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## Reflections on Requirements and Contingencies for a NATO Deterrence or Reassurance Role in the Middle East

Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 4 (September 2009)

by [Ariel E. Levite](#)

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### Introduction

Lamentably I have not been privy to earlier discussions in the NATO deterrence workshop series. I also confess not to be a great expert on NATO's deterrence challenges in Europe. Let me, therefore, focus my input on areas I am more familiar with, namely possible deterrence challenges and requirements in the greater Middle East that may open the door for NATO to play a constructive role in enhancing security and stability in the region. Let me hasten to add, however, that I hardly take for granted that NATO will be the mechanism of choice to undertake any of these missions in the greater Middle East, notwithstanding the growing emphasis on NATO's out of area operations, presently first and foremost in Afghanistan.

I have no doubt that an agonizing debate will precede any decision to undertake new Middle East security missions (as distinguished from lending civil emergency assistance, for example). Furthermore, such debate is bound to encompass four interdependent questions:

1. Whether new security commitments ought to be undertaken in the region;
2. Whether NATO is indeed the preferred institution for carrying out such missions (the other main options that would probably be considered could include the UN Security Council, the European Union, some ad hoc coalition of the willing, and even individual NATO members operating separately but with some coordination, with the United States probably in a lead role);
3. Under what mandate to undertake the missions and whether a mandate that can enjoy the members' consensus will actually be adequate to carry out the mission successfully; and lastly,
4. Which NATO members will be willing to actively support such missions as distinguished from merely going along with a decision to let NATO provide the umbrella for such undertakings. (A related question, of course, will be whether these NATO allies will commit sufficient new resources to carry out the added missions, assuming of course that a Middle East role for NATO will not come at the expense of another NATO mission, such as that in Afghanistan.)

It is likely that the Middle East will present serious security challenges in the years to come, and it is reasonable to assume that there will be a significant U.S. reticence to act alone in carrying out some of these heavy-lifting assignments. Moreover, a reasonable case could be made that, given the interest that all NATO members have in a stable Middle East, the appeal of the Atlantic

Alliance as a viable platform for such intervention may come into vogue, especially now that France has returned to the Alliance's integrated military structure. One might even be able to point to certain advantages that the Atlantic Alliance could bring to bear if tasked to undertake such Middle East security missions, not least its vast experience and generally successful track record in practicing extended deterrence under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, as well as its well established mechanisms for political-military coordination and burden sharing. I nevertheless assume that an acrimonious debate over such challenging missions would inevitably ensue among NATO members should the United States actually propose such an undertaking for the Alliance, and I sense that the outcome of such a debate is far from being a foregone conclusion.

## The Scenarios

The scenarios I envisage in this context involve three primary types of missions that NATO could undertake: deterrence, reassurance, and peacekeeping. These, in turn, could potentially lead to a fourth one, namely response and peace enforcement, though NATO might also undertake peacekeeping even if it had not played any previous deterrence or reassurance role in that theater of operations.

In considering Middle East deterrence and reassurance missions we obviously have to note that in most of the scenarios we envisage these functions are closely interrelated. One could easily look at each of the following scenarios as cases in which NATO undertakes to deter aggression or another provocative action of some sort, and/or seeks to reassure Western allies in the region that they would not have to cope alone with destabilizing and menacing developments.

It is also worth noting that the manner in which NATO could carry out its deterrence and/or reassurance role could vary greatly. It could assume the form of unilateral declaratory policy, but it could also take the form of a politically binding framework (perhaps on the model of Partnership for Peace) or perhaps (though this is less likely) a legally binding obligation and even extension of NATO membership. Incidentally the latter idea has already been floated for Israel in the context of peacemaking. NATO's commitment could also manifest itself in contingency planning and occasional exercises, and in permanent (though variable in scope) offshore deployment in the region, all the way up to intermittent or permanent deployment of forces.

Let us consider briefly several scenarios in the context of which NATO could assume each of these roles.

