Commentary No. 22
February 28, 2019

NATO and North Macedonia: A Game Not Worth the Candle

Paul Hansbury

Summary

This spring sees seventy years since the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, the fundamental document from which NATO developed.

Contents

1 History, strategy and the Balkans
2 An incentive to Russian meddling
3 Turning Turks

The organisation's current Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, describes the alliance as being 'in good shape.' It is also a changing shape, with Montenegro added to its ranks in 2017 and accession papers signed with North Macedonia earlier this month. However, NATO's latest enlargement – while hardly changing the balance of power – looks like a case of rubbing salt in the wounds of relations with Russia. In this context, the expected accession of two-million strong North Macedonia should be viewed as a time for caution rather than celebration. If the goal of NATO's activities is to bring peace and stability to the Balkans, then its current strategy may prove counterproductive.

History, strategy and the Balkans

Russia has long recognised the strategic value of the Balkans. It was partly for this reason that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire brought Russia great concern. It was against the backdrop of Ottoman decline that Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, seriously damaging relations between Austria-Hungary and Tsarist Russia. Meanwhile, Russia initially backed its fellow Slavs, the Serbs, in their ambitions for a port on the Adriatic Sea and encouraged their organisation of the Balkan League with Bulgaria and Greece in 1912. Many in Russia saw the realisation of a Greater Serbia as a chance to contain Austria-Hungary.

> A century may have passed but Russia still looks upon Serbia as a cultural ally and, these days, a bulwark against NATO expansion in the region.

Tsarist Russia's overriding strategic interest related to the south-eastern limit of the Balkans. Specifically, securing its access through, and prospectively even control over, the Turkish Straits which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Russia's Black Sea Fleet and its trading capacity depended heavily on such egress. The Ottoman Empire looked close to dissolution during the First World War and a nervous Russia proposed to its allies that it should acquire the Straits in the event of victory. The resulting Constantinople Agreement was scuppered by the collapse of the Tsarist regime, but the importance to Russia of access to sea remained.

The Second World War presented the government in Russia another chance to try to secure control over the Straits. Josef Stalin called into question the 1936 Montreux Convention that had formally handed full control to Turkey but, according to Dmitry Trenin, this only 'helped throw Ankara into Washington's arms.' Turkey joined NATO along with Greece in 1952: a big prize for NATO and a loss for the Soviet Union.

In the twenty-first century naval power remains a vital component of state power despite changes in global commerce and warfare. Russia's adjunct use of naval capabilities during its Syria intervention – firing cruise missiles from vessels at sea – showed the importance it attaches to its navy.

> Any prudent NATO strategy aimed at peace and stability should begin by recognising that Russia claims interests in the Balkans and south-eastern Europe and take these into account. Otherwise NATO may find that it requires greater means than it has at its disposal.

An incentive to Russian meddling

NATO's 2004 and 2009 enlargement rounds brought it a more extensive presence in the region. In the wake of the 1990s' conflict there was a sound rationale behind this, but as NATO faces sterner tests both within the alliance itself and from outside, it needs to reappraise its current strategy for peace and stability on its periphery. Getting drawn deeper into local disputes in the Balkans could provoke Russia to step in and the involvement of both NATO members and Russia will only aggravate local tensions.

On the one hand, outside encouragement – largely from the European Union – has brought progress on relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The two polities have held fruitful discussions about revisions to their common border. These discussions, on the

other hand, have renewed separatist claims in Republika Srpska; an autonomous area of Bosnia and Herzegovina populated by ethnic Serbs.

> It is as a consequence of this that NATO engagement with Bosnia about potential accession to the alliance risks imperilling Bosnian statehood: membership is very popular in the state as a whole but deeply unpopular in Republika Srpska.

As the final signatory of the Adriatic Charter document (with other signatories apart from North Macedonia already acceded), Bosnia will presumably be the next focus of NATO members' attentions.

These local disputes encourage Russia to involve itself in support of one or other side with the goal of upholding its proclaimed interests and undermining NATO. North Macedonia's path to membership might be seen as an example. It has required settling a dispute over the country's name with Greece, ultimately resolved by the addition of the word 'North', and both Greece and North Macedonia claimed that Russia splashed money at the small state in the run up to its referendum on the name-change.

Turning Turks

NATO has little to gain strategically from actions in the Balkans without considering Russia's likely reactions. The small, landlocked and mountainous North Macedonia won't be worth the irritation it causes Russia if that means Moscow subsequently steps in and acts as a 'spoiler' elsewhere in the region – raising the costs and resources necessary to bring about sustained peace and stability. At present, Russia's opinions are only taken into account to the extent they don't encroach upon the rights of prospective members.

This does not mean that NATO members should overlook North Macedonia's rights. Public opinion polls in North Macedonia have indicated strong popular support for accession, although the name change requirement was a sticking point. Surveys suggested that public support for NATO membership dropped considerably if it required changing the country's name. In this regard it is worrying that turnout during the referendum on the name-change was only modest and the durability of Macedonians' support looks less certain. This should, at least, give pause for thought. Moreover, given the requirements of consensus for NATO decision-making, it is questionable whether additional members will help the alliance to retain its 'good shape.'

More significantly, it would be a poor strategy if NATO invested efforts only to fracture elsewhere. Indeed, more worrying for NATO members is how increased tensions in south-eastern Europe would affect Turkey; the pivotal state for the balance of power in the region.

> The strategic value to NATO of Turkey is paramount. It provides the alliance with its second largest army and provides a gateway to the turbulent Middle East.

The Incirlik air base in southern Turkey has been valuable in this regard.

The trajectory of post-Cold War international relations has been one of warming relations between Russia and Turkey, and cooling relations between Turkey and the rest of NATO. Admittedly the Syrian war has tested Turkey's relations with Russia, including the downing of a Russian military jet in 2015 and the assassination of Russia's ambassador to Turkey, but healthier signals include Turkey's scheduled purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence systems. In recent years the position of Turkey within NATO has looked shaky and if it were to realign with Russia, which, while not very likely at present, is far from unimaginable, then NATO's current strategy for south-eastern Europe would soon appear greatly misjudged.

Paul Hansbury
Associate Fellow, Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative