

ALBANIA: 10 YEARS OF NATO MEMBERSHIP

The impact of NATO membership and the future of security challenges

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Background

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a military and political organization of 29 North American and European states based on the principle of collective security. The crux of the military aspect of NATO is article 5, which binds together the member states into a collective security and collective action against the threat to one or more of the members.[1] The creation of NATO in 1949 was a continuation of the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Western Europe after the Second World War. Diplomats and politicians in the United States at the time thought that the economic part of the reconstruction of Western Europe was not sufficient to safeguard it from a potential threat from the Soviet Union. Therefore, 'by December 1948, the State Department had concluded that a North Atlantic Security Pact was an essential supplement to the Marshall Plan'.[2] In January 1949, in his inaugural speech at his reelection, President Harry Truman said that the Marshall Plan should be supplemented and enforced with a 'collective defense arrangement' binding together the United States, Western Europe and Canada.[3]

One of the effects intended with NATO, which remain valid even today is a psychological one, the fact that the United States would not return to the isolationism of the between the wars period. During all the Cold War period, NATO served as deterrence towards the Soviet threat to Western Europe and it was not engaged in any military activity. 'In addition, America's hegemonic position in NATO, the military counterpart to the EC, mitigated the effects of anarchy on the Western democracies and induced cooperation among them. America not only provided protection against the Soviet threat; it also guaranteed that no EC state would aggress against another. For example, France did not have to fear Germany as it re-armed, because the American presence in Germany meant that the Germans were contained. With the United States serving as a night watchman, fears about relative gains among the Western European states were mitigated, and furthermore, those states were willing to allow their economies to become tightly interdependent.' [1]

With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there were certain calls that NATO is no longer relevant and it should be dissolved because the threat towards which it was created in 1949 was no longer there. The Soviet Union after the Second World War was really capable of reaching the Atlantic, but the Russia that emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union was not capable, so threat didn't exist anymore. But contrary to this, the United States, especially during the Clinton administration, began to expand NATO to former communist Eastern Europe, a process which continues today with the former Yugoslav countries as were the latest examples of Montenegro and recently North Macedonia. Since the end of the Cold War there have been three major rounds of enlargement in 1999, 2004 and 2009, involving the countries of Eastern Europe. Albania began its collaboration with NATO in 1994 in the framework of Partnership for Peace, and in 1999 it supported allies operations in Kosovo war in 1999 and later NATO's missions in Former Yugoslav countries.

At the same time, in the 90s NATO began to act militarily in support of collective security objectives, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1995, which brought the Dayton Accords, in Kosovo in 1999 and later in Afghanistan and Iraq. Also NATO has been involved in humanitarian missions: in 2005 in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which resulted in between 1,200 and 1,800 deaths and the displacement of more than 400,000 people from the New Orleans area and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and following the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, which killed an estimated 53,000 Pakistanis and injured an additional 75,000. [2] With the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, the refugee crisis and the return of Russian influence and disruptive activity in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the fact that the need for NATO is more than ever present, is realized by the fact that how today's world, and especially the Balkans and Eastern Europe would look like if NATO were dissolved in the 90s with the disappearance of the Soviet threat.

Albania 10 years in NATO: what has changed

In the 10 years since Albania's NATO membership, two have been the most important changes related directly with the Albanian army: first, the modernization of the armed forces; second, the participation in the foreign missions in the framework of NATO or UN. These two developments will be analyzed below.

First, there has been a radical transformation and modernization of the Albanian armed forces. During the communist regime, the army had a disproportionate role and size compared with the Albanian population at that time. In the 1970s and 1980s its human personal was almost 100 thousand active soldiers, officers and other low ranked personal, while comprising also the reservists, the number was almost 750 thousand [1], a very large number for a population of approximately 2.5 million inhabitants. The rationale for such large number of personnel was the constant 'western-imperialist' and 'eastern-revisionist' threat to Albania's security, as exposed by the Albanian communist leadership of the time.