## Deterrence

- Deterring the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons (visible in Tehran's suspension of safeguards, expulsion of IAEA inspectors, HEU enrichment, and weaponization activity), or future overt nuclearization (through testing and public statements);
- Dissuading retaliation by Iran to an attack against its nuclear facilities or to another perceived provocation or dissuading Iran from acting on an opportunity leading it to target (overtly or covertly, directly or by proxies) the United States, another NATO country, allied forces, regional allies, or to disrupt efforts to protect sea lines of communication and oil shipments (e.g. a reincarnation of the reflagging of the Kuwaiti tankers in the 1980s, this time under a NATO umbrella), or to conduct information warfare;
- Deterring Iranian subversion, terrorism, and intimidation, all the way up to attempts to act upon veiled (e.g. versus Iraq) or declared (e.g. versus Bahrain) territorial claims, especially after Tehran feels emboldened and empowered by acquiring a nuclear strike capability and with it the perceived ability to operate under a veiled or explicit national nuclear umbrella;

- Dissuading Russia from undertaking a demonstrative intervention or threatening to do so on behalf of Iran or Iraq; and
- Deterring nuclear (and missile) proliferation activity within the region (e.g. from Iran to Lebanon or Gaza) as from outside the region (e.g. North Korea or Pakistan), namely an extension of the Proliferation Security Initiative in general, and the recent UN Security Council resolution concerning North Korea in particular.

## Reassurance

- Assuaging security concerns of allies (both present NATO Alliance members, especially Turkey, and others) in the region and well beyond it that could otherwise lead them to engage in a proliferation cascade, bandwagon with adversaries (e.g. Iran), succumb to their intimidation, or take preventive unilateral military action and engage in a costly and destabilizing arms race;
- Addressing Talibanization or Iranization, or the unraveling of Pakistan or Iraq (especially post-U.S. troop withdrawal), or the destabilization of Lebanon, Eritrea, or Sudan threatening first and foremost their immediate neighbors (e.g. Turkey and Jordan) followed by the export of terrorism, narcotics, and/or weapons, illegal immigration, or the further spread and intensification of maritime piracy;
- Containing the possible reemergence of Iraq as a threat to its immediate neighbors, especially Jordan, or to a heretofore protected part of its population (e.g. the Kurds); and,
- Preventing the spillover and accentuation of security anxieties from the Middle East to friendly parties outside the region (e.g. Japan).

## Peacekeeping/Peace Support Operations

Unlike the deterrence and reassurance role, which would be directed at preventing further deterioration of an already precarious regional security situation, the peacekeeping role, if assumed, would be primarily aimed at facilitating a dramatic favorable transformation of the regional scene. Naturally the most likely scenario in which one might envisage NATO playing such a role would be in the Arab-Israeli context, though one should not entirely exclude such action elsewhere as well, for instance in North Africa, especially in deference to growing Spanish security concerns there.

Most Arab-Israeli post-conflict arrangements have included some form of international peacekeeping, monitoring, or enforcement operations component, under either a UN or a multilateral umbrella. These arrangements have proven enduring, and at least moderately successful in preserving stability, and in some cases they have paved the way for more enduring political accommodation. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that similar arrangements, perhaps on an even more ambitious scale, are currently being proposed in support of the Israeli-Syrian, and especially the Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking effort. What sets apart an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement from a Syrian-Israeli one (unless the latter actually becomes a component of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace deal) is that it would be most likely to create a political climate in which a significant international peace support presence (performing various functions from reassurance to the Palestinians to monitoring demilitarization to providing early warning), including perhaps by NATO, would be implemented. Moreover, it might even create the political conditions that would allow for Israeli accession to NATO as part of an effort to reward Israel and offset the security risks that Israel would undertake in the course of peacemaking.

## Additional Considerations

The discussion has thus far focused on some scenarios in which NATO might be called upon to perform missions enhancing Middle East security. Regardless of the political desirability or feasibility of assigning NATO such out of area missions, there are also several considerations that affect the challenges that NATO will actually face should it undertake such new roles.

