

NATO AND SYRIA

Q&A

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NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced NATO is joining the Western anti-ISIL coalition in Syria. How exactly NATO will be “joining” the Western powers already involved militarily in that conflict?

The secretary emphasized NATO won't be assuming combat roles in Syria. The formal “joining” of the anti-ISIL coalition is in reality a political gesture since all 28 NATO members are already involved in combating the caliphate in Syria and Iraq in one way or another. Diplomats in Brussels said NATO's move is symbolic more than anything else.

Why the announcement at this moment then? Is this yet another “timing” maneuver in the European efforts to salvage the transatlantic partnership?

The move was emerged from the ongoing effort to smooth out diplomatic relations between the United States and the Alliance. NATO's European component saw the US presidential visit to Europe as a good opportunity. President Trump's prodding over burden sharing and his presidential campaign description of NATO as “obsolete” have had an effect. Secretary Tillerson has repeatedly mentioned the need for NATO allies “to do more” in fighting Islamist terrorism and, by extension, to increase their defense spending to the minimum level of 2 pc of GDP.

There is nothing new in the creeping European dissatisfaction with Washington concerning defense spending and war plans. The US though can claim with some justification the Europeans are “slackers” when it comes to common defense while all the while seeking America's unequivocal reaffirmation of the famous Article 5. President Trump's visit to NATO HQ on May 25 [re-emphasized](#) US dissatisfaction with the “slackers:” Trump lectured his NATO counterparts on defense spending and was silent on Article 5.

The NATO secretary's announcement aimed at “pacifying” the US president. It was extended with the reluctant concurrence of Berlin and Paris. There is little evidence it “pacified” President Trump but it provides some political breathing space as NATO members [prepare to submit](#) “action plans on how they aim to meet the military alliance's defense spending goals.”

Political “symbolic” gestures like this, however, have a tendency to morph into full military involvement. Under what circumstances can this happen in Syria?

NATO’s original *raison d’être* was to serve as a *defense* coalition tasked to maintain peace by deterring Communism. After the collapse of the USSR this *raison d’être* ceased to exist. As a result, NATO is still in search of a new mission.

So far, doctrinal reorientation has had mixed results although there is renewed emphasis on the Russian threat (demanded mainly by ex-Warsaw Pact members). Thus, in the absence of any other doctrinal “quick fix,” NATO now gravitates toward out-of-area military intervention with the nebulous declared purpose of “defending liberty and “promoting democracy.”

This is how we arrived at Yugoslavia and “humanitarian bombing” and “humanitarian intervention.” Today, the term “humanitarian” serves as the core excuse for *long range military forays of questionable legality and strategic value*.

The scope of the Syrian catastrophe is such, however, that all the available excuses for mass military intervention are now beyond the pale.

What began as a classic “regime change” covert operation to overthrow Assad, dating back to the George W. Bush administration, has ballooned into a strategic and humanitarian disaster that is threatening Europe’s stability and has emboldened Iran in its quest for regional hegemony as a nuclear power in waiting. Russia’s robust involvement in the war further constrains any US/Western move beyond what can be arranged (with difficulty) between Moscow and Washington.

Against this backdrop, NATO has no options of collective military involvement in Syria without a cast iron agreement with Russia, something impossible at this time.

What are the realistic chances of NATO expanding its role in Syria as part of the “war on terror?”

NATO is inherently unsuited for battling an amorphous threat of a thousand (Islamic) faces. NATO’s *military* planning focuses on clear-cut contingencies: it comprehends the Baltic states’ nervousness over Russia -- but it has no doctrinal or planning tools in order to respond, for example, to Southern European worries over the influx of Moslem undocumented aliens serving as a funnel of jihadis into Europe.

Afghanistan is the quagmire that best demonstrates the ineffectiveness of mass conventional military deployments in attempting to defeat a *fluid multi-tentacled threat* like the Taliban; after 16 years of war, NATO’s enemies are increasing their tactical initiative and control large parts of the territory the Alliance tries to defend. The worst part is that no one has any idea about an exit strategy. And few, if any, remember the lessons of Vietnam.

