

HYBRID THREATS AND EURO-ATLANTIC COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION

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Introduction

NATO Allies on the both sides of the Atlantic have been witnessing various ongoing crises: from mass refugee influx to rising concerns over emboldening Russian maneuvers in Ukraine and Syria, and nowadays the strategic consequences of *Brexit* for Euro-Atlantic relations. Evidently, these interrelated challenges are of transnational and hybrid nature involving state and non-state actors alike. These threats of hybrid nature posed by various combinations of state and non-state actors have mounted transnational challenges (e.g. terrorist infiltration, radicalization) on EU-member NATO allies' borders such as Ukraine for Eastern Europe, and for non-EU Allies such as Turkey with its long border to Syria. Meanwhile, the last decade has witnessed terrorist attacks of unprecedented magnitude in the Allied heartlands of Paris, Ankara, Brussels, and Istanbul most recently.

The ongoing rise of hybrid threats on the Allies ranging from political instability in Eastern Europe and the Middle East to mass refugee influx and terrorism in the neighborhoods put forward the need to timely discuss key questions on the relationship of rising terrorism with the strategies of hybrid warfare, and the venues for effective Euro-Atlantic counter-terrorism cooperation as a method to counter hybrid threats. Above all, such cooperation is essential for the security of the states and their citizens in Europe and beyond. NATO and EU are the two core international organizations that are expected to assume leading roles in institutionalized international cooperation against hybrid threats. An organization that fails to contribute to the security of its members is bound to head the way of strategic irrelevance for its members, and thus seizes to be considered as a serious global actor!

In order to address the questions of what kind of international cooperation is necessary and how this can be achieved, this paper starts by delineating the concepts of ‘hybrid war’ and ‘hybrid threat’ with a reference to ongoing Euro-Atlantic challenges, and then the paper proceeds with the critical assessment of the existing counterterrorism efforts, and finally the paper ends with a comprehensive discussion of the policy implications of such cooperation for the Allies and their neighbors.

1. Hybrid Threat or Hybrid War?

As hybrid threats to international security have been evolving, so as their use in scholarly and policy debates have become a source of ongoing confusion. In many instances, it can be noticed that the concepts such as ‘hybrid threat’ and ‘hybrid war’ are used randomly, without even providing a working definition for a term. This has led to further confusion of the policymakers, instead of much needed conceptual clarification. For that reason, this section will define each concept, and then delineate their similarities and differences, and explain why the author has chosen to proceed with ‘hybrid threats’ throughout this research.

In addition to conceptual clarification, this section aims to put these terms in context. To this end, this paper refers to NATO and EU definitions from official reports as primary sources, which indicate a level consensus of the member states about their understanding of these key terms. As NATO and EU are the two core institutions to organize Euro-Atlantic cooperation against hybrid threats, their definitions present a meaningful starting point for this research.

In a 2011 report, NATO describes hybrid threats as:

Hybrid threat is an umbrella term, encompassing a wide variety of existing adverse circumstances and actions, such as *terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption, ethnic conflict* etc. What is new, however, is the possibility of NATO facing the *adaptive* and *systematic* use of such means singularly and in combination by adversaries in pursuit of long-term political objectives, as opposed to their more random occurrence, driven by coincidental factors. [*Emphasis Added*] (Bachmann and Gunneriusson 2015)

This comprehensive definition of hybrid threats enables researchers to grasp the multi-faceted nature of the term. At the same time, this definition presents examples of hybrid threats such as terrorism and migration, which are considered in the analyses of this paper as well. That is why this paper uses the term “hybrid threat” with the connotations and examples set out in the above NATO definition.

The same report underlines that “*hybrid threats* are not exclusively a tool of asymmetric or non-state actors, but can be applied by *state and non-state actors* alike. Their principal attraction from the point of view of a state actor is that they can be largely *non-attributable*, and therefore applied in situations where more overt action is ruled out for any number of reasons. [*Emphasis Added*] (Bachmann and Gunneriusson 2015)

This point in the report is of particular importance for this research, as it highlights the fact that *hybrid* does not necessarily mean *non-state*! In this regard, this ‘hybrid threat’ conceptualization also opens door for the consideration of ‘hybrid war’ in the formulation and development of hybrid threats. Accordingly,

