetic role in NATO. The domestic political context is for the first time so positive since 1974, when dictatorship and the Turkish invasion in Cyprus fuelled anti-Americanism and handicapped NATO participation for decades. The Greek-American Defense Dialogue opens up new opportunities for military cooperation, more systematic and long-term basing as well as trade and investment in Greece.

Cyprus

Regarding Cyprus, Greece supports the upgrading of its security position, possibly through EU-NATO cooperation. The triangular schemes with Israel and Egypt provide a parallel channel of indirect connection. Energy routes and resources create additional economic linkages with NATO.

All in all, the Greeks expect that NATO's strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean will include an advanced role for Greece and special considerations about Cyprus. The cost will obviously entail more exposure to Turkish pressure as well as terrorism and migration. Another source of friction may be disagreements with EU members that still exert control over Greek finances, when it comes to energy and national budget priorities.

The 20th and 70th anniversary

This year we celebrate 20 years since the NATO entry of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and 70 years since the formation of NATO. Both happened amidst Balkan conflicts: Kosovo in 1999, the Greek Civil War in 1949. Although the Balkans played a secondary role in international politics in-between, they became catalysts for international political change. This is the definition of the "Balkan paradox" as formulated by Harvard professor Arne Westad. This is a tricky region. It remains to be seen how much this rule applies to NATO today.