With the fall of the communist regime and the economic and social difficulties of the 90s, the Armed Forces suffered from neglect and lack of investments. In this situation, the main aim was to move away from an Army of huge numbers for a small country like Albania and mainly dated Soviet equipment, which in many cases was from the 60s, to a smaller, more mobile Army, and with modernized equipment. Compared with the communist-era Army, which emphasized heavy armament mostly produced in Albania, the Albanian Army in the last ten years has been more focused in acquiring light armament as Beretta, machine guns MG4 and MG5, Snipers SAKO 22' and 42', M-4 assault rifles, troop transporters, Cougar and EC145 helicopters, etc. [2] The purpose has been not only to modernize the Army but at the same time to unify it in equipment with the other NATO member countries, to make it easier for the Albanian Army to interact quickly with the other NATO member countries. The Kuçova Air Field project continues this process of modernization, this time in the Air Force, which has suffered most than the other parts of the army because the aircraft is much more expensive and therefore almost impossible for Albania to acquire it.

Albania's military expenditure has increased since the 90s, reaching the highest value in 2009 of more than 250 million dollars and representing 3.5% of the GDP [1], the year when the country became part of NATO. Since then the military expenditure has oscillated in lower numbers compared with 2009, when in 2018 it was 201 mln dollars, or 1.25% of GDP. [2]

But the problem is that the bulk of Albania's military budget goes for the military personnel, respectively 66% in 2016, while only 8% of the military budget was used for new equipment. This is a fact that severely hampers Albania's ability to renew its military equipment.[1]

Second, in the 10 years as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Albania, a country in which in 1997 following a bloody popular rebellion, were stationed thousands of foreign troops to maintain peace and security, has been transformed into an exporter of security to often distance countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Chad, but also in Kosovo. In the last 10 years, there have been more than 4 thousand Albanian armed troops participating in different NATO missions. Currently there are 211 Albanian troops participating in NATO missions in Afghanistan, Latvia, Kosovo and the Aegean Sea.[2]

But Albania's participation in NATO missions has started way before its NATO membership. In 2002 the first contingent of Albanian Armed Forces participated in the framework of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, following the United States military intervention of October 2001 in that country, supported initially by Canada, United Kingdom and Australia and later by all NATO member countries. Since its first participation in ISAF, Albania has contributed with more than 3 thousand armed forces in Kabul, Herat and Kandahar, in collaboration respectively with Turkish armed forces, Italian armed forces and US armed forces.[3] The second bigger international mission has been in Iraq, following the 2003 United States-led-coalition military intervention of March 2003. The first Albanian mission in this war went to Mosul, in North Iraq in April 2013 with 70 armed forces, which soon were increased to 120. The Albanian Armed Forces withdraw from Mosul and later from Baghdad in December 2008 with the end of 'Freedom of Iraq' operation. Overall 1343 Albanian military personnel participated in the Iraq War from 2003 to 2008.[4]

Albania most lengthy international mission has been in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1996 to 2007, following the end of the Bosnia war of 1992-95, in the framework of ISAF and SFOR directed by NATO and ALTHEA and EUFOR, directed by the European Union. Overall Albania has contributed in Bosnia and Herzegovina with 1355 military personnel.[1]

These international missions in NATO foreign operations have served two purposes for the Albanian Armed Forces: first, they have increased the collaboration with NATO, showing to be a reliable partner and preparing the path to NATO membership in 2009; second, they have considerably improved the capacities of the Albanian Armed Forces to deal with different situations, even some of the most difficult as in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, Albania has been consistent in its support for the NATO's decisions regarding Russia, the Skripal case in Salisbury, England, the terrorist threat from the Middle East and the refugee crisis in the Aegean Sea.

The new security situation in the Western Balkans

Since Albania's independence in 1912 and its international recognition in July 1913, security has been one of its biggest problems. Several times beginning with 1912-13, 1918, 1945-46, the Albanian state has repeatedly been threatened by dismemberment by the north from Yugoslavia or the south from Greece. After the Balkan wars and at the end of the First World War, the newly created Albanian state received guarantees for its territorial integrity from Austro-Hungary, Italy and the United Kingdom. Again at the end of the Second World War, the communist government demanded the same guarantees from the Great Powers, which were given by the Soviet Union. The threat to its security returned after the fall of the communist regime, from the north with the war in Kosovo and from the south with the unofficial support for the North Epirus issue, exemplified by the Peshkëpi incident in 1994 and the constant rhetoric in extreme right-wing groups in Greece about the north Epirus.

