On 08-10 November 2012, **George Niculescu,** Head of Research at the European Geopolitical Forum Brussels, and Director for Programs at the Centre for East European and Asian Studies of Bucharest, participated at the international conference on “NATO and the Global Structure of Security: The Future of Partnerships” organized in Bucharest (Romania) by the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (NSPSPA) jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Defence of Romania, with the support of the NATO International Staff/Public Diplomacy Division. The conference gathered a large number of high level officials and experts from Romania, Bulgaria, Armenia, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Serbia, Israel, United States and NATO. Alexander Vershbow, the deputy secretary general of NATO, and Titus Corlatean, the minister of foreign affairs of Romania, have been the keynote speakers of the conference. The list of high level officials who addressed the conference included also: Teodor Melescanu, the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Ioan Mircea Pascu, member of the European Parliament and former minister of defence, and Iulian Fota, advisor to the Romanian president. The conference was meant to celebrate 10 years since the NATO summit in Prague, where Romania was invited to become a member of the Alliance, and, at the same time, the launch of the NATO Senior Executive Master program of the NSPSPA, which trained officers and civil servants from the Wider Black Sea area for work with NATO structures. Please see below a shortened version of the briefing he presented at the conference:

**STRATEGIC LESSONS LEARNED IN NATO OPERATIONS**

**Introduction**

Since the end of the Cold War, the future of NATO has been a topic for debate among politicians, bureaucrats, scholars and journalists familiar with the European and global security issues. NATO’s future role within the new global structure of security and its adaptation to the changing realities have been particularly relevant to that debate.

The North Atlantic Alliance has proved so far an outstanding functional flexibility that allowed it to survive beyond the end of the Cold War. Both political and military leaders of the Alliance have understood the key lesson learned from the fall in irrelevance of the Warsaw Treaty Organization after the collapse of the communism in Central-Eastern Europe: the continuous adaptation of NATO to the new security challenges is the only viable alternative to the disappearance from the geostrategic map.

The strategic lessons learned during NATO's operational engagements over the last 17 years have been a critical asset for enacting NATO's continuous adaptation strategy. Over the last decade, **NATO's transformation**, which formally started at the Prague summit in 2002, has been the main vehicle for this strategy. It was aimed, *inter alia*, at developing NATO's overall capabilities to successfully manage crises which were affecting the security of its members.

**Involvement in Stabilizing the Western Balkans**

The deterioration of the situation in former Yugoslavia during the early '90s led to a number of resolutions of the UN Security Council UNSC) aimed at restoring peace. This offered the opportunity for the Euro-Atlantic Alliance to engage its forces in support of UN peacekeeping initiatives in former Yugoslavia.

It is obvious that NATO's air strikes had an important role in bringing the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiation table. They allowed the three conflicting sides in Bosnia- Herzegovina to successfully conclude the Dayton peace agreement, by the end of 1995. These developments offered the opportunity that NATO's ground forces be involved together with forces coming from partner countries (including Russia), in IFOR/SFOR, multinational forces called to implement the peace agreement under the operational command of Allied structures.

Since 1995, NATO has directly engaged itself in stabilizing the Balkans. The fundamental decision to involve NATO in this most unsettled area of Europe has been based both on Western interests in the region and on NATO’s need to demonstrate that it maintains its relevance in the post-Cold War era. Undoubtedly, NATO has achieved substantial progress in stabilizing the Balkans at the end of the 20th century. For instance, it has made a significant contribution to enshrine multi-ethnicity in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as to setting Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro on a democratic path. However, there still are unresolved problems in Kosovo where the lack of a political understanding between Belgrade and Pristine may still threaten local stability and security.