The perfect demonstration of NATO’s incongruous predicament in the “war on terror” is Islamic Turkey’s dangerous “wild card” behavior.

NATO refuses to do anything about Turkey’s siding with fundamentalist Moslem fanatics, it’s fiddling with ISIS, its attacks on the Kurds proving themselves the best fighters against the Islamic terrorists, and its threats of targeting US troops fighting alongside the Kurds. With such “allies” in its bosom, one wonders how can NATO prove itself as an opponent of Islamic terrorism?

Syria brought intervention strategies to the next level of insanity. The US-led informal Western coalition sides with countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar who run amok supporting and financing every Islamist maniac they can lay their hands on. These “allies” have nothing to do

with human rights and seeking a “democratic” Syria. They embrace interests *directly opposed to the West’s “war on terror.”*

The Alliance still suffers from an old malady: absence of a shared threat perception. Think, for example, of NATO’s reluctance to throw its weight behind member states, like Greece and Italy, facing a strategic threat from “irregular migration.” The farce of the supposed NATO naval deployment in the Aegean to tackle the illegal immigration wave, unleashed by Turkey in summer 2015, is a glaring lesson in what NATO *is NOT prepared to do irrespective of the circumstances at hand.* This is unacceptable and a clear indication that, in essence, NATO picks and chooses when to be powerless even when the situation calls for action.

Russia, the old foe, has made impressive inroads in Syria. Is there a NATO counter-strategy on this?

Those in the West who saw Syria as an opportunity to “roll back” Russia’s efforts to reestablish itself in the Mediterranean made a strategic mistake.

They failed to appreciate Moscow’s determination not to abandon Assad and its only viable naval station in the Warm Waters. They misjudged Putin’s determination to oppose “united” Europe’s haphazard efforts to expand to the East and US power plays in the Middle East. And they overestimated claims by “experts” that Russia would/could not react to EU/US/NATO meddling in the Ukraine. What followed in the Donbas and the Crimea confirmed that Western impressions were inaccurate and dangerous.

Against this backdrop, to speak of a NATO “counter-Russia” plan in Syria has no base in fact. To repeat what we said above, NATO is unprepared, unwilling, and powerless on everything which relates to Syria -- and that also applies to Russia’s play in the Middle East.

Finally, is there a way out of Syria -- with or without NATO?

Syria has become a quagmire that makes Vietnam pale in comparison.

In many ways, Syria is a proxy “low intensity” world war which nobody knows when it may spill over into wider conflict. The United States is the *only* actor that could reduce the threat of this wider conflict. But the American predicament is fraught with insurmountable complications.

The US invasion of Iraq has resulted in a fragmented country beset by perennial sectarian violence; few Iraqis see a positive American role in their drama.

Washington should treat Saudi Arabia without velvet gloves -- but President Trump just signed a multibillion arms procurement agreement with the Saudi Wahhabis, inspirers of Islamist terrorist fanaticism.

Turkey must be told to cease and desist or else -- but Erdogan visited Washington and caused an uproar by unleashing his thugs on peaceful protesters only to walk away untouched.

Washington should rein in the smaller Gulf states pursuing their own pro-terrorist agendas -- but US military interests in the region preclude any serious diplomatic initiatives in that direction.

The Obama administration made little progress in Syria. It hesitated, procrastinated, and spent most of its time wringing its hands on what to do next.

Ironically, this prolonged hesitation may have saved us from who knows what larger conflagrations. But, on the other hand, Obama’s successors, themselves untested and on an extended learning curve, are left to handle the proverbial “hot potato” without any sound legacy foundation strategies and arrangements.

Syria remains unpredictable and explosive -- and, so far, all diplomacy and behind-the-scenes give and take have only succeeded in transforming an impasse into a deadlock. One thing though is [for sure](#): "... the state still known as Syria has effectively ceased to exist."

Extrication, as things stand now, is impossible.