During the 90s the Balkans became the most unstable region in Europe with the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and lastly Kosovo. During those years, Albania, especially concerning its northeastern frontier with Yugoslavia with the ongoing war in Kosovo on the other part of the border, demanded a security guarantee for its territorial integrity from Turkey, which was given.[1] In this view, Albania's aim to become part of NATO and the subsequent membership in 2009 should be seen in this century-old attempt for an outside-the-region guarantee against the inside-the-region threats to its security. NATO membership has allowed Albania to shift its focus from the defense of its territorial integrity as was the case during its more than a century independent existence. In a large measure, the huge army of the communist times was based not only on the ideological fear from capitalism and revisionist communist, but most of all on the historical legacy of direct territorial threats from the south and north. In this view, NATO membership for Albania has been as much about the Army itself, as about the independent existence of the country. By creating security for Albania, NATO membership has enhanced the security of the region around Albania.

Albania's NATO membership has changed the security environment in the country itself, but also in the entire Western Balkans region. It has eliminated the historical threats to the security of the country, but also has created a stable situation in the Balkans also by the NATO membership of Montenegro, Greece, Croatia and currently in process that of North Macedonia. NATO membership for Albania and the other Western Balkan countries has eliminated the territorial disputes between the countries and peoples of the region, which have been the main cause of war in the last two centuries.

In this view, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been transformed from a purely military alliance directed to the defense of Western Europe from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, to a politico-military alliance of not just military collaboration and defense but of 'shared values' consisting in human rights, democracy, rule of law. As was mentioned in the beginning, NATO membership for each country today, as it was the case during the Cold War for Western Europe, not only guarantees the security of a particular country, including Albania, from a common threat, but also because of the US presence in NATO, it guarantees that each of the member countries, including Albania and its NATO member neighbors, will not go to war against each other, as it has happened in the past. This fact has totally changed the security environment in the Balkans, as it changed the security of Western Europe during the Cold War.

Another important impact of NATO in the region has been in Kosovo. Since its military intervention in March 1999 and in the last 20 years, the presence of NATO troops in Kosovo has ensured the maintenance of peace and security in Kosovo itself and the region around it. NATO presence in the region ensures that the Western Balkans will not return to the bloody wars and confrontations of the 90s, even though in many cases the bilateral relations between certain countries as Serbia-Kosovo or Serbia-Croatia are not good, but the NATO membership serves as deterrence to an armed conflict. Kosovo's NATO membership should be the next step, as soon as the country will sign a final agreement with Serbia. In that case the collective security of the region will be in place.

The future security challenges

The nature of the challenges that Albania and NATO faces, have been transformed in the last years. In broad terms, three are the biggest future challenges for Albania in particular and NATO in general.

First, there is the return of Russia's influence in the Balkans. This return is being manifested in regional challenges in Serbia-Kosovo relations and the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The final Serbia-Kosovo agreement will not be signed without the passive (through its influence in Serbia) or active participation of Russia. The lack of a final agreement, especially concerning the fourth Serb-majority North Kosovo municipalities, will represent a permanent security threat not only for Kosovo and Serbia but also for Albania, because as it happened during the Kosovo War in 1998-99, problems in Kosovo could easily spill out in Albania and North Macedonia. At the same time, the lack of a final Serbia-Kosovo agreement increases the possibility of Russian influence in Serbia and the region in general, because without a final agreement Russia holds leverage to Serbia with its veto power in the UN Security Council.

Besides this, the Russian influence in the Balkans consist in creating internal instability in different countries of the region, with Albania not being immune to this problem, even though compared with Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia or Bulgaria, the Russian economic presence and political influence in Albania is much smaller, almost negligible.