One especially important attribute of the above scenarios is that the onset of the crisis that might trigger consideration of a deterrence or reassurance role for NATO in the Middle East could come about rather suddenly, perhaps even in a context or location that had not been previously envisaged. This would suggest a significant burden on NATO's capacity to quickly design and swiftly implement tailor-made solutions to rapidly escalating crises. Yet these are not the traditional hallmarks of the Alliance's planning, decision-making, and implementation processes, especially in out of area operations. Nor do they constitute an optimal use of the Alliance's capabilities. These capabilities can most effectively be employed in "general" as distinguished from "immediate" deterrence and reassurance scenarios, where the mere prospect of the Alliance's intervention might forestall the crisis.

A second attribute of such a NATO role might be its uncertain duration, quite possibly its open-ended nature. The circumstances that could require NATO to step in might not be modified quickly, and the threshold for termination of the mission may be difficult to define, let alone in advance.

A third possible attribute would quite likely be a highly uneven willingness of Alliance members to politically support such an out of area undertaking, let alone staff it, certainly over the long run.

A fourth likely feature of a NATO role in the Middle East is likely to be a lingering concern for the Alliance's overstretch. This stems from the probability that the requirement for NATO to play a role in Middle East scenarios will not diminish the obligation to sustain its other roles, in Europe as well as in its other out of area operations.

A fifth challenge is inherent in NATO assuming a role in such a politically sensitive region where not only several individual NATO members already have well established political and security bilateral relationships, interests, and even military bases, but also some formidable other players such as Russia, China, and even India also have no less significant interests and concerns. For NATO to assume an effective role in such a setting it would, therefore, be required not only to develop good working relationships with its new local partners in the region, but also to manage rather delicate relationships with the other extra-regional players that have significant stakes in the region.

A sixth issue NATO might have to confront were it to undertake deterrence and/or reassurance missions in one of the above Middle East scenarios is how to balance between providing security to the Arabs and to Israel (presumably in both cases versus Iran). This would be a far less sensitive issue (though still an otherwise delicate one) were NATO to assume its role after a comprehensive peace has been established. However, NATO might be seriously considered for this role well before a breakthrough in the peace process has been attained, perhaps even in order to facilitate progress towards precisely such an outcome. Under these circumstances, serious consideration must be given to carefully balancing the security commitments that NATO undertakes towards both Arab states and Israel without actually getting embroiled in the ongoing conflict (and residual hostility) between them.

A seventh concern has to do with the tension inherent in relying explicitly (or even implicitly) on nuclear deterrence as a proven time-honed instrument for providing extended deterrence and reassurance in many of these scenarios. Doing so would involve expanding the role ascribed to the Alliance's nuclear posture at a time when not just the utility but the very legitimacy of nuclear deterrence is being frontally challenged by some advocates of nuclear disarmament. However,

failure to rely on the nuclear posture could actually deprive NATO deterrence and reassurance policies of much needed credibility, and this in turn might make them far less likely to be effective. The political challenge inherent in this domain may be slightly eased by the fact that the very purpose of introducing NATO into the region might be to perform deterrence and/or reassurance missions to help curb and offset proliferation, and ultimately to pave the way for nuclear disarmament.

Let me add that even if NATO could miraculously find a way to base the deterrence and reassurance function it performs in the region on non-nuclear assets and could imbue them with adequate credibility, this challenge would not entirely go away. The reason is that the desirability (in terms of stability) and the legitimacy of national or collective missile defense (which could potentially represent another and more subtle form of extending deterrence and defense capabilities) are vociferously opposed by certain prominent international players for fear that missile defense could somehow affect the general strategic balance.

Finally, in addition to all of the above NATO may have to confront some mission-specific challenges in particular contingencies. Some of these challenges could prove to be quite formidable, such as those associated with deterring Iran.

### **About the Author**

Ariel Levite is a Non Resident Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C. Prior to joining the Carnegie Endowment, Levite was the Principal Deputy Director General for Policy at the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission from 2002 to 2007.

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