Perhaps, the most significant of all the missions NATO undertook in the Balkans has been **the resolution of the Kosovo crisis**, since it faced NATO with new political, legal and military challenges. The strength and weaknesses of NATO’s ability to cope with the stabilization of the Balkans in the 21st century have also been exposed during the Kosovo mission. “Solidarity and firmness of purpose were key NATO strengths in Kosovo”[[1]](#footnote-1). The solidarity of PfP partners in the region and the practical support they offered to NATO has also been very important to the final outcome of the Kosovo crisis. On the other hand, “NATO has displayed some inherent weaknesses - some arising from its multinational nature, some from legitimate expectations of democratic accountability. […] The hesitant and cumbersome approach of NATO when acting as a crisis management organisation precluded much decisive action.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

It is clear that in Kosovo, NATO used force without an explicit UNSC mandate, since the Allies agreed that it was possible and justified on moral grounds to do so, as a solution of last resort to the evolving Kosovo crisis. At that time, “It was equally clear, that such a step would constitute the exception from the rule, not an attempt to create new international law.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

One important lesson learned during the 1990s engagement in the Western Balkans was about the changing nature and features of the Allied conventional forces. Given the low level of the threat of a simultaneous, full scale attack on all of NATO's fronts, and the increasing regional instability from local conflicts which could directly threaten Alliance security, including by fostering extremism, terrorism, as well as transnational security risks, the conventional forces of the alliance had to become smaller, more flexible, multinational and deployable. Flexibility meant, on the one hand, being more mobile, to enable prompter reactions to a wider range of contingencies and, on the other hand, increasing their capability to contribute to crisis management without losing their capacity to be built up, if necessary, for purposes of defence. Multinational forces, including military contingents from partner countries, have played an increasingly important role in preventing and managing crises that affect the security of the member states. The Allied forces had also increased their deployability, since all the crises into which they were most likely to intervene were beyond NATO borders.

**NATO's Operations post 09/11**

**September 11, 2001** meant a turning point in contemporary world politics. It is not only because **the war against global terrorism** has become the central theme of the subsequent international security debate, but also because it reinforced the centrality of the global geostrategic game in Central Asia and the Middle East, it dramatically reshaped the power relations between US, Europe, Russia, China and India, and it reinforced the anti-globalization movement by displaying the vulnerability of the US to asymmetric threats.

NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the first time in its historyin response to September 11th terrorist attacks against USA. However, initially, the Alliance itself has only played a limited, largely political and symbolic role in the war against terrorism. To some degree, Washington’s reluctance to turn to NATO was due to the fact that it was easier to mount quickly a military operation, involving logistics, basing and special forces by themselves. But one can’t exclude that the years of cuts in defence spending and the failures by their European Allies to meet the pledges to improve the European military capabilities raised doubts to many Americans that Europeans could realistically contribute to the operations in Afghanistan. The legacy of Kosovo had reinforced concerns that NATO was not up to the job of fighting a modern war.

However, at their **summit in Prague, in 2002,** NATO leaders agreed **to transform the Alliance,** on the medium and longer term, into the spearhead of Western response to the new security challenges. On that occasion, they agreed on: a significant role of the Alliance in the war against terrorism; the establishment of a NATO Response Force, having the capability to be deployed quickly at large distances of the Euro-Atlantic area; developing a new NATO command structure; and the Prague Capabilities Commitments, that is the responsibility of each Ally to develop military capabilities usable in modern warfare.

After Prague, **important steps to transforming the Alliance** have been made, including: a decision to allow NATO to operate at global level; taking over by the Alliance of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan; a new military command structure, comprising two separate Commands: one Operational Command and one Command for Transformation; and making the NATO Response Force operational.

**Contribution to A Comprehensive Approach to Operations**

Lessons learned in NATO's operational engagements in Afghanistan and in the Western Balkans demonstrated that meeting security challenges required a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments. It has been widely acknowledged that a successful response to a given crisis requires political, economic, and social engagement. This could only be provided through a coordinated and coherent response by, and regular consultation and interaction among, all the actors involved.

At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, NATO Heads of States and Government endorsed an Action Plan comprising a set of pragmatic proposals, which aimed at developing and implementing **NATO’s specific contribution to an international Comprehensive Approach**. Specifically, the Alliance committed to improve its own crisis management instruments, including its military and political planning procedures, and to strengthen its ability to work effectively with partner countries, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local authorities, to encourage synergy at all levels.

After the Bucharest summit, the Alliance strived to improve its performance in five areas of work, with a view to developing and implementing its contribution to a Comprehensive Approach to Operations:

1) **Planning and conduct of its operations**: NATO’s planning of operations should clearly identify goals taking full account of all the military and non-military aspects of a NATO engagement throughout its duration.

2) **Applying NATO’s lessons learned process, and making greater use of NATO training, education and exercise opportunities:** NATO should develop proposals for joint training of civilian and military personnel, to contribute to enhancing mutual trust and confidence between NATO, its partners, and other international and localactors, thus encouraging better co-ordination.

3) **Co-operation with external actors:** Achieving /lasting mutual understanding, trust, confidence, and respect among the relevant international organizations and actors necessitates extensive civil-military interaction. Consequently, NATO’s engagement with the United Nations and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and relevant local bodies, should become a matter of routine, and not an exception.

4) **Public messaging and public diplomacy:** A Comprehensive Approach could not be effective unless it was complemented by sustained and coherent public messages. In particular, the media strategies of the main actors should complement each other. This could be facilitated by establishing direct contacts between them. Individual nations should harmonize their own work in the different organizations to which they belonged.

5) **Improving NATO's military support to stabilization and reconstruction:** For this purpose, NATO should better coordinate its military efforts in stabilization and reconstruction with those of its partners and other international and non-governmental organizations which were providing essential civilian means required in this field.

Bearing in mind the diversity of NATO’s current and future operational engagement, the Alliance’s contribution to a Comprehensive Approach to Operations has remained an iterative, evolutionary process, continuously adapted through a lessons learned process.

The 2010 New Strategic Concept of NATO further acknowledged that a comprehensive political, civilian and military approach is necessary for effective crisis management. It also reiterated the continued commitment of the Alliance to engage actively with other international actors before, during and after crises to encourage collaborative analysis, planning and conduct of activities on the ground, in order to maximize coherence and effectiveness of the overall international effort. A civilian crisis management capability has been set up and it is operating with the Allied structures to plan, employ and coordinate civilian activities until conditions allow for the transfer of those responsibilities and tasks to other actors.

**The Essential Role of NATO's Partnerships**

Another strategic lesson learned from NATO operations is pointing at the **essential role of NATO's partnerships** in ensuring effective and efficient involvement of partners in NATO-led operations. In that vein, the new Strategic Concept of NATO set out cooperative security and, implicitly, NATO's partnerships as *essential core task* for NATO in the next decades, besides collective defence and crisis management. While opportunities for engaging in collective defence currently seem little likely, and questions about NATO's role in crisis management in Afghanistan and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are doomed to entangle with future discussions on the continued relevance of NATO on the international security arena, NATO's partnership policy might turn into an anchor for maintaining the relevance of the North Atlantic Alliance over the next years.

While formal talks about a new partnerships policy were on NATO's agenda since the Riga summit (November 2006), the new policy document "Active Engagement in Cooperative Security: A More Efficient and Flexible Partnership Policy" which was approved in April 2011 in Berlin, is the first comprehensive public statement on NATO partnerships' strategic objectives, priority areas, policy guidelines, and criteria for prioritizing resources. Building upon the requirements of NATO's contribution to a Comprehensive Approach to Operations, this new policy is placing under the same umbrella all of NATO's partnerships (the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council/Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, as well as partnerships with other international organizations and with partners across the globe having a partnership programme with NATO), while allegedly preserving their specificity. This approach is particularly worthwhile for setting up common benchmarks against which one can measure progress of NATO's relations with various countries with a potentially positive impact on effectiveness in meeting partnership objectives, and efficiency in NATO's and Allies' planning and spending of partnership resources, as well as for providing more coherence and consistency to implementing relevant policies. Partnership tools and mechanisms, as well as individual activities, will be reviewed regularly to better focus on actual needs, and to discard those who might have become irrelevant. Interestingly, NATO's special relations with Russia, Ukraine, or with Georgia were not specifically highlighted in this new policy document, probably with a view to avoiding possible misinterpretations by other partners who might have assumed that the Alliance would be granting those relationships a higher priority. Adding to the list of NATO's partners other international organisations is a positive development, although the United Nations, the European Union and the OSCE should have been probably spelled out as key NATO partners in that context.