Also, the Russian threat in the eastern border of NATO returned with the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Eastern Ukraine, just when the eastern border seemed secure. [1] At the same time the Russian threat is not only territorial and military, but also it aims to 'undermine our democratic institutions and sow divisions among us and within our nations. Russian hybrid threats aimed at our democracies have included nerve agent attacks and malicious cyber activities. Russia is one threat, but not the only threat'. [2] This threat has created a security situation unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. [3] On the eastern border of NATO, Russia and its disruptive activities will continue to be a threat to the Alliance because Russia has never accepted NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe, often seeing it just as a substitution of rulers for this area from the Soviet Union in the Cold War to Washington and Brussels today. [4] Russia regards NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe and its approach to Russia's frontier as the root of the current problems between Russia and NATO and Russia and the United States. [5] In this view, Russia will attempt to weaken and sow discord among NATO member countries, as Russia's 2014 military doctrine identifies NATO's build-up and its extension of global activities as its main threat [6], while at the same time will try to keep Ukraine and the Caucasus away from NATO and EU membership. With a return of global Russian activity [7] and a coming multipolar international system, NATO's eastern border will continue to be one of its most problematic and in need of constant military presence.

The second threat is Islamic terrorism, which with the demise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), hasn't ceased to be a threat. The war in Syria continues while in Iraq has returned to normal only in general terms. Hundreds of Albanians from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia who went to Syria and Iraq and dozens of them who have returned, combined with Muslim clerics who operate beyond the rules of the Albanian Muslim Community, will remain also in the future a potential security threat, in need of constant surveillance. Even without the threat of Islamic terrorism emanating from the Middle East or of various Islamic terrorist groups in that region, the Middle East will continue to be a permanent threat to the Western Balkans in general and to NATO member countries in it, because of the growing influence and power of Iran in the Middle East and its proxy rivalry in that region with Saudi Arabia.

The third is the hybrid threat. Most of the threats nowadays come from non-state actors than from state-actors, even the Russian interference in Ukraine and its disruptive activities in Western Europe and the United States are not done directly, but through third actors.

‘Hybrid methods of warfare, such as propaganda, deception, sabotage and other non-military tactics have long been used to destabilise adversaries. What is new about attacks seen in recent years is their speed, scale and intensity, facilitated by rapid technological change and global interconnectivity’.[1]

The Russian interference in US elections, in Brexit election and in a score of other elections in the Western countries, combined with the Chinese cyber war directed mainly towards the United States, constitute the most problematic hybrid threats in the world today. The main purposes of the hybrid threats are to create discord, chaos and doubts in the countries or the countries that are the target. NATO member states have been the target in the last years, especially since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. NATO countries have moved well in the last years to counter this hybrid threats, but there is the need and space for a more coordinated and unified response. Albania is not immune to these threats, and Albania’s 2013 Strategic Defense Review identifies hybrid threats and cyber attacks as two of the emerging security challenges for the country.[2]

Conclusions

‘Albania’s NATO membership has radically change Albania’s Armed Forces modernizing and enabling them to counter modern traditional and non-traditional threats. Also, Albania’s NATO membership has eliminated the country’s perennial security threat to its territorial integrity, which has existed since its independence in 1912, while at the same time it has changed for the better the entire security environment in the region. This has allowed these countries to focus more on non-military problems. NATO membership safeguards Albania and its neighbors from external threats, but also from each other.

But the international context has changed compared with the one that saw the big enlargement of NATO in the 90s and 2000s and its first military operations especially in the Balkans. This change in the international situation with the return of Russian influence and power in different areas of the world, the emergence of China and the growing influence and power of Iran in the Greater Middle East, each of which in different ways, traditional and non-traditional is trying to deter and disrupt NATO’s operations and defense capabilities. Albania and the Western Balkans in general are not a sideshow to these threats, but are touched directly by the three of them.

The response from Albania to these threats is more unity with the other NATO member countries and more military expenditure with the aim to be in line with the 2% of GDP objective.

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