Hybrid war encompasses a set of hostile actions whereby, instead of a classical large-scale military invasion, an attacking power seeks to undermine its opponent through a variety of acts including subversive *intelligence operations*, sabotage, hacking, and the empowering of *proxy insurgent* groups. It may also spread disinformation (in target and third countries), exert economic pressure and threaten energy supplies. [*Emphasis Added*] (Popoescu 2015)

In view of the above definition, hybrid war necessitates an orchestrating state actor, which can weave state capabilities such as military and intelligence operations in support of proxy insurgent groups. Most recent examples of such operations can be observed in Russian maneuvers in Ukraine and Syria, involving both conventional military assets such as fighter jets and air defenses along with local insurgent groups acting as proxy land-forces.

Albeit important, hybrid war is only part of the story when the Allies are faced with ever growing hybrid threats ranging from refugees to terrorism. NATO’s Bi-Strategic Command Capstone Concept describes these *hybrid threats* as “those posed by conventional and non-conventional means adaptively in pursuit of their objectives”. The same concept also includes, “low intensity asymmetric conflict scenarios, global *terrorism*, piracy, transnational organized crime, *demographic challenges*, resources security, which have also been identified by NATO as so called *hybrid threats*”. [*Emphasis Added*] (See: Hybrid Threats Description in 1500/CPPCAM/FCR/10-270038 and 5000 FXX/0100/TT-0651/SER: NU 0040 dated 25 August 2010). Similar to the earlier hybrid threat definition, this one also includes terrorism and demographic challenges, growing out of a combination of state and non-state actors via conventional and non-conventional means. This constitutes another reason of the author’s choice to employ the term ‘hybrid threat’ to capture the complexity of the threat environment NATO and EU need to operate.

Under these circumstances, it can be observed that Euro-Atlantic relations have been under constant trial period, in which even their rare successes are bound to be tested again and again. Still, “*European countries are vulnerable* to threats from war and political instability in Syria and Iraq. Terrorist groups exploit fragile environment for unleashing violence and attacks in European countries” [*Emphasis Added*] (Upadhyay 2016). For this reason, effective Euro-Atlantic cooperation against hybrid threats has become a matter of ‘how’ than ‘if’. Among the sheer variety of these hybrid threats, this paper will concentrate on analyzing counterterrorism cooperation as a way of cooperating against hybrid threats.

2. A Critical Assessment of Euro-Atlantic Counterterrorism Efforts

In this section, NATO’s role in counterterrorism will be analyzed in light of the NATO policy guidelines on counterterrorism, NATO Warsaw Summit Declaration 2016, and evolving terrorist threats particularly around NATO’s southern borders. “NATO’s contribution to the global approach to Counter Terrorism was expressed publicly in the NATO Policy Guidelines on Counter Terrorism endorsed at the 2012 NATO summit” (Bird 2015). In substance, “the new policy guidelines focus on NATO’s strengths, such as intelligence-sharing, capacity-building, special operations forces, training, and technology and capabilities” (Santamato and Beumler 2013). In practice, Allies have been challenged to translate these NATO advantages to effective counterterrorism cooperation. For this reason, instead of being another detailed summary of NATO activities (FOOTNOTE ref. for detailed overview, this section critically examines the promise and pitfalls of NATO counterterrorism policies with the aim of setting the stage for the pertinent policy recommendations in the next section.

As this paper concentrates on the analysis of NATO’s role in counterterrorism, it makes sense to use NATO definition of the term. Accordingly, NATO defines counterterrorism as, “all offensive measures taken to neutralize terrorism before and after hostile acts are carried out. Note: Such measures include those counter-force activities justified for the defense of individuals as well as containment measures implemented by military forces or civilian organizations” (NATO Standardization Agency, Glossary of Terms, 2008). This definition essentially reflects the comprehensive approach of NATO to counterterrorism, which is further developed with the New Strategic Concept adopted at Lisbon Summit in 2010, and with added counterterrorism policy guidelines in NATO Summit 2012. In theory, these were the steps in the right direction that have aimed to achieve comprehensive counterterrorism cooperation with NATO allies and partners, which is intuitive considering the multifaceted threats such as terrorism.

In practice, these measures rendered NATO's role in counterterrorism to the one of 'support' rather than the one of 'leadership'. As the former Head of NATO-HQ Counterterrorism Section, Dr. Juliette Bird outlined the three pillars of NATO counterterrorism policy:

Awareness: ensuring shared awareness of the terrorist threat and vulnerabilities (achieved through consultations (at NATO but also through outreach to experts), enhanced intelligence and information sharing, analysis and assessment).

Capabilities: striving for adequate Alliance capabilities to prevent, protect against and respond to terrorist threats (in accordance with NATO's level of ambition as defined in Political Guidance).

Engagement: continuing to engage with partner countries and other international actors to promote common understanding of the terrorist threat through enhanced consultations and practical cooperation through existing mechanisms. Emphasis is placed on raising awareness, capacity building, civil emergency planning and crisis management. (Bird 2015)

These pillars could be summarized as ensuring that Allies (and where possible partners too) 'share a common view of the threat of terrorism' and agree on how to address it. Allies concluded the Guidelines with a paragraph on implications for potential future operations: "NATO will maintain flexibility as to how to counter terrorism, playing a leading or supporting role as required. Allies' capabilities represent an essential component of a potential response to terrorism. Collective defense remains subject to decision by the North Atlantic Council (NATO Counterterrorism Policy Guidelines 2012). However, important and necessary, NATO's supportive roles in counterterrorism have raised more questions than reassurance among the Allies. Especially the recent terrorist attacks in the Allied heartlands of Paris, Ankara, Brussels, and Istanbul, have raised concerns about the effectiveness of NATO's counterterrorism policies in protecting the citizens of the Allies from terrorists. Most recently, in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Nice, retired French Army General Jean-Bernard Pinatel emphasized that "the spate of attacks in Europe has clearly demonstrated to the French, and to other NATO members, that the US-led alliance is helpless in the struggle against the terrorist threat" (Pinatel 2016). Considering the rise of terrorist attacks by PKK and ISIS in Turkey, and terrorist attacks in Brussels airport and train attacks in Germany, one can see that terrorism has become a growing threat to increasing number of Allies. Evidently, NATO's current counterterrorism policy, which focuses on three main areas, awareness, capabilities, engagement, is far from being able to address adequately the security needs of the Allies in response to growing terrorist threats. In the 11 years that have followed the 9/11 attacks on the

United States, “NATO has opted for a pragmatic approach to the fight against terrorism and succeeded in identifying its added value. The result has been a series of substantial counterterrorism activities. Their impact, however, has been mitigated by the lack of an agreed policy defining NATO’s rightful place among international counterterrorism actors” (Santamoto and Beumler 2013). This challenge remains today, and keeps hampering effective Allied counterterrorism cooperation even in the aftermath of Warsaw Summit 2016. In part, the rise of terrorist attacks throughout the Allied territories can be attributed to the lack of NATO vision for Allied counterterrorism cooperation. Having this vision is not only essential for the security of the Allies and their citizens, but also for NATO’s survival as a strategically relevant actor for Allies’ security, and in world politics. To this end, this paper aims to put forward the below policy recommendations in the next section to present a ground for an effective NATO counterterrorism vision and practice.

3. Policy Implications and Conclusions

As these challenges have been affecting the Euro-Atlantic sphere inside and out, NATO and EU countries need to timely devise long-term political strategies to deal with them. Given the relative paucity of comprehensive studies on such an issue of high complexity, this paper will break new ground by opening to debate the promise and pitfalls of the EU and NATO as core institutions of providing the security for the states and citizens in euro-Atlantic area in light of ongoing hybrid threats.

Considering the evolving nature of hybrid threats such as terrorism, it is difficult, if not impossible, to devise clear-cut conclusions about the EU and NATO roles in counterterrorism. Still, there is a need to identify key policies, which can guide the Allies to further improve their counterterrorism cooperation. As this research puts forward, this is not only important for the security of the Allies, but also key for the strategic relevance of NATO and EU for their members, partners, and neighbors.

Instead of seeking strict conclusions, this research aims to offer insights for the improvement of EU and NATO counterterrorism cooperation, which are essential for the Allies’ security, and for the cohesion and survival of these two core institutions. Thus, as a matter of fact, it is a search for conclusions, which aims to contribute to the Euro-Atlantic debate on counterterrorism by exploring the promise and pitfalls of the suggested policies in light of the critical assessment of the existing EU and NATO counterterrorism efforts. While these debates are necessary, the greater challenge remains, which are the one to put them in practice together.

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