NATO's 70th Anniversary
The World's Most Powerful Defense Organization: Achievements and Challenges

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On April 4, the US capital Washington witnessed a meeting of NATO foreign ministers. Although it was a regular meeting, it coincided with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the alliance. Washington, itself, was the place that witnessed the signing of the NATO's founding treaty in 1949 between twelve countries. The current membership of the Alliance comprises 29 countries.

Although the main objective of the Alliance was maintaining peace in Europe, changes in the world, most notably the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, have already raised much debate about the viability of the continuation of the NATO, because the Alliance was perceived to be associated with the Cold War and combatting the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union at the time. Indeed, NATO was an effective deterrence to the Soviet Union's endeavours to expand to areas that Western countries consider to be of geostrategic importance to them. Such perception, however, does not take into account the nature of the alliance and how it was able to adapt to changes in the world order. The structure of the Alliance, its committees and operating mechanisms all reflect the principle or maintaining the balance of interest amongst its members. Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO, said "a successful alliance should have the answers to three specific questions; who are we? what do we want? and what are our capabilities?". I believe that NATO does have specific answers to these questions. NATO is an organisation that comprises a number of countries that share common interests and values, and which have pledged to work together in accordance with a clear and binding charter. Article 5, which is the cornerstone of the Alliance's Treaty, states that "an attack against one member state of NATO is an attack against all of its members", meaning that NATO will intervene militarily to deter such attack. The Alliance has set clear goals, namely, to defend the security and freedom of its member states. As for its capabilities, NATO has no army in the traditional sense but forces in various military formations of the armies of its member states and such formations are deployed in many different regions of the world.

Although NATO's structure is determined by the rules that govern the operations of regional organisations in terms of membership or working mechanisms, there are other factors that are specific to the Alliance and that may explain its ability to continue to exist and develop further throughout the past decades. These can be summed up in three factors as follows:

First, NATO is a dynamic organisation and was able to adapt to international changes and developments. Though the NATO Treaty sets out specific objectives, the challenges facing NATO, especially threats from outside the territories of its member states, have prompted it to issue what is known as "Strategic Concepts", a high-level official security document issued every ten years based on intensive discussions not just between the member states of the Alliance but also with its partners. The Strategic Concept, which complements the Treaty, identifies the central features of the new security environment, specifies the elements of the Alliance's approach to security and provides guidelines for the adaptation of its military forces.

Second, the establishment by the Alliance of partnerships with many countries, about 55 countries in total. These include two partnerships with the Arabian Gulf region and the Middle East, viz (1) the Mediterranean Dialogue Initiative in 1994 between the Alliance and seven south Mediterranean countries; and (2) the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) for cooperation with the Gulf States, the Middle East and North Africa, which was joined by four Gulf States, including the Kingdom of Bahrain. The latter initiative includes addressing hard and soft security issues and was crowned by the opening of the NATO's Regional Centre of the Istanbul Initiative (NATO-ICI Regional Office) in Kuwait in 2017. These partnerships underscore the NATO's success in becoming a global security forum for the identification and assessment of the most serious regional and global security threats.

Third, the ability to accomplish tasks and get the job done. If NATO begins a military action, it will finish it. Examples of this are many, most notably the military campaign against Libya in 2011. Having said this however, the Alliance has strict rules and conditions for military intervention, including the need to have (1) UN resolutions authorizing military action, (2) obtaining unanimous approval of the member states of the Alliance and (3) the existence of threats to the vital interests of NATO members.

On the other hand and despite the importance of the above, the Alliance faces challenges at three levels as follows:

(1) In NATO itself as an institution, in terms of the emergence of cracks in the "unity and solidarity" among its members and I do not mean here the US statements lambasting the Alliance from time to time. Despite the US rhetoric, the Secretary General of NATO addressed a joint meeting of the US Congress making him the first leader of an international organisation ever to do so. This is, no doubt, a strong indication of the continuing US support to NATO. So, what I am referring to here is the indications of sharp divisions within NATO, including the decision of Turkey, which is a NATO member state, to buy an S-400 missile system from Russia. This is a real challenge to the Alliance. There is also the continuing wrangling about the commitment of member states to spend 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense.

(2) The second level concerns the relations between NATO and other world powers in general and Russia in particular. It is true that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that the Alliance "does not want a new arms race" and "we don't have

any intention to deploy new nuclear land-based weapon systems in Europe" despite the fact that Russia has violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between Washington and Moscow and that the United States has decided to withdraw from it. However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has accused Moscow of wanting to "dominate" Europe and said that the Alliance will work on containing the Russian power". What sorts of containment? This is the big question.

(3) The third challenge relates to the relationship between NATO and its partners in the Arabian Gulf region and the Middle East in general. The current security environment is very complex and intertwined, not the least the present and expected alliances including the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). In this regard, questions arise about the role of the NATO in addressing such developments. This is an issue that needs a series of dialogues between our region and NATO, as the Alliance, despite all the challenges, remains the strongest defense organisation in the world.