The strategic objectives of NATO - partner relations were formulated very broadly in this new policy with a view to making them relevant for a wider range of partners having different, and sometimes diverging, individual interests, aspirations, needs and circumstances. They include enhancing support for NATO-led operations and missions, as well as enhancing awareness on security developments, as a means for preventing crises. On the other hand, the priority areas for dialogue, consultation and cooperation between NATO and its partners include political consultation with a view to preventing crises and contributing to their management, as well as specifically cooperation in NATO-led operations and missions.

The wider engagement with nations across the globe is also a highlight of NATO's partnerships policy. Every Nation which doesn't currently have a formal partnership arrangement with the Alliance, but it is sharing an "interest in peaceful international relations", and is getting the blessing of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) might develop political dialogue and practical cooperation with NATO. One potential beneficiary of this policy might obviously be China. Any efforts by NATO to set up a formal relationship and a China policy should be welcomed. NATO's progress in stabilizing Afghanistan is inevitably requiring dialogue and cooperation with Beijing whose concerns in terms of regional security in Central and Southern Asia should be carefully considered besides those of other major regional actors, such as Russia, Pakistan and India.

Operation "Unified Protector" in Libya was indeed the first successful test for NATO's renewed partnerships policy. This has been the first NATO intervention backed by the Arab League and the African Union. Relationships with key Arab countries under NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and with the African Union -whose operations NATO supported in the past- might have been essential arguments for accepting a key role for the Alliance in the implementation of UNSCR 1973.

On the other hand, Germany's abstention in the UNSC on Resolution 1973 and the limited participation in the NATO operation were widely perceived as a rift in Alliance cohesion. They have highlighted the lack of a common approach to the MENA region which has plagued NATO for many years. This has mainly been the case because, depending on their geographical location, different Allies attached different levels of importance to various regions neighbouring the Euro-Atlantic area.

It remains to be seen to what extent this policy will substantially deepen and broaden NATO's partnerships, and increase their effectiveness and flexibility, which are its alleged aims. Moreover, this new partnership policy should turn NATO's engagement in cooperative security into an essential core task, as required by the new Strategic Concept, rather than keeping it solely as a tool for strengthening/supporting NATO's crisis management capabilities. If the Alliance succeeded in doing so, than, if necessary, NATO could one day claim to remain relevant to the international system of the 21st century, in spite of having had, perhaps, a hard time in performing its international crisis management tasks in Afghanistan or in other operational theatres.

**Conclusions**

Lessons learned in NATO's operational engagements in Afghanistan and in the Western Balkans demonstrated that effective crisis management required a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments.One strategic lesson learned during the 1990s engagement in the Western Balkans was about the changing nature and features of the Allied conventional forces. Given the low level of the threat of a simultaneous, full scale attack on all of NATO's fronts, and the increasing regional instability from local conflicts which could directly threaten Alliance security, the conventional forces of the alliance had to become smaller, more flexible, multinational and deployable. Furthermore, through agreeing on a NATO contribution to a Comprehensive Approach to Operations, the Alliance demonstrated it learned another strategic lesson from its operation in Afghanistan: a commitment to improve its own crisis management instruments, including its military and political planning procedures, and to strengthen its ability to work effectively with partner countries, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and with local authorities is essential for operational success in countering insurgencies in difficult geographical environments.

Another strategic lesson learned from NATO operations is pointing at the essential role of NATO's partnerships in ensuring effective and efficient involvement of partners in NATO-led operations. While opportunities for engaging in genuine collective defence seem little likely, and questions about NATO's role in crisis management in Afghanistan and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are doomed to entangle with future discussions on the continued relevance of NATO in the future international security arena, NATO's partnership policy might turn into an anchor for maintaining the relevance of the North Atlantic Alliance over the next years. However, as the operation Unified Protector in Libya clearly demonstrated, developing a common strategic vision for the regions from NATO's neighbourhood would also be needed for strengthening Alliance's political cohesion in the future.

1. \*\*\*, *Kosovo- Lessons from the Crisis, presented by the Secretary of State for Defence by Command of Her Majesty*, June 2000, London, The Stationery Office. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \*\*\*, 14th Report of Select Committee on Defence, published on the INTERNET [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Javier Solana*, NATO’s Success in Kosovo*, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 78, No.6, November/December 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)